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Feminist Green Writings Of Contemporary Tamil Women Writers: A Study

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Abstract:

This paper analyses the select poems of Tamil women writers – SakthiJothi, SakthiArulanandam, MalathiMaithri, and P. Sivakami from feminist ecological perspective. These chosen writers fulfill the didactic principles of the traditional Tamil poetry as they use their poetic space for educating the readers about environment degradation and protection. They critique the mindset of the people and government policy makers who reduce women and nature to mere objects. Though their poems are written in regional language they all echo the global concerns of environmental protection. They subvert the preconceived romanticized similarities between women and nature and highlight their relationship between them as productive which are not mostly included in gross national product of the country.

Keywords: Eco-feminism, environmentalism, Tamil women’s poetry, women and environment.

Introduction:

Tamil language and literature has a rich legacy and Tamil poetry has 2500 years old history. During classical times all writing – including writings on medicine, astrology, architecture and the art of music, dance and painting – were in poetic form. Tamil poetry, since classical times, is didactic in nature thus all poetry was written with a purpose. The history of Tamil language and literature infers that the poetry was either dedicated to man or God. Basically classical Tamil poetry was ethical in nature as they are intended to guide and uplift mankind. Though Sangam poetry was centred on man, the ethos and emotions of humans were presented in its harmonious relationship with nature. To attest this argument, the evidence could be drawn from the classification of Tamil poetry that goes as ahamand puram. The traditional Tamil poetry covers a period over 20 centuries. Though it has crossed over various epochs like epic writing, didactic writing, devotional writing, religious writing and minor poetry, the inseparable relationship with nature is recurrent in all these forms of writing.

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When the political and social transition took place, the themes and forms of Tamil poetry also shifted and expanded, but the bottom line of promoting nobility of character, chastity of women, respect for elders, education, truth and honesty has been celebrated. To articulate the above mentioned themes, almost all the poets used the metaphors of nature in one form or the other.

During the beginning of 20th century, the modernization entered the Tamil literature. Writers like SubramanyaBharathi (1882-1921) spread the spirit of modernization and nationalism through his writing. Before him there were poets like saint poet RamalingaAdigal (1823-74) who made the most difficult philosophical ideas feasible for common men through his simple diction. VedhanayagamPillai (1824-89), the first novelist in Tamil, brought new content to Tamil poetry with his social satire written in contemporary idiom. SundaramPillai(1855-97) influenced by Shakespeare's plays introduced poetic dramas into modern Tamil literature. Followed by Bharathi's vibrant modernist and nationalist literature Bharathidasan emerged into the literary scenes of Tamil to fight not only against the social injustice but also strived forward to create a new socialist world. He expressed his love for nature "not with meditative musing, but with a very live sense of wonder and delight at the energizing glories of nature" (Rahman 444).

The Romantic Age of Tamil literature was decorated with the poets like DesikaVinayagamPillai (1876-1952), NamakkalRamalingam (1888-1972), Suradha (1921-2006), Vanidhasan (1915-77), and Mudiarsan (1920-88). Unlike the romantic era and the neo-classical period of Tamil literature a devastating transformation of sensibility was noted in Tamil literature during the modern age. The decay of old morals and religious order and the influence of western art and literature gave birth to New Verse, a new poetic form. The emergence of the new verse according to Abdul Rahman "was not paroxysmal but gradual and natural". (446) The formation of Progressive writers' Association of Tamilnadu in 1948 and the Academy of Arts and Literature in 1954 triggered the reach of progressive writers to the every corner of the state. Though all new poetry was personal and incomprehensible, they do not deny the moral values and moral commitments. They too followed the didactic principles of classical Tamil poems in addition they insisted readers to voice for the new order in the society. As all other literary world, Tamil literary world is also androcentric.

Tamil women writers and their contribution to Tamil literature:

In the male dominated space there were great women writers like Avvaiyar, Andal, Kakaipadiniyar and KaraikalAmmayur. The 1800s witnessed the rise of a new market for Tamil books, especially novels, and a new reading middleclass that included young women and housewives. The women as new readers have redefined the status of Tamil publications as commodities and the market for fiction increased tremendously. Hence there was a rise of journals and magazines which encouraged the publication of novels in serial form.

