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ECOFEMINISM IN THE MYTH OF MANASA DEVI IN AMITAV GHOSH'S GUN ISLAND

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Ecofeminism emerged as a literary movement during the early 1970s. Ecofeminism is the correlation between the subordination and operation of women and nature. Ecofeminism also finds expression in age-old classical texts, in the centuries-old epic of Ramayana in the Indian Mythology.

In her Preface to a long poem *Sita (A Poem)*, Prof Nandini Sahu, poet-thinker-ecofeminist says, "Sita was a woman closest to Nature- she was the original ecofeminist-deserted twice, abducted once, she never spent her life brooding over a decipherable destiny, rather she took charge of the flora and fauna and then her own children Lava-Kush, as a single parent till they were twelve years old. She was like Mother Earth. She was the embodiment of patience, endurance, optimism, love and motherhood."

Ecofeminism is about the function of women and their interrelationship with the environment and the conflicts faced by them to conserve their habitats. It contains the biotic spaces in which a woman resides and the presence of nature and non-human objects. It illuminates the situation of patriarchy, colonization and female dominance and explores the connection between the operation of woman and the operation of nature by the masculine centred practices and attitude.

Writers like Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai and Sarah Joseph explored the conceptual essence of ecofeminism in their works of fiction through folklore and their strong-willed feminine characters. Ecofeminism strengthens deep ecological movements through the values, experiences, thoughts and perspectives of women. It holds the key for cultural transformation and provides a balanced attitude for humankind which is essential for life on the planet earth.

Man's greed and commerce has violated, polluted, degraded the Earth with little concern towards conservation and preservation of the resources of Mother Earth. Studies reveal that in India, farms are suffering a loss of four billion tons of topsoil every year. Pesticide run-off and toxic dumping accumulated over thousands of years are poisoning the soil and the groundwater table. The nuclear power industry, by generating plutonium, poisons the flora and fauna of Earth without any plan to secure them. There is a huge deprivation of wetland habitation too.

This race for development and industrial monocultures, have isolated man from nature and has resulted in creating a devastating derangement of the ecosystem, its flora, fauna and human life. Habitats have got dislocated, natural resources are eroded and depleted, rivers are polluted. Similarly, women, in the form of gender, division of labour, dominance and control are violated through culturally-sanctioned crimes. Women are systemically marginalized or discriminated against, institutionally and directly, in every part of society. There is gender injustice in all walks of life such as in politics, in employment, in the arts, in media and culture. The proverbial glass ceiling is becoming more and more challenging to reach, let alone overcome. The marginalised section of women bears the worst brunt of environmental degradation. Exploiting and devaluing earth and women have become the mainstay of patriarchal capitalism.

Ecofeminism is a means to establish the connect between women and nature. Both women and nature are the most vulnerable, the most affected because of the abuse of the environment. This dual oppression cannot be seen in isolation. Human beings have subordinated the entire living and non-living entities on earth. The disparity between men and nature has led to the disparity between men and women. Climate change and environmental problems such as deforestation, water pollution, and environmental toxins, have taken a heavy toll, especially, on women. They suffer from poverty, food and water crisis, health issues, domestic and sexual violence and a host of other unspeakable forms of oppression. All the creatures on the earth are interlinked, exploitation of one affects others.

According to Julia Mason, ecofeminist and Professor of Gender Studies, ecofeminism can function as a tool for analysing the connect between environmental justice and gender justice. It challenges some of our deeply held assumptions on racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of oppression. Radical or cultural feminism became the source of ecofeminism, recognizing the dynamics comprising fright and bitterness behind the supremacy of male over female.

