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Sacred Femininity and Ecological Exploitation: An Ecofeminist Analysis of Prakriti

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Abstract

In India, rivers are treated as living goddesses and nature as a sacred feminine force. Figures like Ganga and Yamuna are worshiped as mothers, sustainers, and purifiers. The philosophical idea of Prakriti tells us the generative energy of the universe. Yet, in modern India, these same rivers suffer from high levels of pollution, industrial waste, and ecological neglect. This stark contrast between symbolic reverence and environmental reality demands deeper critical thinking from us. This paper explores how cultural feminization of nature does not necessarily ensure its protection, grounded in ecofeminist theoretical perspectives. Inspired by the works of thinkers such as Vandana Shiva (*Staying Alive*), Val Plumwood (*Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*), and Maria Mies (*Ecofeminism*), the study argues that the association of femininity with nature can sometimes perpetuate structures of control rather than challenge them. The study draws on mythological narratives as well as contemporary ecological crises. Alongside these cultural narratives, it also examines ecological realities such as pollution, dam construction, and industrial exploitation. It demonstrates how both women and the environment are simultaneously glorified and exploited. In conclusion, this paper suggests that reinterpreting myth through an ecofeminist perspective helps challenge deeply rooted cultural beliefs and to rethink what genuine ecological responsibility might be in the Indian context. The paper further examines the gendered dualism in the Prakriti - Purusha framework, arguing that linking femininity with materiality and passivity can subtly justify control and exploitation. The analysis ultimately suggests that re-reading mythology through an ecofeminist lens is not only symbolic, but a political necessity for rethinking ecological ethics in contemporary India.

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Key words Ecofeminism, Indian mythology, Prakriti–Purusha dualism, Feminization of nature, River pollution, Ecological ethics, Gender and environment.

INTRODUCTION

Ecofeminism connects feminist thought with ecological concerns, arguing that patriarchal systems lie at the root of both gender inequality and environmental destruction. It has inspired grassroots initiatives across the world, often led by women, to protect forests, rivers, and ecosystems in communities most vulnerable to climate change.

This study explores ecofeminism through philosophical, cultural, and mythological perspectives. Indian traditions provide a rich backdrop, where rivers such as the Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati are revered as divine mothers who purify and sustain life. At the same time, philosophical frameworks like the *Prakriti–Purusha* dualism in Samkhya thought show how femininity is associated with nurturing qualities, while masculinity is linked to rationality and control. These ideas reveal a paradox: the feminine is celebrated symbolically, yet treated as passive and exploitable in practice.

The discussion also turns to mythological narratives of river goddesses such as Ganga, Saraswati, and Kaveri. These stories highlight how female agency is glorified but simultaneously erased, transforming acts of sacrifice or resistance into myths that reinforce patriarchal order. Alongside these cultural narratives, the paper also considers ecological realities such as pollution, dam construction, and industrial exploitation. These examples expose the contradiction between symbolic reverence and material ecological harm.

The study draws on a qualitative approach, analysing philosophical texts, mythological narratives, and ecofeminist scholarship. By weaving together cultural traditions, historical accounts, and contemporary ecological issues, the research highlights recurring patterns of reverence and exploitation. This allows for a deeper understanding of how ecofeminism frames the relationship between women and nature, and how it offers a vision of care, non-violence, and spiritual connection as pathways toward more balanced human–nature relationships.

Review of Literature

- *Prakriti and shakti: An ecofeminist perspective* by Khanduja Geetika.

- *Sacred Ecology: The Feminine Spirit in Hindu Philosophy and Environmental Ethics* by Shruti Parmar.
- *The Suppression of Nature and Women: Locating the Debate in Eco-feminist Discourse* by Dr. Sujata Roy Abhijat.
- *Humanizing the Feminine Earth: An Ecofeminist Perspective on the Corporeal Nature* by Meera Baindur.

Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is a social and political movement that integrates feminism and ecology (Merchant, 1980; Mies & Shiva, 1993). It argues that patriarchal systems drive both environmental destruction and gender inequality. The term was coined by French writer Francoise d'Eaubonne in her 1974 book Le Féminisme ou la Mort. Ecofeminism calls for more cooperative, caring and more sustainable way of living where no single group dominates. It includes grassroots movements where women lead efforts to protect forests, especially in communities most affected by climate change. Humans see nature as feminine, maternal, and holy in most cultures. Ecofeminism talks about sacred femininity through ideas like Shakti and Prakriti, seeing nature as a living, divine force often imagined as Mother Earth.