PenmatiBodhini and SubramanyaBharathi'sChakravarthiniand PanditVisalakshiAmmal'sHitakarini marked an important moment in the literary history of Tamil women's writing. Vai Mu Kodainayakiammal(1901-1960) established a publication house in the early 1960s and it remains to be a significant milestone as it helped the founder and as well as other women writers to record their opinion on women's issues. She had written more than a hundred novels and most of them were published in serial form in her magazine Jaganmohini and the magazines were sold over 10,000 copies every month and attracted many women readers. She wrote on women's issues related to

dowry, ill-treatment of women, women's education, and problems inherent in the devadasi system. The 1930s is yet another remarkable decade for the development of women's writing as the literary magazine *Manikkodipromoted* modernist ideology. During the post-independent era writing, editing and publishing were considered to be dignified professions for women. The Self-Respect Movement of 1921 played a significant role as it encouraged women writers to take part in public activities. Women writers like *TrichyNeelavathi* and *MoovalurRamamarithammal* reconfigured the role of women through narratives which they used as a tool for social reform. Only during this period women transcended the feminine realms and entered the world which was considered to be a male dominant then. They altered the perception of space, body, and identity. This period witnessed writers like *Rajam Krishnan*, *R.Chudamani*, and *C.S.Lakshmi* whose writings resonate the maxim –personal is political.

An overview of Contemporary Tamil Women Writers:

The 1980s and 1990s Tamil literature has opened up for women writers and there was an important shift in the Tamil literary space with the emergence of more women writers and Dalit writers. They were influenced by the feminist movement of the world and India. Literary magazines like *Kanaiyazhi* encouraged women writers like *Salma*, *KuttiRevathi*, *Sukirtharani*, and *MalathiMaitri*. *Kalachuvadu*, a literary magazine for the first time in the literary history of Tamil published a collection of contemporary women's writing in 2004. During the first quarter of twenty-first century women writers – like *Bama*, *R.Meenakshi*, *Ilampirai*, *Kavin Malar*, *ManushiBharathi*, *Perundevi*, *SakthiArulanandam*, *SakthiJothi*, *Salma*, *P.Sivakami*, *TamizhachiThangapandiyam*, *C.S.Lakshmi*, *AndalPriyadarshi*, *Indumathi*, *Damayathi*, *Kanimozhi*, *Kaveri*, *Krishnangini*, *Tamizhinadi*, *Vennila*, and *PudhiyaMadavia* and many more – are emerging into the literary space. Contemporary Tamil women's writings are based on historically and culturally concrete realities and it encompasses different levels of consciousness, perceptions and actions. Their writings propagate an awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at the place of work and within the family. Contemporary Tamil women writers such as *MalathiMaithri*, *Salma*, *KuttiRevathi*, *Parameswari*, *SakthiJothi*, and *SakthiArulanatham* and others did not have a smooth walk into the literary space due to their conscious action to change the above mentioned situation.

In 2003 a group of men and women who claim themselves to be the Tamil cultural guardians objected publically to the language and themes used by the new generation Tamil women writers. They charged the writers for obscenity and immodesty. But these women writers did not give up the spirit but rose up beyond everyone's expectation. Women writers who entered the public realm used their newly gained education and social status to write recreate and redefine literature. They survive within literary movements led by men challenging the priorities defined by a male dominant culture. There are only few translations and anthologies available for the global readers of Tamil women writers. Besides, there is a lack of critical scholarship and literary critics who can assess women's writing with sensibility and respect. Literary critics being mostly male, their attitude to women's writing is generally an extension of their attitude to economic role. As they consider women's income and work as secondary, they extend the same notion towards their writings and they try to treat them recreational and decorative. Women writers who maintain the code of conduct prescribed by male literary world are mostly praised and others are targeted for their open articulation about their identity, body politics and sexuality questions.

