



**WOMEN, ECOLOGY, AND RESISTANCE: AN ECOFEMINIST ANALYSIS  
OF AMA ATA AIDOO'S *THE GIRL WHO CAN* AND MAHASWETA DEVI'S  
*DRAUPADI***

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**Abstract**

*Ecofeminism as a study deals with the relationship between women and nature. Moreover, the study of Ecofeminism connects the exploitation and oppression of women with the exploitation and degradation of the environment. Ecofeminism as a study condemns patriarchal domination and promotes equality, sustainability, and respect for both women and nature. The relationship between mother nature and women is often depicted and outline as a spiritual, emotional, and deep association. In various cultures across the world women are seen as caretakers, givers, nurturers, and providers of the family, which is very similar to nature, as nature provides people with all the necessities for survival and sustenance of the future. The paper takes into account the short story of Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Girl Who Can* (1997) and Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* (2018) to throw light on the ecofeminist perspective of such women who are not included in the mainstream to express their views in decision making process. By incorporating theory of Ecofeminism by Karen J. Warren and Vandana Shiva the paper aims to explore the relationship between women and nature and the resistance steps taken by women to combat against societal stereotypes and patriarchal domination.*

**Keywords**

*Ecofeminism, Nature, Women, Exploitation And Resistance, etc.*

**Full Article**

**Introduction:**

The term Ecofeminism was firstly introduced in the early year of 1970s. Ecofeminism is one of the divisions of feminism. The term Ecofeminism was coined by a French writer Francoise d' Eaubonne in her work *Le teminismeou la Mort* in the year 1974. Alicia H. Puleo, a philosopher in her paper titled "What is Ecofeminism" (2017) define the term Ecofeminism as an "attempt to outline a new utopian horizon, addressing the environment issue from the categories of patriarchy, and rocentrism, care, sexism and gender" (Puleo, 30).

Ecofeminism plays a vital and significant role towards restoring and reconstructing the connection between women and the environment. As stated by Bina Agarwal in her work *Gender and Green Governance: The Political Economy of Women's Presence Within and Beyond Community Forestry* (2010) that, "women's relationship with the environment in general, and with forest resources in particular, is complex and ambiguous. It reflects, especially their interrelated dualities that play out in different ways across gender and class lines" (Agarwal, 3). Moreover, Sustainable Development on the other hand focuses on the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the needs of the future. It is an amalgamation of socio-cultural and "environment friendly" economic development. (Kaparanova and Warth, 6). Hence, gender



equality is the need of the hour for the social development and the preservation of the environment.

Born on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1942, in Sakumono, Ghana, Ama Ata Aidoo is an author, playwright, academician and a poet. Aidoo's has written numerous works and won many awards. Her works mainly focus on the experiences and struggles of women in Africa, gender inequality, patriarchy, postcolonial influence, social stereotypes, etc. Moreover, her writings also focus on the impact and influence of modernity in African culture which led to a tension between the modern influence with traditional influence. Apart from her contribution in the literary fields, Aidoo has also served as the Minister of Education and Culture of Ghana from 1982-1983.

Aidoo's *The Girl Who Can* (1997) is a well-established short story that was published in the year 1997. The story revolves around the theme of patriarchy, gender expectations, resistance, resilience, reproduction, agrarian culture, farming and femininity. The short story is based on the protagonist Adjoa, who is also the narrator of the story. Adjoa in her narration narrates the journey and instances of her life and how she was constantly criticized by her grandmother for she was born with very short legs. However, the story took a turn when she won every race that she had participated during school events.

Karen J. Warren (10<sup>th</sup> September 1947- 21<sup>st</sup> August 2020) was a scholar, a former professor and an author. Karen is very well known for her contributions in the field of Ecofeminism, whereby she highlights and discusses the connection between women and nature. Furthermore, she also wrote on the interconnectedness between women discrimination and exploitation with that of nature exploitation and degradation.

Warren in her work *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters* (2000) classified Ecofeminism into three different categories:

- Feminism
- Nature and the evolution of science and technology
- The indigenous viewpoint.