Sacred Femininity

Prakriti and Purusha

Ecofeminism talks about sacred femininity through ideas like Shakti and Prakriti, seeing nature as a living, divine force often imagined as Mother Earth. The philosophical framework of Prakriti – Purusha dualism in Samkhya philosophy that says Prakriti (nature) is associated with matter; fertility and passivity whereas Purusha represents consciousness and rationality. Prakriti reflects qualities Kulacudamani Nigama of nature that is nurturing, patient, fertile and ever-giving. Characteristics typically attributed to women. In contrast, Purusha is associated with the rational mind, conscious thought and masculinity. This depicts masculine as dominant and feminine as the malleable physical world to be controlled or conquered.

Nature as Prakriti is inherently active, a powerful, productive force in the dialectic of the creation, renewal and sustenance of all life. In Kulacudamim Nigama, Prakriti says:

There is none but Myself
Who is the Mother to create.

Without Shakti, Shiva, the symbol for the force of creation and destruction, is as powerless as a corpse. All existence arises from this primordial energy which is the substance of

everything. The manifestation of this power into energy is called Prakriti. Ontologically, there is no divide between man and nature, or between man and women, because life in all its forms arises from the feminine principle (Woodroffe, 1913, as cited in Shiva, 1988, p.37-38)

Rivers as Divine Mothers

At the cultural and symbolic level rivers such as Ganga and Yamuna are worshipped as divine mothers and givers of life, yet used as sites where waste is dumped, extracted as a resource, and abused by discharging industrial wastes. It reveals that respect is essentially granted in ritual or symbolic forms, but it is degraded and exploited in real world.

In the Mahabharata, Ganga embodies the feminized river whose maternal love is bound by sacrifice. Forced to drown seven of her eight sons under a celestial curse, she becomes a symbol of womanhood compelled to surrender for the sake of cosmic order and social harmony. Her descent through Shiva's hair from the heavens reinforces her dual role: both a divine force of purification and a life-giver, revered as the sacred stream that cleanses sins while bearing the burden of surrender.

Brahma, the creator of the universe according to Indian mythology, was deeply concerned about the ecological problem of the descent of Ganga from the heavens to the Earth. He said,

> Ganga, whose waves in swarga flow
> Is daughter of the Lord of Snow
> When Shiva, that his aid be lent
> To bold her in her mid-descent
> For earth alone will never bear
> These torrents travelled from the upper air.

The above metaphor is a description of the hydrological problem associated with the descent of mighty rivers like the Ganga, which are fed by seasonal and powerful monsoonic rains. (Kalidasa, as cited in Shiva, 1988, p. 175).

The Yamuna, is connected to Krishna's youth; she stands for play and devotion. The river Saraswati, like the goddess associated with wisdom, represent knowledge and purity. For devotees, these rivers are not only the physical entity they embody, but also sacred mothers who nourish humanity.

In Indian mythology, the stories of river goddesses reveal how female agency is often glorified yet simultaneously erased. Saraswati's transformation is particularly telling: while the physical river disappears from geography, she reemerges as the goddess of learning. Knowledge continues to flow, but the feminine source itself becomes invisible, suggesting that women's contributions are abstracted and celebrated symbolically while their material

presence is diminished. Similarly, the tale of Kaveri illustrates how resistance is domesticated. Married against her will to the sage Agastya, she transforms into a river to escape subjugation. Yet her act of rebellion is retold as an origin myth that ritualizes her flow, stripping away the defiance at its core. These narratives show how mythology can both elevate rivers as sacred mothers and simultaneously neutralize their agency, turning acts of resistance into stories that reinforce patriarchal order. (Kabra, 2025)

The Ganga, being one of the most revered rivers in Hindu tradition, but it is also one of its most polluted. Despite decades of government programmes such as the Ganga Action Plan (1985) and Namami Gange (2014) industrial discharge, untreated sewage and ritual practices continue to impact water quality degradation (Singh, 2018). This contradiction is made possible by the maternal metaphor of Ganga as endlessly purifying. Devotees submerge idols, flowers and plastic during the celebrations. The Ganges is mostly contaminated by human and industrial waste, as well as religious and cultural activities like carcass dumping, immersing partly burnt bodies, and mass bathing events such as the Kumbh Mela.