As a natural and spontaneous response to the indiscriminate violence against nature, the women of North India rose in silent and significant protest. Being literally and figuratively close to the earth and having established an interdependent emotional connect with Nature, the women hugged the trees in an overwhelming gesture of protection and ire. The Chipko movement is a classic example of women power and nature. Villagers especially women have realised that they cannot sustain their livelihood in a deforested area, and have increasingly become aware of how floods continually play havoc with their small agricultural communities. Women have opened their eyes to the fact that their men would not mind destroying nature to get money while they slog and go to nature for all their needs, from fuel to fibre, from food to fodder. Women naturally have a physical and a spiritual connect with nature. The women of the Chipko movement are the torch bearers of the ecofeminist school of thought. Having realised the duality of the system and being more religious, and more sensitive, women physically rose to protect nature from the greed of men. Their belief that each tree has a Vriksadevata and that the deity Van Devi or Bon bibi will protect their family welfare and that every green tree is an abode of the Almighty God, made them fiercely and fearlessly dare the wrath of the axe. The tree-hugging gesture was the women's way of resisting the onslaught against nature and establishing an enduring bond with her. The spirit of the Chipko movement swept swiftly across the districts of India. This movement illustrated the fact that when the appeal to secular norms fails, it is from the culture, religion, myth and folklore that one can draw strength. The silent forest satyagraha like Chipko was a precursor to widespread awareness campaigns like Mitti Bachao Abhiyan, Van Mahotsava, Chetna march, Kalpavriksha and even the recent river cleaning and conservation as well as the Swachtha movements. These movements apart, selfish gain and exploitation continue. Across every spectrum of society women and nature are the primary victims of violence, exploitation, and discrimination. And like nature, women too have to be protected and honoured to set the rhythm of existence right. Thus, protection and exploitation of the earth and women are closely knitted and directly related. It is in this context that ecofeminism as a literary movement finds meaning and relevance. Ecofeminism becomes of enormous value as it is not only about protecting trees, animals or soil only because it is sacred, but rather an imperative for survival. One agrees with Y. King, that it is not a sentimental movement. For most of the women of the world, interest in the preservation of the land, water, air, and energy is no abstraction but a clear part of the effort to simply survive.

In her book *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson studies the effect of chemicals in DDT with the outbreak of lethal disease like cancer that impacts generations of people. She is convinced that if human being poisons nature, nature would, in turn, poison humankind. Our heedless acts of destruction enter into the vast cycles of the earth and in time return to bring hazards to ourselves. One would find her ideas and concerns serious and sensible in the present time too as we suffer the consequences, often fatal, of being exposed to the increasing amount of chemicals being injected into the environment. Her writing opens everyone's eyes and makes one aware of what mankind is doing against nature. It also points attention to other environmental issues.

Vandana Shiva, noted ecofeminist, connects food depravity and poverty to capital patriarchy. She says that declaring nature dead when it is alive, is Man's way of establishing his empire over nature and thereby women. This means all species can be exterminated. People can be dispossessed. Quoting Bacon, she calls it the "Birth of the Masculine time" She attributes the systemic and ruthless destruction of the biodiversity, the genocidal and ecocidal systems to the "monoculture of the mind." In her book *Stolen Harvest*, she argues that converting natural forests to monocultures to generate revenue is a growth, based on robbing the forests of their biodiversity and its capacity to conserve soil and water. Forest communities are also robbed of their food, fibre,

fuel, fodder, medicine and security from flood and drought. Monoculture leads to the derangement of climate and dispossession of natural habitats. In *Staying Alive*, she says that movements like the tree-hugging, Chipko and the legal challenges of women against the giant nuclear corporations of the United States, reflect the intuition that somehow, the struggle for a feminine voice to be heard, is connected with the struggle for a nurturant, protective attitude towards our living environment. Despite these heavy concerns and massive protests, degradation and abuse of both nature and women continue to rise catastrophically. Secular systems, legal interventions and policies do little to mitigate the carnage that is widespread both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Writers have resorted to the classic wealth of literature, culture, folklore, myth, rituals and stories to craft their stories to drive home the need to nourish and nurture the planet and its inhabitants. Through their works of fiction and non-fiction, writers like Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, Anita Nair, Arundati Roy, Vandana Shiva, plot the trajectory of doom for the earth, if domination and reckless destruction of the planet continues. Amitav Ghosh, master storyteller and a keen environmentalist makes deft use of folklore to drive home his ecological concerns. Ghosh poignantly brings out the saga of environmental degradation by man and its fatal repercussions through the myth of his bandukki saudagar and Manasa Devi, the Goddess of snakes in the *Gun Island* and of Bonbibi and Dokkin Rai in *The Hungry Tide*.

