

An Ecofeminist Reading of Select Poems of Dattatreya Ramachandra Bendre/Da. Ra. Bendre/Bendre

Jyothi A., Research Scholar

Department of P G Studies and Research in English
Jnana Sahyadri, Kuvempu University
Shankaraghatta, Shivamogga Dist., Karnataka State, India
jyothi.civic@gmail.com
9916779219

Abstract

The world is getting more and more techno-equipped with sophisticated modern innovations and improvised adaptations. But when it comes to liberty and equality of genders and the way we treat ecology there have been many issues for concern.

The term *ecofeminism* has existed even before the word was used by French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book, *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* (1974). But it is said that it has come to India in the 1970s. It is an umbrella term, the theory of ecofeminism borrowed from feminism and environmentalism. In this research paper the researcher emphasizes more on the connections between women and nature, how environmental ethics were bound with women, mainly in Bendre's poetry, and also in Kannada writings. This research paper which is also going to discuss the green reading of Kannada writes Bendre and his Mother earth philosophy in Kannada literary context.

Keywords: Bendre, Mother earth, Ecofeminism, and ecological concerns.

Introduction

If we look at the recent past, there has been a great deal of dialogue about the feminist view and its importance for understanding the universe. These discourses have echoed in all the platforms of media around us. Close attention to these discussions reveals the contemporary situation of women in modern society.

The world is getting more and more techno-equipped with sophisticated modern innovations and improvised adaptations. But when it comes to liberty and equality of genders and the way we treat ecology there have been many issues for concern.

Be it emperors, kings or dukes, they have always treated men as slaves, women as

second gender and nature as an everlasting resource to gain more power. Indeed, this ideology enriched the power matrix of the rulers. Thanks to philosophers (like Socrates) and reformers (like Buddha) who created an alternative discourse with a different perspective also prevailed in history. Society has resisted and continued to evolve with new paradigms in maintaining power relations dominating such discourses. Dilution of the Vachana movement which originated in the twelfth century could be seen as an example of such domination. Ideas of a casteless society asserted by revolutionary thinkers were lost and their community turned into a caste in the years after the Vachana movement.

Understanding Environmentalism

The word “environment” is a relatively recent term which appeared less than 400 years ago. It has a most complicated history, with multiple meanings. Some may find this surprising, particularly against the background of the twentieth century, in which the term environment has been ubiquitously used (Muller, 2001). Etymologically, “the state of being environed” in the sense of natural conditions in which a person or thing lives” (Harper, 2001). The environment could be understood as ‘surrounding,’ which includes biotic factors like human beings, animals, plants, microbes, etc., and abiotic factors such as light, air, water, soil, etc.

The word environmentalism refers to a wide philosophy, ideology, and social movement regarding concerns for ecological protection and development of the health of the environment. Environmentalism advocates the lawful preservation, restoration, and development of the natural environment. It can also be described as a movement to control pollution or protect plant and animal diversity. But the essence of environmentalism is the harmony and balance between the surrounding and humans, which is in friction always.

The quest to preserve nature has been seen since the Romantic era of literature. The 1870’s amenity movement in Britain was a reaction against rapid industrialization which was then worsening the lives of people. John Ruskin and Octavia Hill were leading the environmental movements in late nineteenth century. It was a period of steam engines, not the hydrocarbons. The Commons Preservation Society (1865) raised its voice. This phase is generally termed as the first phase of environmentalism. This movement expanded into preservation and conservation aspects like that of birds, national parks, pollution control, etc.

Silent Spring by Rachel Carson (1962) created a huge shift in environmental movements. In her book, she questioned the extensive use of chemicals in farmlands especially that of DDT. In her book, she documented that use of DDT could cause cancer and could prove lethal to flora and fauna. Many groups were formed in 1970’s such as Greenpeace and Friends of America who started to have research-oriented awareness campaigns to protect the environment. By 70’s World Earth day was observed, the UN started to organize conferences on

human environment and became a catalyst in pushing the countries to adopt environmentally friendly policies. In spite of all these, 1970-80 was seen as the peak period of green revolution in countries like India leading to farmlands full of pesticides and chemicals. Today, the problems have become fatal with global warming, overpopulation, and many other issues.

