

Exploring Spiritual Ecofeminism and Magical Realism in Vandana Singh's "The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet"

¹Mansi Binani, ²Dr. Swati Singh

¹PhD Scholar, GD Goenka University

²Corresponding Author, Assistant Professor, GD Goenka University

Abstract

The intersection of ecofeminism and magical realism in literature offers a unique lens through which to explore the complex relationships between gender, ecology, and spirituality. Vandana Singh's short story "The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet," from her collection *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet and Other Stories* (2008), exemplifies this intersection, merging the boundaries between the real and the fantastical to interrogate patriarchal structures and their impact on both women and the environment. This chapter delves into Singh's story and analyses it through the framework of spiritual ecofeminism which is a branch of ecofeminism that emphasizes the spiritual connection between women and nature and its interplay with the literary technique of magical realism.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Spirituality, Magical Realism, Gender.

Ecofeminism, as a theoretical and activist movement, emerged in the late 20th century as a response to the dual exploitation of women and nature under patriarchal systems. Rooted in the belief that the domination of women and the degradation of the environment are intrinsically linked, ecofeminism seeks to challenge the hierarchical structures that perpetuate this dual oppression. It draws connections between the ways in which patriarchal societies have historically marginalized women, often aligning them with nature to justify their subjugation, and the systematic exploitation of the natural world. In the context of Indian literature, ecofeminism takes on additional layers of complexity, as it must also contend with the legacies of colonialism, caste, and class, which further complicate the relationships between gender, nature, and power.

Indian ecofeminism, in particular, is shaped by the country's diverse cultural, religious, and ecological landscapes. The movement in India is deeply influenced by the historical and contemporary struggles of women, particularly those from rural and indigenous communities, who have often been at the forefront of environmental activism. These women, whose lives are intricately tied to the land, have resisted the encroachment of modern industrialization and the commodification of natural resources, asserting their rights to both their bodies and their environments. Indian ecofeminism, therefore, not only critiques the patriarchal and capitalist exploitation of nature but also emphasizes the importance of cultural and spiritual connections to the land. Vandana Singh's work reflects these themes, offering a narrative that is both deeply rooted in Indian cultural contexts and engaged with global ecofeminist discourses.

Vandana Singh, who was born in New Delhi, India, and now lives near Boston; is one of the first Indian female speculative fiction writers. Singh holds a PhD in particle physics and is currently an associate professor of Physics at Framingham State College, Massachusetts. Some of her short stories have been collected in *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet and Other Stories* (2008) and *Ambiguity Machines and other stories* (2018). Along with her countless short stories, Singh's works include two standalone novellas, *Of Love and Other Monsters* (2007) and *Distances* (2008) along with some children's fiction. According to Vandana Singh, Science Fiction and Fantasy posit alternative futures, different social arrangements as well as technologies through "engaging our imaginations and making up ingenious thought-experiments, through asking 'what if' questions and attempting to answer them" (Singh 202).

As a teenager, Vandana Singh joined an environmental justice action group in India and this is when she fostered her interconnected way of seeing the world by fusing environmentalism and feminism. According to Singh:

I believe that the current environmental crisis we are in is a direct result of our exiling the rest of nature from our lives and our consciousness. That just as being blind to the oppression of women creates conditions where this oppression continues unchecked, being unable to ‘see’ other creatures allows us to go about blindly and stupidly destroying the ecosystems on which we depend. (qtd. in Phillips)

Therefore, Singh’s environmentalism helped her see the universe as being intimately connected to human life as well as the environment. This perspective also led her to question the dualism of Western science and how the scientists “remove” themselves from their research for the sake of “objectivity” (qtd. in Phillips).

Singh’s “The Woman Who Thought She Was a planet” is a poignant exploration of these themes, presenting a story that is both allegorical and literal in its depiction of a woman’s transformation into a planetary being. The narrative is infused with elements of magical realism, a literary mode that blends the mundane with the miraculous, creating a space where the boundaries between reality and imagination are fluid and permeable. Magical realism, as a literary technique, has been employed by writers across the globe to challenge dominant narratives, particularly those rooted in Western rationalism and colonialism. In the context of Singh’s story, magical realism serves as a vehicle for exploring the ecofeminist themes of the narrative, allowing for a depiction of the protagonist’s journey that transcends the limitations of realist fiction.