Male dominant world generally believes that women's writing is about women's lives and it cannot provide any intellectual content that can benefit the world. This is evident from the fact that since

the inception of SahityaAkademi (1955), only four Tamil women writers – Rajam Krishnan (1973), Lakshmi Thiripurasundari (1984), Thilagavathy(2005) and C.S.Lakshmi (2021) won the academy award. This is evidence of how Tamil women writers struggle to become global while they remain local and mostly domestic. Women in Tamil Nadu have been writing for more than 2000 years and they have been writing about their personal self, inner emotion, family, marriage, motherhood, on the one hand, and about socio-cultural politics that oppress women on the other side. For Tamil women, writing is more than an art, and for them it is a rightful and legitimate creative expression and activism. Though their writings struggle to gain acceptance and fall a prey for scrutiny and censorship, their writings on environmental issues gain reception and acceptance. Their green literature contributes to the expansion of environmentalism of global south. The connection between environmental movement and women's movement goes beyond analyzing the mere parallel between women and nature but extends to address the role of women in protecting the natural resources and their productivity.

According to the theory of feminist ecology women are historically associated with the responsibility for cultivation, collecting fuel, and fodder in hills and plains. Rural women involve in agricultural activities as waged or unpaid labourers. Most often they are the principle collectors of drinking water but they are given less visibility in water management. Whereas within urban context women are affected differently due to their exposure to pollutants. For them the privatization of neutral resources and destruction of environment affect women proportionally depending on their class, caste, ethnic and economic status. Within this perception, this paper approaches and analyses select poems written by contemporary Tamil women writers like SakthiJothi, SakthiArulanandam, MalathiMaithri, andP.Sivakami as the poems of feminist ecology. The writing of these women writers donot only alter the definition and scope of Indian feminism but also they contribute more to the development of green literature globally.

Historical overview of Women and Environment in India:

In general, India has witnessed the role of Indian women in the protection of environment for a longer period of time. During colonial period, British people eroded the rights of the people to land and forest resources led towards resistance which ran parallel with the independence struggle. It is interesting to mention the role of Meitei trade woman who controlled the commodity market initiated the nupilan (women's war) against the British administrator's policy of exporting rice from the Valleys of North East India. During this struggle these women voiced for the livelihood rights of the poor people, to conserve soil, and to protect water resources. However after independence like the women's movement in India, even the environmental movements too dissolved in the process of making of new nationhood. Both women and environment were neglected and pushed to the fringes of development and the connections between these two major entities were never established till 1970s. As 1970s is significant for the rise of women's movement in India, the environmental protection measure too was geared up during this period. In the pioneering report entitled "Towards Equality" submitted by ICSSR in 1974 on the status of women the role of poor peasant women, who were bound to natural resources was hardly highlighted. It was only after Chipko movement both women and environment have become an inseparable identity in Indian context.

In the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held at Stockholm in 1972, environmental issues were widely approached as "elitist and irrelevant" (Krishna 47)for developing countries like India. On the global stage, it was the late Prime Minister Indra Gandhi captured the world

attention at the same conference at Stockholm with her comment that “poverty is the greater polluter”. She emphasized the importance of improving the quality of lives of poor people and she devised the managerial solution through institutionalized planning and laws for the environmental concerns. The National committee on environmental planning and cooperation was set up and later this was transformed into the Department of Environment and in 1980s it emerged as full-fledged Ministry of Environment and Forest in India.

In academia too the connection among women, environment and development policies were hardly established till 1980. In 1987, it was Walter Fernandes and Geetha Menon brought the forest issues in Central India within academic debates and Bina Agarwal (1988) followed it up with her views on wood stoves in India. This academic activism was positively fuelled with the role Kali for Women press through its publication of Vandana Shiva’s *Staying Alive* (1988) and *Ecofeminism* with Maria Mies in 1992. Ecofeminist perspectives viewed women and environment from an essentialist point of view and it hardly acknowledged the heterogeneous nature of women.