Goddess Manasa Devi, in all her manifestations, is a symbol of the unity of all life in nature. Her power manifests in water and stone, in tomb and cave, in animals and birds, snakes and fish, hills, trees, and flowers. Ghosh believes in the holistic and mythopoetic perception of the sacredness and mystery of all there is on earth. Legend has it that, the Goddess gradually retreated into the depths of forests or onto mountaintops. Today her presence is limited to beliefs and fairy stories. When humans get alienated from nature and earth, the result is chaotic. This is evident in our contemporary society. But the cycles never stop turning and the Goddess, as is revealed in *Gun Island*, re-emerges from the forests and mountains to remind us, to revisit and return to our basic human roots. The Goddess Manasa Devi in the novel, *Gun Island*, epitomises the protective, possessive and passionate spirit of nature. Her capacity to regenerate, reproduce and replenish is what breathes life into the earth even when annihilation is systemic and complete. Her spirit and presence in the book are all-pervading and persistent. *Gun Island* moves from Brooklyn and Kolkata to Venice. Ghosh returns to the themes of migration and climate change, examining them through the lens of oral narratives, new histories and migration, circling back to old and new myths.

Ghosh's narrative, a story within several stories, begins at a temple in the Sundarbans in West Bengal. The temple, said to be constructed by the Gun Merchant as a tribute to Manasa Devi, the goddess of snakes, accelerates the narrative's winding prose. The legend that envelopes the temple is a story that the protagonist Deen sets out to uncover. On a visit to the temple, deep in the vast landscape of the Sundarbans, Deen comes face to face with the king cobra, who guards the temple. Driven by pride and fear, Tipu who accompanies him attempts to subdue the king cobra and gets bitten. This sets off a series of strange and almost fantastical journeys that blur the borders between the natural and the supernatural, the known and the unknown, taking our protagonist across geographies and through time. Against the backdrops of Los Angeles, the Sundarbans, Venice and New York, is the metaphorical interplay of the topographical locations. Each of these has been the entry point for explorers who built vast empires on the riches they have extracted from defenceless nations. The slaves, of the conquered land, were carried across the oceans to unknown lands to serve ruthless masters. The characters who inhabit the novel are now immigrants of another kind, escaping the poverty of their homes and crossing borders in search of new homes.

Gun Island tells us a story of a time long ago, when a man attempted to escape the wrath of a goddess. Interwoven into this are stories of illegal immigrants, of characters in search for imagined lands, and of sea mammals whose homes are being destroyed by industry and capitalism. The myth of Goddess Manasa Devi is a part of Bengali folklore. Her epic rivalry with Chand Saudagar is the weft and warp of the plot. Manasa Devi is the Snake goddess. She epitomizes feminism and therefore earth. The Saudagar, the merchant is commercially inclined and bent on monetary gain. He epitomises patriarchy and male power. The power of his gender, of his capital, topped by patronage from Lord Shiva, makes Chand Saudagar powerful, strong and overbearing. On the other hand, Manasa is a 'woman' who has command over the netherworld of snakes and serpents and her unbridled ambition is her only defence. It is with this feeble resource that she wages a relentless campaign for respect and recognition. The myth is a nail-biting adventure of the tempestuous turns of the struggle between Chand and Manasa. In today's context, Manasa is a genuine feminist icon. Her myth