Moreover, Warren in this book defines the term Ecofeminism as well as “defending” its term. Warren argues that the exploitation of women is very much connected with the exploitation of the environment and that it both occurs due to the dominant patriarchal forces. Additionally, Warren in the book also discusses on the intersection of race, sex, nature, women and patriarchal domination.

Mahasweta Devi, a prolific writer, is born in 1926 in the city of Dhaka in Bangladesh with a significant literary background. What makes Mahasweta Devi extraordinary from other writers is her unwavering support where she writes not only for the cause of the suppressed but also takes part in their revolutionary process. Being an active writer, she takes into account the social problems like unemployment, poverty, class and caste discrimination, gender inequality etc. She writes mainly for the marginalized i.e. Santhals, Lodhas, Mundas and put efforts in fighting for the rights of the tribals. Her notable works *Mother of 1084* (2019), *Rudali* (2002), *Aranyer Adhikar* (2010), *The Queen of Jhansi* (2019), *Breast Stories* (2018) throws light into the conventional issues that remains ignored by the mainstream narrative. She is highly influenced by the Naxalbari Movement of late 60s and early 70s. Mahasweta Devi in *Draupadi* (2018) focuses on how women and nature are interrelated to each other and how suppression and exploitation on both women and nature in the hands of masculine power and misuse can lead to the deterioration of society ecologically, socio-culturally and economically.



*Draupadi* (2018) by Mahasweta Devi deals with the exploitation of both women and nature where diversity is superseded by the hypocritical and materialistic benefits that can be drawn from nature and women are overruled by their exploitability.

#### **Objectives:**

- To explore how the narrative reflects an ecofeminist idea of resistance.
- To analyze how women and nature are intricately linked to each other for a nation's progress.

#### **Methodology:**

- The paper has been analyzed through Karen J. Warren's Ecofeminist Theory through her work *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters* (2000).
- This paper incorporates Vandana Shiva's Eco-feminist theory through her work *Ecofeminism* (2010).

#### **Discussion:**

##### **Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Girl Who Can* (1997):**

Ama Ata Aidoo short story *The Girl Who Can* is a powerful story which highlights the strength and resilience of a woman. Aidoo through her protagonist Adjoa reflects the complexities and intricacy of gender roles, societal expectations, family expectation and the agrarian life. Set at the backdrop of Ghana, Hasodzi, was once a very fertile land until droughts hit the area and ruins the environment and agricultural products. The declining and exploitation of the environment here is linked or is interconnected with the exploitation and subjugation of women, mirroring the concept of ecofeminism. In relation to it, Karen Warren in her work *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters* (2000), highlights the issues of droughts, deforestation, and various environmental issues. Warren states that:

Adequate analysis and resolution of such environmental issues as deforestation, water pollution, farming and food production, and toxins and hazardous waste location must be integrally connected to an understanding of the plight and status of women, people of color, the poor and children (Warren, xiv-xv).

The story *The Girl Who Can* opens with the problem faced by Adjoa even though she was unable to understand what the problem is really about, as she was just seven years old, but could however sense that her grandmother is having a problem with her. In the story it is witnessed that, right from the moment Adjoa was born, she was heavily criticized by her grandmother, Nana because of her legs since, and "They are too thin. And also, too long for a woman" (Aidoo, 9). By the statement above the grandmother argues that a woman needs to have a good perfect leg so that they can participate in farming and agricultural labor, since farming was the central occupation, bridging the connection between women and nature. Karen Warren in her work argues that:

Trees and forests are inextricably connected to rural and household economies governed by women, that women are more dependent on forest products than men for food, fuel, fodder, and products for the home including building materials, household utensils, garden, dyes, medicines, and income, that women suffer more than men as a consequence of environmental degradation and destruction of forest (Aidoo, 16).



