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One Earth Family: An Eco-Feministic Study of the Novel *Everything the Light Touches* by Janice Pariat

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Abstract

*The paper examines how the colonial attitude persists today in the form of masculine capitalism, where a few dominant powers oppress the rest of the biodiversity. Furthermore, masculine capitalism attributes its destructive acts to technological and mechanical development. It constructed and framed this illusion to be the development of mankind. The word development means steady and strong growth of something. In contrast to the meaning, masculine capitalism is heading the human species towards extinction. The research, as depicted in Janice Pariat's novel *Everything the Light Touches*, highlights that it is high time to dismantle the hierarchical structure in order to protect the Earth and its ecosystem. The realization of this critical situation by the female population led them to propose the idea of eco-feminism, which challenges the masculine hierarchical structure by considering the earth as one family. The novel explores the beauty and unique inner worth of lives that exist beyond mankind. It explores the relationship that humans share with plants and the natural world.*

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Masculine Capitalism, Biodiversity, Marginalization, Diversity, Hierarchy.

Ecofeminism

The term Eco feminism was coined by French feminist activist Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* published in the year 1974. In this book the author explains how the masculine mentality is the root cause for most of the problems the society and the environment faces today, like extreme population increase, landslides, global warming, pollution etc. Many feminist writers related to the thoughts of Françoise d'Eaubonne.

In India Eco feminism as a movement was started by Dr. Vandana Shiva who is an environmental activist and Eco feminist and has a doctorate in the field of quantum physics. She has been claimed as one of the most influential eco feminist globally. She advocated that the masculine capitalistic attitude has only led to destruction in the name of development and that now eco-feministic thought

process should be underlying the human attitude to revive the Earth and the humanity to head towards sustainable living. Shiva has written many books to voice out for the welfare of the earth. Ecofeminism, Staying alive: Women, ecology and development, Earth democracy, Soil not oil oneness vs. one percent, etc. Shiva is the founder of Navadhanya, a non-governmental organization that promotes biodiversity conservation.

She Spells Out that the Ultimate Aim of Eco Feminism is to Overcome Three Apartheids

- The first apartheid is that human beings are separate from nature. Shiva highlights the Indian philosophy has always insisted on the concept of one earth family. Shiva also throws light upon the attitude of interconnectedness of the entire biodiversity that is present in all aspects of life.
- The second apartheid is the hierarchy. Shiva says that the differences should not be measured with the single measuring instrument but should be defined from within the self or the community and should be acknowledge and cherished for its intrinsic worth.
- The third apartheid is the economic disparity. The physical workers and the bread labors should be the major contributors of the economy and the economic bipolarity should be diminished.

Analysis

The novel *Everything the light touches* by Janice Pariat talks about the lives that exists beyond mankind. It particularly renders major focus to the life of plants. The novel traces the journey of four characters and their attitude towards nature along their journey. It involves the journey of Shai, a young girl in her twenties, who is in pursuit of identity. Shai's journey brings out the value of culture, heritage and importance of a life that is interconnected with the biodiversity. The other woman character in the novel is Evelyn, who travels from Europe to the British India to explore the diverse plant varieties in India. Through the life journey of Evelyn the author explores the mental dominance that women faces in the male dominated fields. Evelyn has a very different thought process in comparison to the people around her and through this the author has portrayed a clear differentiation between ecofeminism and masculine attitude that is common even among women who believes in the structure of the masculine dominated society. The third protagonist in the novel is Johann alias Goethe, who have a deep insight about nature and holds the philosophy All is leaf, which suggest that nothing in this world are separate entities everything is a part of the whole. The reflections of Goethe are direct opposites to that of Carl alias Lineaus, who believe in arranging and creating hierarchies.

The novel begins with the travel of Shai young girl in her twenties returning to her hometown near Shillong from Delhi. The very beginning of the novel gives the taste of tussle in the society between Eco feministic thoughts and the masculine capitalistic ideas. As it begins with Shai moving from Delhi to Shillong it is symbolically moving from a city where development means technological and mechanical to a place where technological developments are less important and nature especially plants are seen as siblings or family members. Not only Shai all the protagonist in the novel make their journey from the society with a stereotypical mindset to a society where differences and uniqueness are valued. While boarding flight from Delhi to Shillong, Shai is not allowed to carry coconut with her in the flight this scenario portrays how the plants and nature doesn't have space in the capitalistic sophisticated world, where coconut is a symbol of nature and airplane is a symbol of capitalism.