signifies many anti-establishment profiles. She is a semi-divine female confronting the established patriarchy, be it the divine Lord Shiva or the temporal capitalist authority of Chand Saudagar. Manasa, like Sita, raises uncomfortable questions on the role of feminine energy when faced with male power and authority. Manasa is fiercely independent. She is a 'lone warrior' who fights for recognition from the establishment of power systems, personified by Chand Saudagar. Her fight is purely personal and on her own terms. She is a calculated negotiator, a determined goal-oriented 'Goddess' who uses her power to extract her dues rather than give it away in selfless benevolence that females are always expected to display. By weaving the story of Manasa in his plot, Ghosh spells out the catastrophic process of displacement of humans and animals alike. Manasa Devi's pursuance of the merchant is nature's way of warning the human predators, the capitalist and profit mongers, of the havoc wrought on earth and its disastrous and impending gloom. And unless it is persistently overcome, Ghosh argues, there is no way out.

Ghosh's employs the myth as a direct plea to the industrialist and capitalist to stop the carnage of the earth before it is too late. In Sundarbans, effluents of agriculture and indiscriminate dumping of chemicals from the refineries have led to massive fish kills and dolphins migrating away from their old haunting grounds. The composition of the waters changed. The sea levels rose. Piya observes that "the flow of freshwater diminished, saltwater had begun to intrude deeper upstream making certain stretches too saline for the dolphins." (*Gun Island*, 92) There is bewilderment and chaos as no one knows where they belong anymore neither humans nor animals. Both Piya and Moyna realise that like humans, animals are also repressed, oppressed and stressed and are constantly on the move in their quest for new haunting grounds. In *Gun Island*, Ghosh explains that life evolved from the sea. It is not surprising that destruction is most strongly felt from the water. In Garjontola, in the Sundarbans, Rani, the individual dolphin and pod had beached themselves. The birds were circling, leaving the region with a putrid odour that stank like hell. The reason for this mass killing is, as Piya observes, man-made sounds from submarines and sonar equipment. "Marine animals use echolocation to navigate. If something messed with that they could become disoriented and run aground." (*Gun Island*, 99)

Amitav Ghosh reinforces the myth of Manasa Devi through the shrine's architecture, built in the 17th century around the same period as the Little Ice age. He traces the path of the merchant in hot pursuit, through its symbols, friezes and panels. The physical appearance of the king cobra establishes the connection between the myth and belief systems. The king cobra follows Deen but does not attack him as if in acknowledgement of his unthreatening intervention into its domain. But it attacks Tipu as it feels threatened. Tipu pays a price for his pride and insensitivity. Rafi grandfather notes in the *Gun Island*, "If a cobra puts something in you, you can never be rid of it." (*Gun Island*, 78) In other words, once Nature is harmed there is no reversing it. Her bleeding presence will forever haunt. In Tipu, Manasa Devi has now got a medium where she can make her presence felt, reminding man of the folly of his actions and their irreversible consequences. The role of Manasa Devi as the eco feminine protector and avenger gets emphasised. After his encounter with the cobra, with a bit of Manasa Devi in him, Tipu gets sensitised to the impending devastation and gloom. He falls into spells and can fathom the unseen unknown future. He starts getting the knowledge of the presence that pervades in Nature. In his state of trance, Tipu succeeds in knowing and informing Piya that, Rani, an individual Irrawaddy dolphin-oracella brevirostris, is endangered. Piya gets the alerts rationally through the GPS fitted on Rani- to provide real-time information on her whereabouts and general conditions. But she is shocked to find out that Tipu prediction was intact in terms of time and place and event. In Los Angeles, Deen is subtly warned by Tipu of the impending catastrophe by telling him not to let anything scare him off to cancel his trip. He goes to the extent of hinting that Deen might encounter a snake in Atlantis. It proves prophetic as Deen realises that massive wildfires had been raging around Los Angeles for several days. From his flight, Deen sees two eagles circling targeting and capturing a snake. The recurrent snake motif brings the wrath of the snake goddess into play, making the ecological imbalance more pronounced. The presence of the yellow-bellied snake on the Venice beach is another indication of the recurrent and ominous presence of the Goddess. These snakes are not the natural inhabitants of Venice. Ghosh says, it is a stark revelation of climate change that snakes should appear in Venice and the resulting catastrophe is poignantly brought out when Gisa's pet dog, Leola gets killed due to the bite of a snake in Venice beach. In California, Ghosh reports through the words of Piya, of similar incidents at the Ventura beach. This brings us back again to his pet concern of the impact of displacement and migration. The snakes move northwards because of the warming up of the oceans. Amitav Ghosh does not let go the myth of Manasa Devi. At this juncture, Manasa Devi, the true ecofeminist steps in. She sends signals of global warming and its impact on animals and humans as represented by the yellow-bellied snake. It was as if, "a voice were crying out from the past to remind the world that the limits of human reason and ability become apparent not in the long, slow duration of everyday time but in the swift and terrible onslaught of