From Ecofeminism to Feminist Environmentalism:

The relationship between women and environment required revisiting from Culture specific perspective. This gap was filled up by Bina Agarwal who introduced the term Feminist Environmentalism in 1992. According to her poor women particularly in the third world countries are often the victims of environmental degradation. On the one hand, women are seen as the victims of environmental degradation and on the other they are the active agents in movements of environmental protection and regeneration who often brought in gender-specific perspectives into the activism. She proposed the term “Feminist Environmentalism” as an alternative term and an Indian variant of Euro-American concept of ecofeminism. Because the connection between the domination of women and nature is ideological as they are rooted in the “system of ideas and representations, values and beliefs that places women and nonhuman world hierarchically below men.” (Agarwal 85)

Bina Agarwal subverts the proposition of ecofeminism as problematic on several accounts. She opposes the idea of women as unitary category which does not acknowledge the intersectional elements of “class, race and ethnicity”. Further she views the role of economic advantage and political power as dividing elements among women that challenge the women as homogenous entity. Though few women thinkers include third world women’s perspective into it, they once again generalized the role of third world women. Hence, by introducing the term Feminist environmentalism she stresses the need to re-evaluate and understand the concept as rooted “in their material reality, in their specific forms of interaction with the environment.” (Agarwal 96) She also puts forward the factors such as division of labour, property and power “which shape the knowledge based that experience”. Hence the link between women and environment is partially restructured by class/caste/ race questions. Above all the term acknowledges the need to challenge and transform the relation between gender and actual division of labour within feminism and environmentalism.

The contemporary Tamil writers have been occupying the literary scenario since 1990s by questioning the patriarchal domination. Their voices unsettled the male-defined and male-centre literary Tamil world which tried to demoralize them in the name of culture and tradition. Tamil literary Magazine *Kalachuvadu* took the initiatives to publish a special edition on “Women Writing” as a part of its 47th issue. Among the works published the works of Salma, Sukirtha Rani and Malathi Maitri triggered

controversies. Kalachuvadu complied the select works of women that appeared from 1994 to 2004 in 2008. In the National level Women's World Organization for Rights, Literature and Development (Women's WORLD), a free speaking network of writers, literary critics took the initiatives of translating the poems written in regional languages into English. Women's World published Interior Decorations: Poems by 54 women from 10 Language in 2010. The editor of the book puts the purpose of the book thus: "To examine how critical the silencing of women, and the use of systematic force- direct or indirect to ensure that silence, is to maintenance and perceptions of patriarchal power." (Joseph 16) SakthiJothi's "Land, the Good Woman" (2017), "Seed" (2009), SakthiArulanadam's "Of Trees" (2007) and MalathiMaitri's "Riverside Civilization" (2011) and P.Sivakami's "Voice of the Forest" (2012) are taken for analysis. All the poems chosen for the study have been translated by Prof. Swarnalatha and Prof. Srilatha, Professors of Humanities in IIT, Madras.

There is a close nexus between feminism and green thinking in the works of the chosen writers. SakthiJothi, a Dindugal based writer, a winner of Tamil Nadu Government Young Poet award, has a doctorate in Tamil Literature. As an agriculturalist, she has the first-hand knowledge of earth. She acknowledges that her poems are rooted in nature as she actively participates in environmental conservation for her community in Theni District. So far she has penned eleven collection of poetry and is the founder of Sri Sakthi Social, Economic and Educational Welfare Trust. Her poems are translated into English and Malayalam. Though she writes more about environmental conversation she does not want to be branded as "Green Poet". According to her a woman's mind cannot be separated from nurturing ability. She does not confine herself in essentializing women's link with nature but she asserts the dependence of human beings on nature for their basic need. In her poem "Land the Good woman" she argues for biodiversity and cycle of ecosystem and the role of nature in assuring continuation of food chain. Her poem "Seed" highlights the power of seed to nurture the entire ecosystem. She believes in the responsibility of every individual to care and protect natural resources like water, land and forest. She connects the use of fertilizers and genetically modified seed with the "chemicals like Zykan-B used in the Concentration camps to kill Jewish people." (Srilata 141) This cautions against cultivation of genetically modified seeds which will lead towards new era of food dependence.