The novel highlights the fact that human beings are still not completely discarded from nature and gives the hope that some people are well aware of the importance of the nature and how plants similar to human beings has its own characteristics. The conversation between Kong Nuramon,

Shai and her father about the Wood Wide Web as they call it, which is the communication system of a plant through the roots. The communication system of the plants are more complex, advanced and a challenge put forth to the human species which continuously degraded all the other species assuming and framing the other living organisms in the ecosystem to have less sense. The conversation highlights that the nature's intelligence is far greater than that of man. The act of Shai's father standing as guardian to protect the trees from people who are determined to cut it down resembles a person guarding the members of own family. This is one of the ultimate aims of Eco feminism as put forth by Vandhana Shiva i.e. to live with the mindset of one earth family.

While Shai's father have a more strong bond with the nature, in contrast Shai is not able to relate to the place and doesn't feel sense of belonging to the soil since Shai was more used to the objective, connectionless and emotionless lifestyle at Delhi. Shai does not even bother to know the names of the plants that grow around the place, this represents the life of majority of the population where people live their entire life feeling alienated in own birth place. Initially when Shai comes to Shillong from Delhi she does bother much of what is happening in the place even about the cutting down of trees. Shai feels alienated to her own hometown. This can be substantiated with her words I wouldn't get behind if it involves protest picnics in the forest. This is one of the major repercussions of masculine capitalism where humans not only get alienated but has loose most of the valuable inherent human abilities for eg. majority of the human communities except the farmers and the tribes has lost the ability to do hard physical work and eventually the physical strength.

Similarly the human species is slowly losing its ability to have subjective knowledge i.e. the knowledge gained through observation this can be substantiated from several incidents from the novel. First, is where Shai's father shares his knowledge about the communication of plants, the memory capacity and its aromatic vocabulary this knowledge of plants can be gained only through observation not only through the eyes but through all the other sensory organs of the body. The second incident is when Shai is recollecting the conversation with Grace about the directionless life that Shai is leading The reference to the 'compass' which is a symbol of the Western industrialization and colonialism, here the western and the Indian lifestyle are put into comparison where the compasses and instrument made to aid the Westerners to identify the direction who doesn't know to identify direction with the help of nature in contrast the Indian indigenous people like Shai's father knows to find North with the bend of the Thuja trees.. Vandhana Shiva stresses that Eco feminism gives importance to the indigenous way of living. The indigenous lifestyle aligns with the natural system for example the tribes sense the time and direction with the help of the Sun. They predict the natural calamities with the help of the sky and animals around.

One of the major criticism eco feminism charges on masculine capitalism is that it has created a hierarchy of knowledge. It places the knowledge from the western civilization to be on the top of the hierarchy and others below it. The mention of intelligence of the migration birds in the novel to fly without the compass proves it wrong. The reflections that Shai have with herself about sensing direction portrays that the indigenous knowledge and the knowledge and ability of birds, animals and nature are far more superior than the intelligence of man-made technologies and machines.

Shai mentions about the increase in number of buildings in the hilly region. Man always tends to place comfort and sophistication before wellbeing. There is a usual trend in people trying to spend their vacations in cool hilly regions. But there is least care among the people about not harming the eco-system while enjoying. Today buildings and resorts are built in high numbers in the hilly region for people who can afford vacations in hilly regions, which has become a good source of revenue. Hence for money, the lives of trees that were guarding the hills from soil erosions and landslides are put in danger. Humans in the hierarchy constructed in their mind place nature in the bottom line which leads to self-destruction.

The third apartheid of Shiva focuses on yielding one's own food with physical labor as investment. The novel through the portrayal of Shai working with Banri on the soil to sow, nurture and harvest own food not only helps to be self reliant but also gives a sense of belongingness to the place. Also the novel takes up a eco-feministic attitude in the portrayal of Uranium extraction in Mawmalang, where the corporate tries to manipulate the minds of the people saying it is for the good of the people but then the people come together to stand up for protecting mother earth by placing nature before any other priorities

Conclusion

In this research, the researcher through the novel Everything the light touches by Janice Pariat have explored the tussle between the marginalized and the masculine capitalistic minds. Also it has analyzed how the subjective knowledge system of the individuals is undervalued. The researcher also discusses the importance of diversity and how measuring diversity under one scale affects the quality of life. Since colonization, there have multiple types of subjugations, where a hierarchy was formed leading to inequality in the society. In this structure, one culture, one gender, one system of knowledge was considered supreme and diversity lost its respect. This societal structure was followed in the Masculine capitalism even after the colonial rule came to an end. The society considers the strengthening of this societal structure to be development which is actually destruction of biodiversity in disguise. Eco-feminism highlights that the masculine capitalistic attitude may lead to destruction of the earth. Eco-feminism does not believe in extinction or escape rather calls the humanity to change the societal structure where sustainable living becomes possible. This becomes possible only when diversity is respected and hierarchy is demolished and when the entire biodiversity is seen as one family.

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