Women and Environmentalism-Ecofeminism

The word Ecofeminism is not just a phrase. It is an ideology which aims to end all sorts of social injustice. Karren Warren points out that Aldo Leopold's essay 'Land Ethic' (1949) is a major work for the ecofeminist ideas. In his book 'A Sand County Almanac' (1949), Leopold uses the word 'Land Ethic' which is nothing but a philosophical look at how humans should regard land/nature. According to him, all non-human elements such as air, land, animals and plants do have equal rights to live. This is how the environment and humans were seen inseparably. A writer like Susan

A. Mann makes the connection between women, race, gender, class, and environment issues. Chipko Movement, Green Belt Movement of Kenya of 1970's was seen as an extension of ecofeminist movements. Soon, ecofeminism also grew as the academic approach in dealing with social constructions. (Aldo Leopold's 1949)

The prefix 'eco' came from ecology a systematic study of living organism and environment. Feminism is advocacy of women's rights. Environmental destruction and gender oppression led to ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is an umbrella term which comprises a variety of ideas, for example, deep ecology, religious ecology, social ecology, and anti-nuclear movement. Ecofeminism says that capitalist patriarchy is the worst social system. Patriarchy is a systematic domination of male over female. Capitalist patriarchy means men's control over natural resources. Linguistically women are linked to nature, we exploit 'mother earth', we cut down 'virgin' timber, through this we feminize nature with naturalized women and in this process, we are enforcing mutual subordination. Historically women play a vital role in agricultural production and in managing of the household economy especially in developing countries. And the other interesting thing is women were the first victims of natural calamities and environmental destructions in which men are affected by 25 percent but women by 75 percent. All these led to ecofeminism or the need to build an ecofeminist theory. Ecofeminism is concerned with two major things-one is Environmental Justice and the second one is Social justice. Environmental justice is concerned with protecting the environment, ecosystem, and natural resources, and social justice is concerned with addressing divisions between human beings, for example, racism, sexism, classism, property and so on. These two are different and distinct but not in conflict with each other. These two require each other's support to address the problems. Environmental destruction and social injustice have the common cause that is hierarchal thinking. Ecofeminism is one aspect of feminist perspective. The hierarchies of male

over female, civilized over uncivilized, white over non-white, and man over nature are binary distinctions as ecofeminists argue. Warren J and Vandana Shiva argue that these binaries lead to sexism and environmental injustice. Without addressing environmental issues, we cannot address social issues because one leads to other. The social mentality of domination over women is also connected with the domination and oppression of environment. (Shiva 1998).

Ecofeminism also considers nature and women as the products of social, cultural construction. Cultural Feminism is the first theoretical school that shows concerns about environmental pollution. The political movement that they have launched aims at ending industrial pollution, which has greatly enhanced people's awareness of such issues.

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the relevance of ecofeminism in the interpretation of literature
2. The theoretical and practical variations in the ecofeminist approaches.
3. To look at major contributions to ecofeminism by Da Ra Bendre, through a close green reading of his selected poetry.
4. To use ecofeminism as a tool of literary interpretation in decoding the literary piece of work focusing on the use of language, metaphors and other formal features.

Research Methodology

Though the current research uses a wide range of research approaches such as close reading, feminist literary interpretation, comparative analysis, psychoanalytic theory, Post-colonial, Marxist reading and many others, the researcher would like to employ two major methodologies. A close reading without ignoring parameters like the socio-political setting, background of the author, historical context, feminist literary interpretation and representation of women.

Apart from historical research, the present study is also a descriptive content analysis and a conceptual study on discourses around ecofeminism.

In realizing the objectives of the study, the researcher focuses on the poetry of Da Ra Bendre.

Brief Introduction to Dattatreya Ramachandra Bendre / Da. Ra. Bendre/ Bendre

Bendre 'invented' the new language of modern Kannada poetry which is a blend of folk form and philosophical thought. Just as Wordsworth lived in the difficult period of transition, Bendre wrote during the Navodaya period which saw the struggle for independence, the movement for the unification of Karnataka and the impact of colonial modernity. As in the time of Wordsworth in England had discoveries, similar experiments were reflected here.)

Among all the writers of the Navodaya era of Kannada literature, Dattatreya Ramachandra Bendre is very important due to his distinctive narrative technique and the new language he brought to poetry. Bendre had written poems with social concern and incorporated nature and its beauty in his writings. *Krishnakumari, Gari, Meghadhuta, Haadu-Paadu, Gangavatarana, Sooryapaana, Hrudaya Samudra, Muktakantha, Chaityalaya*, are his notable collections.