Moreover, the grandmother also claimed that women should have legs “that have meat on them: with good calves. Because you are sure such good legs would support solid hips. And a woman must have solid hips to be able to have children” (Aidoo,9). This statement proves that women’s worth is measure with their abilities to produce children and their body was often being compared with that of a fertile land which is productive and fruitful. And if a woman is born with certain abnormalities they shall be question or even be regarded as “unproductive” and a failure. Ecofeminism as a branch often highlights on how women as similar to nature are often judge by their ability to produce fruits. Thus, Alicia H. Puleo in her paper titled “What is Ecofeminism” accentuates the importance of giving women the chance to choose their own life options. She states that:

Women must be recognized as subjects with decision- making power in demographic matters; in other words, subjects with their own life that choose if they will have children or not and, if so, when and how many to give birth to in the framework of an ecological culture of equality (Aidoo,31).

Additionally, though Adjoa’s mother often takes the side of her daughter, however she cannot stop her mother from meddling with her daughter’s life. For example, when Adjoa said that she wanted to go to school, “Nana thought it would be a waste of time” (Aidoo,11) especially because she is a girl and she have thin legs. This very idea mirrors the patriarchal idea and domination. As per the patriarchal notion, education for women ruins their lives, “too much schooling ruins a woman; everyone knows that...These girls that go to university follows men around until their bodies are useless. Nobody knows if she can have children” (Adichie, 98). Thus, women were never provided with basic education. However, in the other hand Adjoa mother claimed that she wanted her daughter to go to school so that “her daughter, could learn to write and read my own name and a little besides- perhaps to be able to calculate some things on paper- that would be good” (Aidoo, 11). Thus, upon persuasion by her mother Adjoa was granted permission by her Nana to go to school and receive formal education.

Towards the end we witnessed the turning point in the story. Adjoa after gaining permission to formally attend schools, she was selected by her teachers to participate in a running competition. Adjoa was stunned as first as she has always made to believed that she will never be able to run or participate in running events. Thus, overjoyed by the news Adjoa went home running and inform her Nana and her mother that she was selected to participate in a running competition. The both was in disbelief and went to her school to confirm the news, “my mother and Nana, they had not believed it at first. So, Nana had taken it upon herself to go and ‘ask into it properly’. She came home to tell my mother that it was really true. I was one of my school’s runners” (Aidoo, 11).

On the day of the competition, Adjoa stunned everyone including her mother and her Nana by winning every race she participated in.

Yes, I have won every race I ran for my school, and I have won the cup for the best all-round junior athlete. (Aidoo, 12)

All the three, Adjoa, Nana and the mother were overjoyed with the outcome. Adjoa has turned her abnormalities, her thin legs that were often considered as “useless”, into strength and victory, which is one of the characteristic traits of an ecofeminist, that is, turning something “useless” or weakness to strength and liberation.

Adjoa capability of turning her weakness into strength highlights or symbolizes resilience and resistance towards the patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes, which claim that women are “useless”. She proves that women, given the opportunity can succeed and claim victory.



Moreover, she was able to live up to the characteristic trait of Ecofeminism that support the notion that all women's worth should not be link with her ability to reproduce or the labor she is able to contribute in the field, but instead they should be defined by their capabilities, courage, determination, resiliency and abilities.

Aidoo in her short story *The Girl Who Can* have successfully presents the readers the strength, courage and determination of a woman. Additionally, she was able to present the ecofeminist traits present in the protagonist. Moreover, through her work, Aidoo was able to question the patriarchal force and was further highlights the “the African women's brave and persistent struggle to overcome the inhibitions created by the male- dominated society to subject them to a narrow world, and to assert themselves in the larger world” (Chakraborty, 1) and more importantly to stand and fights for their own opportunity, freedom and liberation.