fleeting instants of catastrophe.” (*Gun Island*,78) Manasa Devi, the snake goddess, also has under her command worms, insects and spiders. Amitav Ghosh deftly weaves into the story, the presence of spiders in Venice. First, Rafi points out to one *makrosha* jumping from him to Deen and scuttling away. Next, Deen is shaken to find the spider, a deadly variety on his laptop in his room in Venice. Piya recognises it to be the brown *Loxosceles reclusa*, a poisonous variety, not a native of Venice. She explains that as Europe is getting hotter they are moving up far north. Nature is mystified in the prescience of Manasa Devi in *Gun Island*. Ghosh’s concern on climatic derangement is never more acutely felt. Manasa Devi manages to pursue and torment the gun merchant and reach out for him even when he seems to have hid himself beyond her grasp. Her chasing the merchant to pay obeisance to her is Ghosh plea for a return to Nature. An ardent prayer to set the rocking balance of ecology right.

The myth of Manasa Devi is an eco feminist challenge against the corporate patriarchal system. Deen realises the tender nature of the pursuit when he sees it “from the perspective of... the goddess herself. And then the pursuit no longer seemed to be a story of an almost incomprehensible vindictiveness but something more fraught, and even tender, a search driven by fear and desperation.” (*Gun Island*, 152) Manasa Devi was “in effect a negotiator, a translator, a voice carrier between two species that had no language in common and no shared means of communication. Without her mediation, there could be no relationship between animal and human except hatred and aggression.” (*Gun Island*, 271) For communication to happen she must command the trust from both sides. The merchant and his fellow humans refused to acknowledge her voice. Hence the urgency of her search for the Merchant. If her authority is questioned “all those unseen boundaries would vanish” (*Gun Island*, 153) and the merchant and many others like him in their quest for profit would trample the earth’s creatures and “would recognise no restraint in relation to other living beings.” (*Gun Island*,153) It was imperative for Manasa Devi to thwart his attempts at concealment at all costs in order to save him and the other creatures of the planet and to strike a balance of harmony and peace. The power of the myth is doubly confirmed when Tipu tips Piya from the impending beaching of Dolphins in the Sundarbans, bringing the species to near extinction. All this is mysteriously connected with the movement of the gun merchant. The catastrophe which ensues, Cinta argues, has rational explanations in global warming, changing habitats, increasing amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and other greenhouse gases too. Gases emitted by cars, planes and factories that make a myriad number of gadgets, that nobody needed a hundred years ago are all inevitably linked to history.