Dattatreya Ramachandra Bendre is a prolific writer of modern Kannada poetry. Bendre was brought up in an environment with a literary background. His grandfather had a literary bent of mind. Bendre had a lifelong attachment to his mother who was a permanent source of inspiration for him. In one of his well-known poems, 'Ambikatanayadatta' which accounts for the origin of his assumed name, he says:

Mother! Beloved Ambika! Datta is born of your body, He has but given
what you gave him.

Gangavatarana (G.S Amur, *The Spider, and the Web*)

He also celebrated his grandmothers' name in several poems. He grew up in an atmosphere surcharged with the devotional ardor inspired by Marathi saints, and he also constantly exposed to Marathi poetry and the Bhakti literature in Kannada in Dharawada. His first Kannada poem was 'Tutturi.' The period between 1918 to 1932,(the year when 'Gari' (Feathers) was published,) could be described as Bendre's formative period. In his teaching career, he taught a close group of talented young boys whose careers he shaped meticulously by instilling in them the love of literature and love of the land. He read with them and translated for them the works of the British Romantic poets and a few series of writings of Rabindranath Tagore.

Bendre received the prestigious Jnanapith award in 1974 for the work *Naaku Tanti* (Four Strings) and in 1976 Kashi Vidyapeetha presented him with his third honorary Doctorate. Bendre's poetic activity continued uninterrupted until his death in 1981.

Bendre and the Undercurrent of Philosophy

Between 1957 and 1978 he brought out eleven collections. The poet, Bendre said, is a symbolic figure whose work is a continuation of the cultural tradition of the past. He could not have given a better description of himself. Though his commitment was to the present and the future, he was, in the true sense of the term, a traditional poet. He refused to be called a Renaissance poet or a modern poet and insisted that he was a *Vedakavi* or *Vedavit Kavi* which means a philosophical poet. His vision was rooted in the spiritual tradition, harmony

(Samarasya) at all levels between God and Man, Man and Nature and among men.

Often critics (Jagadish Koppa, Kirthinath Kurthakoti) trace influence of redefinitions and reformulations by seers like Sri Aurobindo on Bendre. He absorbed not only the essence of Vedic culture but opened his sensibility to a variety of influences including Western thought. Though he was born in an age of conceptual slavery and cultural imitation, his response to the West was always from his culture.

Bendre's acceptance of the humanistic values of the West was within the religious and cultural framework of his own culture and his understanding of the native world. Bendre did not see any opposition between 'Laukika' (the material world) and 'Aloukika' (metaphysical) and never denied the body and the world in his writing. He particularly was drawn to the Desi (indigenous) stream of this tradition and identified himself with the sharp line of Bhakti poets like that of Vachanakaras (12th AD), the Haridasas (post 15th AD), Kumaravyasa (15th AD) Chamarasa (15 AD) and Lakshmisha (16th AD).

Bendre believed in immortality and had his theory about it which he published in 1977. Immortality, he said, 'is as real as the North pole. In life, it has to be realized, again and again, every moment. Since immortality has no end, its *Sadhana* (enlightenment) also cannot have an end.'

Representation of Nature and Woman in Bendre's Poems Naadaleele

Embracing red is in front. The disturbing fog behind I know the
hunter will come from that side
The deer are sniffing the morning breeze Kolu sakhi....

In the outer layer, it seems as though poet is describing the hurdles of life and yet not giving up the joy of embracing beauty. The hunter is coming scouting to kill life, all the happiness, and sadness, still, the poet celebrates. But at a higher level of meaning, he is talking about the desires of life which come in the way of actualization of life's purpose. The poet opines that the man knows about himself and his limitations yet is always aspiring to go beyond.

Blend of Love and Religion in Bendre's Poems

Bendre's nature poems have two distinct patterns where one is the love with religious feelings towards mother earth. The second pattern is that the mother earth will not take the humans on a higher journey as the humans (the Man) are spoiling the life of the earth. These

two aspects repeatedly appear in his poems.

Mother earth is one of the inspirations for Bendre's poems. It has been expressed creatively often bringing love and protection together. D.R Nagaraj points out in *Shakthi Sharade Mela* that the mother philosophy has become the origin of religion and art which also reflects the Indian mind in responding to its different experiences.