### **Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* (2018):**

Society and nature are constructed based on the dual nature and hierarchy of the androcentric thought process. This hypocrisy posits man and his “culture” in the high realm whereas women and nature are trampled below them as an object of exploitation. The hegemonic power of patriarchy debases the variety existing in nature- the variety of gender and plants and animals. The variety that demands equality is marginalized and synthesized to fulfill their own benefits resulting in deterioration of society and depredation of our environment. This practice of domination and control is dated back to the colonial and pre-colonial era. It is the colonizers that marred the connectivity of human beings with nature. Though nature is the embodiment of giver but she isn't an ever-forgiving mother. In Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* (2018) the forest acts as a temporary refuge for the revolutionaries or the tribals who are on the run. The “ill-famed forest of Jharkani” (Devi, 17) is like a web for the security forces into which the rebels disappear after attacking them. The colonizers compelled the tribal society into a legacy that situates them at the bottom, forced into slavery and even criminalized them. The tribals lead their life according to their own customs and traditions and did not abide by the norms of the Brahmins. Tribal women lead their life in their own terms and take part in economic activities. But the patriarchal colonizers define woman's role as a producer and limits her freedom to engage in ‘economic activities’. And the caste system of Indian society has ignited the fire of this discrimination resulting the tribal women being doubly marginalized. Though tribal women toil day and night, they are prone to domination and exploitation.

Vandana Shiva, an environmentalist, opines that the idea of development that we have borrowed from the West can be termed as ‘maledvelopment’ (Kaur, 388) because they undermine any kind of progress but encourage violence against the local environment and women. From Tagore's monograph *Tapovan* (1910) she asserts:

Indian civilization has been distinctive in locating its source of regeneration, material and intellectual, in the forest not the city. India's best ideas have come when man was in communion with trees and rivers and takes away from the crowds. The place of the forest has helped the intellectual evolution of man. The culture of the forest has fueled the culture of Indian society. The culture that has arisen from the forest has been influenced by the diverse processes of life which are always at play in the forest, varying from species to species, from season to season, in sight and sound and smell. The unifying principle of life in diversity, of democratic pluralism, thus became the principle of Indian civilization (Shiva, 55).



Shiva believes that Indian culture is identified with the forest. Mahasweta Devi's short story *Draupadi* (2018) depicts the life of a Santhal tribal woman who is engaged in Naxalbari Movement in West Bengal that spread through eastern India in the late 1960s and early 70s. Her husband is shot and killed and she is also apprehended eventually by the Special Forces and interrogated and stripped and raped several times by multiple men. When she is asked to cloth and present herself before the military specialist Senanayak, she does not pay any heed and instead questions him: naked, bloodied, and defiant and threatens him to question her and do the needful if he dares so.

However, the Forest Jharkani has been proved as a political refuge for Dulna and Draupadi as their lives are threatened after the Operation Bakuli massacre. They both go underground for a long time in a neanderthal darkness. As a result, the inhabitants of the forest have to face the casualties:

The Special Forces, attempting to piece that dark by an armed search, compelled quite a few Santhals in the various districts of West Bengal to meet their Maker against their will.... Finally, the impenetrable forest of Jharkani is surrounded by real soldiers, the army enters and splits the battlefield. Soldiers in hiding guard the falls and springs that are the only source of drinking water; they are still guarding, still looking (Devi, 17-20).

The urban students opine that these tribal people have a long partnership with the primitive world of the forest. Though they are away from book learning but they are learning new survival techniques. So, it is rightly said that women and nature are indispensable. If anyone in the story, when Dopdi is asked to come in front of Senanayak, she refuses and chooses to come naked "pushed Senanyak with her two mangled breasts" (Devi,33) and challenges "What more can you do? Come on, Kounter me- come on, Kounter me-?" (Devi,33) And for the first time "Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid" (Devi,33).

Devi presented her Dopdi as a normal Santhal woman. But at the moment she is raped and stripped off her clothes, Dopdi stands for herself and questions the very authority and her right to dignity, even though she stands outside the Hindu Caste System. She makes her rapists realise that it is them who has transformed her into prostitute, not because she is a widow or hides out in the forest with young men.

### Conclusion:

Ecofeminism draws as a similarity between deterioration of women and nature. It focuses on the fact that preserving the biodiversity and giving proper right to women ensures a better development of the society. It symbolizes women's fight for the harmonical existence of diversity. Writing by women writers becomes a specific medium to voice out the rights and equalities, education and policies and programs for women to remove the obstructions and shower women with the opportunity to take part in decision and strategy making at both micro and macro level.

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