Spiritual ecofeminism, a subset of ecofeminism, adds another layer of depth to Singh’s story. This approach emphasizes the spiritual connections between women and nature, positing that the patriarchal devaluation of both is not only a social and political issue but also a spiritual crisis. Spiritual ecofeminism draws on indigenous and non-Western belief systems, which often view the earth as a living entity and women as its spiritual caretakers. This perspective contrasts sharply with the dualistic thinking that underpins much of Western science and philosophy, where nature is often seen as inert matter to be controlled and exploited, and women’s bodies are subjected to similar objectification and control.

Vandana Singh’s short story collection, *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet and Other Stories* (2008), contains ten rich and mysterious stories that are wrapped in Indian history and culture along with vivid imagery and rich, fantastical elements. All of the characters in these stories face challenges in their difficult and mundane lives and yet, they dream of other worlds and realities that are beyond their understanding. The short stories in this collection have a lyrical, dream-like quality, and yet beneath its lyricism, the stories explore multiple ways in which the patriarchal society is impacting both the human as well as the nonhuman ecosystems. This paper evaluates the magical realist title story, “The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet” through an ecofeminist lens by exposing the social and ecological ills of the patriarchal society which is a result of marginalisation of the planet as well as the women. The paper aims to find traces of magical realism intertwined with ecofeminism in this short story. As both are processes of resistance, ecofeminism resists repressive power and magical realism contests reality, this story highlights how magical realism is an effective mode of communicating ecofeminist issues.

“The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet” is a story about a woman named Kamala, whose illusion is ultimately matched with reality. The story is told from the point of view of her recently retired husband Ramnath Mishra, who spends all of his time at home and he realizes that he has never known and will never be able to control his wife. Kamala shocks her husband by taking off her clothes and telling him that she has had a revelation and that she is a planet. Therefore, she declares “I know at last what I am. I am a planet” (Singh 39). She doesn’t want to dress because she claims that “A planet does not need clothes” (40). Ramnath finally persuades her to put on her clothes, because “even planets have atmospheres...this gray sari, it looks like a swirl of clouds” (45). The story delves into the complexities of marriage and explores Kamala’s quest for selfhood in a patriarchal society. On an ecofeminist level, this story examines how, in a fractured society, where the earth is victimised, women too are vulnerable.

All species survive by adapting to a particular life strategy and therefore, there remains a necessity for adjustment between the individual and the environment. With their children out of the house and the husband retired, Kamala finally wants to spend her time discovering her true identity. Her journey on her self-discovery means that suddenly Ramnath has to take care of his wife, something that he is not comfortable with. The living conditions forced on Ramnath is alien to him and therefore it strains his nervous system, which leads him to “imagine different ways he could commit murder” (46). Charles Darwin put forth the principle of natural selection

as a mechanism of evolutionary change but earlier natural philosophers like Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck theorized that physiology evolves according to function within particular environments. Therefore, biological organisms are adapted to a specific ecosystem (Scott 199).

This paper employs this ecofeminist perspective to evaluate “The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet” as a story that is infatuated with the adjustment between Kamala and her journey to discover her self-identity. The paper also discusses how Singh’s short story successfully engages with ecofeminist concerns by employing magical realist devices. The story explores how the Indian social system has failed the women who live in a patriarchal environment. Ecofeminist concerns come into play in this discussion of honour and the systemic abuse of women, and this analysis will also consider how patriarchal ideals of overtly sexualised female body shapes are highlighted with the use of natural as well as animalistic imagery.