In Bendre's experience, there is an identicalness in Bendre's mother that who has given birth and mother earth he considers to be the source of all life. His affection towards both mothers is equal. But the mother earth is not just as an affectionate mother, instead she becomes a challenge. With the entire dreadfulness eventually 'the mother earth' also returns to the form of 'affectionate mother' (one who given birth). She, the mother earth merges with other mothers and becomes identical. These are evident in numerous poems he has penned.

'O Taayi Maate' (O Mother),
'O mother, mother, Shivajaayi, guard me! Why do you open your mouth? Whichever way I go, I am little a dog..... ..
O, mother, I have come, called you mother, with nectar fill this mouth Open your lotusa little bee has come
Open open say Ambikatanaya's words
'O mother, mother, Shivajaayi, guard me! Fill this mouth.' 'O Taayi Maate' (O Mother),
(Ambikaatanaya Datta. 'Aralu Maralu, Pg.17-18)

Bendre describes in this how a man should co-exist with nature and he should have love and affection towards nature. The poet compares nature to mother based on his mother earth philosophy. The craving for mother's love is also evident where nature's affection and fondness is expressed. The poet converses with nature placing her on the highest platform. He also well begs her to fill his stomach with whatever the earth could provide.

'Taayige Prarthane' (Prayer to Mother) You're the shining constellation, I am a Star, I was thrown out from the womb
Still there is an illusion, I am revolving Haven't woken up completely from birth sleep,
You haven't let me go, in the vast expanse of the sky,
Taking me on your chariot, where, I do not know (Ambikaatanaya Datta. 'Aralu Maralu, Pg. 22)

The poem starts with his mother and extends to the principle of the mother in its

entirety. This is the origin of Bendre's earth poems which also seek to know where man is going or where the earth is taking us. For Bendre, the problem of the earth means the problem of human history, the question of the evolution of humanity. In his earth poems, he discusses the questions of where the man is moving to, which way he is taking. Bendre uses his poems as platforms for discussing these fundamental questions. Are human beings destroying the earth or is the earth taking humans in a particular direction. Probably the poet was influenced by modern scientific innovations and the urge of man to compete with the earth in every aspect. As the innovations increased, man treated the mystical nature as subordinate to him and carried on with the mission of colonizing the entire globe. The poet was responding to such explorations about which he is not clear where or what they are heading towards.

It comes in subtle meanings like that in the fourth line where he still aspires to join the journey of the earth rather earth joining the journey of man.

Bendre focuses on the question addressed to the earth; where is the earth taking humankind? Against this backdrop, the search in Bendre's nature poems has taken two different ways. Originally, even though earth and man have individual relationship, the approach is different. The first one belongs to man's strength, which developed in the process of civilization and this is man's adverse strength of destroying nature. There is no limit to his creativity; human's evil destroys nature and its surroundings'. The second one is the strength of the mother earth. Love, anger, protective powers are the different faces of this strength. While emphasizing the second aspect, the poet portrays the earth as more powerful than mankind. These two different paths finally converge on the central questions of human history. Bendre seeks an answer to this question with the affection he had for mother earth, and finally he found the answer in the same affection.

Like all mothers, mother earth is also a woman full of affection. Bendre had great respect for mother earth and if anyone calls her as soil (Mannu) he gets angry and questions, how can we call mother earth as mere soil (Mannu)? She is taking mankind to new heights and so, he refuses the offer any such attribute. 'Bidimuttu' would be an ideal example for this.

Turn down as just soil? Don't know what
soil?

The crop of soil, the beauty of soil, the scent of soil. Even if the landlord
abandons,

The womb will never leave soil's closeness. Even if life turns
to ash

Soil is still cool

The sky ganga rain's compassion

Washing the mortal foetus; Life's spring longs
for affection Even lord Shrinivasa
Found abode in Tirumala (mountains) This earth is not
soil, it is god's love.

- (Bidimuttu)
(Ambikaatanaya Datta. 'Aralu Maralu, Pg.141.)

For the poet, if someone calls earth as soil, his response was much different from what others have thought of it. For him, the soil is the origin of the crop, our food, beauty and the fragrance of the universe. The soil has the competency of giving birth to life even in the absence of any caretakers. According to the poet, our body's vivacity is from the soil. Even after death, man's corpse joins earth's lap. She receives with the same love and makes humans sleep (Death) on her lap. This earth is not just a place of feelings. Men experience the power of the goddess here. Even the poet's god, Shreenivasa has also settled in the mountains rather than in any other mystical world.