Around 38,000 MLD (million liters per day) of sewage is generated from towns along the Ganga, while the treatment capacity is only 12,000 MLD, leaving the majority untreated. Approximately 30% of pollution comes from industrial activities, while 70% is due to municipal waste. The Indo-Gangetic plain, which feeds 40% of India's population, consumes nearly 60,000 metric tons of pesticides annually, much of which runs off into the river (Jhariya & Tiwari, 2020).

The Ganges River, lovingly called *Ma Ganga*, is seen by millions as a sacred mother who purifies sins and grants liberation, yet the reality of her waters tells a very different story. Rituals like bathing, cremation, and pilgrimages highlight her spiritual importance, but rapid urban growth and industrial waste have left the river dangerously polluted. Each day, nearly five billion liters of sewage pour into her flow only a fraction of which is treated alongside toxic industrial effluents, making the water unsafe for bathing or drinking. Despite government pledges and billions spent on clean-up, many still believe the goddess can cleanse herself, creating a painful tension between faith and ecological crisis (Hinduism Case Study – Climate Change, 2018).

In contrast, industrialization, dam construction and urban expansion prioritize economic growth over ecological balance. We treat rivers as repositories of resources rather than a living ecological systems. Mies and Shiva (1993) argue that patriarchal capitalism treats both women and nature as productive resources whose labor is extracted but rarely acknowledged.

Every major new dam in modern India has displaced people from futile river valleys. 'They do not see the huge water reservoir nature provides below the ground. They do not see nature's work and our work in distributing water. All they can see is the structures they build.' The masculinist mind, by wanting to tame and control every river in ignorance of nature's ways, is in fact sowing the seeds of large-scale desertification and famine. The *Narmada Bachao Andolan* movement exemplifies resistance to this paradigm, linking ecological justice with social justice (Shiva, 1989, p. 184).

Ecofeminist critique

Ecofeminists highlight the tension between these two sets of relationships, as they revere nature and women in theory. As Vandana Shiva points out, The Ganga and other rivers are worshipped as sacred mothers but they are simultaneously used as dumping grounds for sewage, industrial waste and ritual material. To illustrate the philosophical tendency to situate nature in a passive role: this habit makes it easier to justify human domination over non-humans (Val Plumwood, 1993). Maria Mies and Shiva, go further to note that while both women and nature are celebrated as contributing life-giving forces, this idealization obscures the reality that both are subject to control and exploitation in patriarchal and capitalist systems. In other words, the language of reverence coexists with practices of harm, creating a paradox where glorification and exploitation go hand in hand.

Plumwood (1993) explains that motherhood and nature are often treated as background forces rather than independent agents. A mother is defined through her relationship to her child or the father, just as nature is defined as “the environment” in relation to humans. In Western thought, human identity is constructed by denying dependence on nature, and similarly, masculine identity is built by distancing itself from the mother’s nurturing qualities. This rejection of dependence allows men to frame themselves as autonomous and rational, while relegating women and nature to a passive backdrop of necessity. The result is a worldview that elevates male activity as free and independent, while reducing both mothers and nature to instruments that support but never define themselves Plumwood (1993, p. 22).

Conclusion

Ecofeminism lays bare a painful truth: both women and nature are cherished in stories, rituals, and symbols as sacred, nurturing, and life-giving, yet in reality they are often exploited and diminished under systems of power. The dualism of *Prakriti* and *Purusha*, the myths of river goddesses, and the polluted waters of the Ganga all show how reverence and harm can exist side by side, creating a paradox that is hard to ignore.

What ecofeminism asks of us is not just an intellectual shift, but a change of heart. It calls us to move away from domination and commodification, and instead embrace care, reciprocity, and respect. Healing our broken relationship with the Earth means rediscovering compassion, non-violence, and spiritual connection, values that have always been present in cultural and indigenous traditions.

Thus, ecofeminism extends beyond theoretical discourse, encouraging a more respectful and responsible relationship with the ecological systems that sustain life. It invites us to imagine a future built on justice, sustainability, and love, where women and nature are not passive resources but powerful agents of renewal and life.

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