In this story, magical realism has an imaginative involvement and it emerges as a site of resistance, which is a reaction to the disillusionment of socio-political realities. Kamala, who is at odds with the ordinary, everyday world; hallucinates that she is a planet and therefore she takes her clothes off in order to reach out to the other planets. At first, Ramnath thinks that she just wants to ruin his retirement, but after this episode, he calls his family doctor, whose diagnosis is “women are odd” (Singh 44). The elements of magical realism begin to appear in the story when Ramnath noticed that “she was coughing up something dark from her mouth” (46) and to his horror he noticed that it “was not blood but composed of small, moving things.... It was an insectoid, alien, about as tall as his index finger. There was an army of those things coming out of her mouth” (47). Because she was the creator of these tiny aliens, therefore, they protected the “planet” (47) that gave birth to them. This story inevitably becomes an inward turning one because nature outside fades behind Kamala’s growing interest in the anatomy of her body and its “inhabitants” (47). She begins the process of adaptation as a planet living amongst human beings and this process challenges the relationship between husband and wife.

The relationship that Kamala shares with her husband even before her revelation is depicted to be one of silence and detachment. Kamala thus turns out to be a true envoy of “Eco spirituality” that evokes the “manifestation of the spiritual interconnection between human beings and the environment . . . [and which] engages a relational view of person to planet, soul to soil, and the inner to outer landscape” (qtd. in Panda and Bhattacharya 80). As her focus shifted from herself to her immediate surroundings, she became conscious of the lively atmosphere- “it seemed as though she were falling into a trance, interrupted only by sighs of deep rapture as she gazed at the sunset” (Singh 45). Throughout the story, Kamala draws a therapeutic sensation from her intricate bonding with nature by nurturing the aliens that she carried in her body. Therefore, she is able to comprehend her exact place in the universal ecosystem very naturally, thereby understanding the value of being able to procreate these creatures inside her. In her story, Singh’s treatment of ecofeminism not only contends that the patriarchal society encourages the exploitation of women and nature, but rather she also lends an elevated status to her protagonist by equating Kamala to a planet, not just in terms of their subjugation; but in terms of the spiritual association between Kamala and nature. Such a treatment undoubtedly justifies that spiritual ecofeminism “is seen as part of a process of reconnection, a re-establishment of ways of knowing and being in the world that have been lost in the history of patriarchal domination” (qtd. in Panda and Bhattacharya 83).

Vandana Singh weaves natural as well as animalistic imagery throughout the story, and thus an ecofeminist reading is rooted in Singh’s powerful descriptive intensity: “In the moonlight from the window, her face was like the surface of the moon: pitted and cratered, fissured with age ... Inside the bedroom the women were all sprawled on the bed like beached whales” (Singh 43). This tale also focuses on decolonizing Western ideals, which is rooted in the androcentric understanding of men as superior while women and nature are othered in order to justify their subservient position in society. The more Kamala works to resist her subordinated status, the more her desperation grows; she is never allowed to go out of the house unaccompanied because male dominance, in the form of her husband, retains the upper hand. Instead of settling for what little freedom Kamala can achieve in this patriarchal society, she:

Let go of all the balloons, some seven or eight of them. They floated up into the sky. She stretched her arms out to them, her face full of blissful yearning. Slowly and majestically, she began to rise over the ground- an inch, two inches ... she continued to rise ... into the night air, her white petticoat filling with air like the sails of a ship. (Singh 52)

Kamala finally flies away like a balloon into the vast beyond. The balloons become a conceit that allows the protagonist to reinvigorate her body and explore her self-identity. The story speaks to the simultaneous permanence and attempted deconstruction of the patriarchal status quo and it ends with Kamala's spirit freed because her "journey is just beginning" (50).

The little insectoids in her body, which she refers to as her "younger ones" (48), represents what Griffin calls "the roaring inside her" (Griffin xvii). Not only Singh's story negotiates Kamala's place in nature, but it also highlights her lack of place in the society where family honour is of the utmost value. Singh's protagonist gazes "dreamily into a private world" with "a smile on her lips" (Singh 43) and later she finally loses her reluctant self-control when rose into the night air, disposing off her clothes, until she became a "tiny, bright blob still rising into the sky" (53). This final act of resistance through the power of certain magical elements forces Ramnath to realise his efforts to protect his family's honour have been in vain. While Kamala is physically present in Vandana Singh's short story, her allegorical status as a planet other her in a way that justifies the patriarchal project of colonialism. This is evident towards the end when Ramnath is finally colonized: "the insectoids were already marching up his back, over his shoulder and into his terrified, open mouth" (54).