'Prarthane,' (Prayer) is a representative of Bendre's philosophy towards earth, Earth is an immortal gorgeous beauty

Is it in me to see all its beauty? Time is fading
second by second. Am I capable of stopping it?

The work that remains to be done is endless, The lives that
have come to do it are infinite. I am not the only one.

Everything need not happen in my lifetime.
- (Prayer)

These lines seem very simple in general, but there is very subtle meaning in them. The emphasis is on man's mediocrity and hidden evil ambitions in 'Prayer.' The brutal attack on mother earth by such ambitious persons' is something which is happening for years. Such persons are responsible for the bad consequences around us. Some people can't live harmoniously with nature, and it is impossible for such people to live with nature cordially; they want to live with all their arrogance and pride and want to experience everything at one go. If such people are in powerful position socially or in power, they will spoil everything with their individualistic, selfish craving or fetish. They desire to have control over the mother earth; this tendency could be found throughout history, and mother earth suffers from such powers. The poet urges that it's not just meant for only me and I don't need to claim that everything is mine.

In 'Prayer,' Bendre speaks about such people those who don't have love and affection for nature. Will they always consider mother earth as commodity and violate the rights of mother

earth. The poem describes how to live with earth affectionately and also poem gives positive views of earth and human history.

Conclusion

History has its barbarian episodes' it has seen fights between the kings, between kingdoms, between the groups and many more. The poem, 'Modalagitti' represents all these, yet making the mother earth as the first comer as well the spectator of all the events which have taken place till date. Socially existing structure of kingship is the inspiration for all the historical barbarities. Their ambitions and battlefield ventures have created nothing less than bloodstreams. In attaining kingship, father, mother, brother nobody is given importance over power. Bendre doesn't explore historical violence in abstract meta-language in both the poems, 'Chigarigangala Cheluvi' and 'Modalagitti.' He extends it to natural phenomena, and he doesn't conclude that it is world's basic attribute. Bendre finds all such violence in a few particular institutions. In 'Chigarigangala Cheluvi' he makes inequality the main accused and in 'Modalagitti' Kingship (Rajatva) is the accused. In the poem 'Modalagitti' kingship is not about the same violence as in the western literature. Here the mother earth has digested the violence of humans. And she forgives the humans, so she proves that she is more powerful than kingship.

Bendre again turns his attention to mother earth's love and he never thinks that mother earth is ultimately very violent. Instead he writes that if her children make mistakes, she becomes furious. This is clear in Bendre's poem 'Modalagitti' (The First Comer). The poem describes the human history from a particular viewpoint, Bendre's vision is precisely about his opposition to patriarchal society. Lust, heroism, and phrenetic courage are the main features of this civilization, whereas matriarchal civilization's values are different. In the patriarchal civilization, pride blandishes in the name of self-esteem. But in matriarchal society love is the main inspiration to the society; love, kindness, and life's happiness are the foundations of the society. The values which socialists attribute to model society are the values of the matriarchal civilization.

One can see the interwoven relationships between all the members in the poem, 'Shraavana'. (Shraavana also called Sawan is the fifth month of Hindu calendar and considered auspicious. It also marks the arrival of South-West monsoon. For the people, it's about holy things and feasting whereas for nature its reunion)

Bendre's vision of society is different from that of other Kannada writers. He gives ample importance to mother earth, the dilemmas of development and the issues of man overriding earth and woman as well. He does not distinguish between a woman and earth. He uses the phrase, 'Bhoomtai' which represents both the earth and mother. According to him,

both woman and earth have similar caring protecting or productive capacities. All his poems in one way or other speak of the same though differently; altogether the message is the same which is saving the mother earth and environment as well as the woman. Bendre raised sensitive questions like power structure, patriarchy, and male domination and its aftermath on the society. He raised such questions through his writings, not in a rhetorical way but indirectly through poetry.

Bendre had written several poems on the same theme, but the researcher couldn't bring all of them to discussion due to constraints. The researcher has taken up a few examples of his poems which deal with earth and woman. An extensive study exclusively on his poems would do justice to the poet's vision.

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An Ecofeminist Reading of Select Poems of Dattatreya Ramachandra Bendre/Da. Ra. Bendre/Bendre 607