Nature, like Manasa Devi, is spurned and humiliated by the modern gun merchants. She is forced to reclaim her power either by coercion or revenge. Like the magical practices, something in the modern context seems to have taken possession of man's will to react and respond and he is no longer in control of what happens to him. Cinta explains that we live in a world of impersonal systems and don't have to impose our presence on them. Eventually, the presence slowly fades and systems take over. Demonic possession seems to have overcome human beings. Ghosh says “everybody knows what must be done if the world is to continue being a liveable place ...yet we are powerless. We see shocking and monstrous things all around us and we avert our eyes: we surrender ourselves willingly to whatever it is that has us in its power” (*Gun Island*, 216/217)

Ghosh cleverly juxtaposes Venice of the 17th century with modern Venice and tries to recast Venice through the eyes of the Merchant. In the picture of 17th century Venice, the death toll because of the epidemic of plague in 1629 unfolds. With the miraculous intervention of the Blessed Virgin, the Plague begins to recede. In a clever and compelling association of ideas, Cinta equates the Black Madonna with the A-sa-sa-re-me, the Greek Minoan Goddess of snakes similar to the myth of Manasa Devi. Through Cinta, Ghosh takes his readers to the present-day Customs house point in Venice with the hope of spotting the monster that was believed to have its lair beneath the embankment of the Customs house point. The monster, she recalls, was last sighted in 1930. The Customs house point had become the busiest point in the city’s network of canals since then and like many others of its kind, the monster has disappeared into oblivion. The pier of the embankment is now eaten hollow with shipworms and these are also invading Venice with the warming of the Lagoons water. They are eating up the foundations of the city which is built on wood pilings. Deen and Cinta also heard the sirens heralding the onset of a flood.

The story of human displacement is also irrevocably connected to climate change and the myth of the Gun Merchant. Tipu and Rafi decide to risk their lives and move to Europe. Rafi says that Tipu could see a kind of darkness closing in around him. That is why he wants to get away from Lusibari, his home in the Sundarbans. Together they plan and move to carve a life for themselves bracing the risk and the torture of the dalals.

Through the word of Deen, Ghosh explains that it is the potency of the dreams and desires generated by the modern technology of laptops and cell phones that there breeds a mad and unsettling relentlessness for pursuing those dreams. It is this desire and appetites of the metropolis that moves people between continents to churn out ever-growing floods of saleable merchandise. In this dispensation, slaves and coolies are producers and not consumers; they could never aspire to the desires of their masters. The youth today craves smartphones, computers and cars. Ghosh points out that, “since childhood, the most attractive images that they beheld were not of rivers and fields that surrounded them but of things like these flashing across the screens of their phones” (*Gun Island*, 279). This is perhaps the heaviest penalty that we pay for our blatant and flagrant abuse of the environment. The Blue Boat of the refugees in Italy is “a symbol of everything that is going wrong with the world-inequality, climate change, capitalism, corruption, arms trade and oil industry.” (*Gun Island*, 199)

It is in this context that Ghosh presents the cult of Manasa who survives as a ‘fighting spirit’ and commanding authority of feminine spirit and energy. She is not shy of pursuing self-interest and ambition even at the risk of being deemed too aggressive or unfeminine. Manasa’s untiring quest for her rightful place can be an inspiring role model. She is the relentless ecofeminist who pursues the merchant tirelessly and ferrets him out of any corner of the globe, he chooses to hide from her wrath. Manasa’s power has a sharp, vindictive edge. She does not hesitate to resort to trickery, coercion or brute strength to subvert her enemies. Her prowess subjugates patriarchal concepts and she breathes the eco feminine strength of courage and compassion, of patience and endurance, of optimism and opportunity. Like Deen, the reader is left with “an overwhelming gratitude -towards the gun merchant, to his story, to Manasa Devi and even to the king cobra. It was as if they had broken a spell of bewilderment and set [us] free.” (*Gun Island*, 271) Ghosh persuades the readers to believe that as long as these feminine and mysterious, natural force move the world, there will be “the wide-open sea, the horizon, the bright moonlight, leaping dolphins and also the outpouring hope, goodness, love, charity and generosity.” (*Gun Island*, 271)

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