The condition of being trapped in a patriarchal society defines Kamala because of her assumed natural disposition to physical as well as mental weakness as well as her innate closeness to nature, be it naturally grown or artificially constructed. Through this, ecofeminism as a theory assumes the role to unmask the "metaphorical, conceptual links between gender, race, class, and representations of nature in literature [as] an important part of forming a more viable environmental ethic" (qtd. in Hauke 5). Susan Griffin's feminist manifesto *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (1978) opens with a prologue:

He says that woman speaks with nature. That she hears voices from under the earth. That wind blows in her ears and trees whisper to her. That the dead sing through her mouth and the cries of infants are clear to her. But for him this dialogue is over. He says he is not part of this world, that he was set on this world as a stranger. He sets himself apart from woman and nature. (Griffin 1)

In this introduction, the man not only links nature with the feminized other but also disassociates himself from woman and nature by positioning himself beyond the world. Woman and nature, in turn, united where a woman not only communicates with nature but also through nature. This short story collection by Vandana Singh, when read across the controversies of gender inequality and environmental degradation, opens up new possibilities for critical discussions. On the one hand, it symbolizes the oppression and the exclusion of women from this society; and on the other hand, it critiques ecological destruction while also advocating restoration.

In "The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet", elements of magical realism are interwoven with gender politics, bringing attention to the ways in which women and nature have been subjected to subordination. Particular attention is paid to the role of Kamala as either being a soft-spoken, passive victim or an unruly, disobedient woman who considers herself a planet. The story narrates Kamala's struggle for agency beyond her inherent biological function as a mother and as a caretaker. An understanding of the story as an Indian ecofeminist speculative fiction hence considers the dystopian of otherness on part of the woman whose alleged sin is wanting what is rightfully hers- the freedom to make her own choice. On the surface, this story is about a couple who struggles with their roles as man and woman, husband and wife, and caretaker in overtly binary manners. Soon, however, the story develops into an exploration of the patriarchal oppression at the core of Indian history, female suffering, and ecological crisis. A critical examination of the limitations of human and natural creation as well as domestication, obsession with honour and body politics, the story ultimately echoes Griffin's assertion that "nature didn't really destroy herself ... it was man who did it:" (qtd. in Hauke 8).

Conclusion

According to Gaard's theory of ecofeminism, Western culture's domination of the environment and women can be traced back to the construction of dualisms of self/other. This dualism separates men from women and nature and therefore, both women and nature are dominated and oppressed. Vandana Singh turns to the genre of speculative fiction to theorize about the quintessentially interdependent relationship we might have with our environment while exploring the origins of human-caused environmental change in the twin oppression of women and of nature by the patriarchal dominant society.

It is evident that in Singh's short story "The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet", there is a synergy between magical realism and spiritual ecofeminism. The short story talks about the spiritual interconnection between Kamala and the environment that aided her to emerge as a thoroughly transformed, self-sufficient individual. In a rare moment of liberating release, the short story's ending sees Kamala, freed from her role as a wife and a mother, finally uniting with the universe. In this story, elements of magical realism and ecofeminism are interwoven with gender and body politics, highlighting how women and nature have been subjected to oppression and subordination in the patriarchal society.

Particular attention is paid to the role of the woman as either a soft-spoken, submissive victim or an unruly, disobedient creature who "acquired the infamous cunning of the insane" (Singh 44). Through an ecofeminist reading that is grounded mainly on magical realism as a narrative tool, "The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet" is read allegorically, setting Kamala as an extended metaphor to nature itself. Singh carefully links the two main pillars of the paper together by using the fundamentals of magical realism in this short story. Singh proves that it is an enhancing artistic tool that helped to get ecofeminism outside the boundaries of its thematic orientation.

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