"This day you find out

Who sowed the first seed

You will learn

Who received the seeds

From my hand

That day

You will be a sower yourself" (135)

She believes that there is a presence of forest within her and she worries for the extinction of animals and few trees like perunelli and soap nut trees which are alive only in her memories. This poem does not celebrate the beauty of nature but alarms the role of individuals in protecting them. She says that she derives her selfhood from the land which is being shared with birds, plants, trees and humans. Her poetry collection VannathinKural expresses the healing power of nature's beauty. According to her, women have

played an important role in preserving biodiversity and keeping the continuity of link in food chain. Seeds are not mere seeds but are suggestive metaphor of life itself. She follows Sangam tradition of poetry in which she often appreciates the tradition of worshipping mountains, rain, forest, oceans, rivers, the sky and the sun. She celebrates nature as the primordial deity. She makes use of her writing as a contributive space for the betterment of agricultural community. She asserts women's lives are dependent on land and waters.

Sakthi Arulanandam (1962) who is comfortable with her identity as Green Writer is also known for painting works that appear in Tamil Little Magazines. She has penned three Poetry collections. In her poems she offers insights about urban ecology and indigenous knowledge and animal rights. In "Of Trees" she draws a parallel between women and trees whose presences are acknowledged only in physical terms rather than considering the "transcendental truth" that remain between women and trees. She reiterates the importance of Government policies to reframe their welfare schemes that records everything as mere numbers. The spiritual truth about women and the pragmatic realities about trees are never understood. She also draws the parallel between women and trees in her interview with Prof. Swarnalatha et al thus: "Man's capacity to shame or abuse a woman even when he doesn't know her personally, is very similar to the manner in which people randomly pluck leaves from trees only to toss them around carelessly. It is the same indifference that is meted out to nature and women". (131-132).

Sakthi Arulanandam draws a parallel between the tree and the woman's body. The tree is being viewed by the world in multiple dimensions. For a traveller, a tree serves the purpose of shadow whereas for a small boy it is an object of happiness. The poet in the process of highlighting the multiple dimensions of the tree, she hints at the readers' ignorance for not noticing the harmony that remains constant within the ecosystem in the form of relationship among living organism such as trees and birds. Such an understanding transcends the human limits and enables people to attain the spiritual fulfillment. Moreover she critiques on the government's attitude towards the contribution of women and nature to the country's economy by penning that how the government "records everything/ as mere numbers,/just like/ those who see women as mere bodies" (Srilatha and Swarnalatha 128-129). For Sakthi Arulanandam nature is a meditative space. She expresses her concern for environment by saying that people are busy to notice the small changes that cause harm to the environment. To her, writing on environment has the power to awaken the people's consciousness.

Malathi Maithri (1968) is a poet from Pondicherry lives in New Delhi. Her poems have been translated into English, Hindi, Malayalam, Kannada, Galician, French, and German. Her poem "Riverside Civilization" transcends the generic boundaries and functions as a historical document and a calendar. In this poem she pictorially describes how rivers witness the cruel realities of violence. She documents the violence that the rivers witnessed through the ages across nations and cultures. She traces the violence that had taken place in the year 1961 on the banks of River Seine. During the Algerian War (1954-62) the Seine River Massacre took place. The intension of massacre on National Liberation Front Algeria and by French National Police was critiqued by Malathi. In the similar way but in a different location, in 1999 violence erupted against Dalit labourers in Manjolai on the banks of Tamirabarani. 17 Dalit labourers including a woman and two-year old child were killed who jumped into the river to escape the violence caused by Tamil Nadu Police Department. Yet another incident in 2009 when Sri Lankan army flooded for "the blood of Ealem Tamil". As the rivers could not stop the violence against their own selves they could not stop the violence against the innocent victims. The poem echoes the paradox on modern

civilization. Moreover this poem breaks the dichotomy between local/global, civilized/barbaric, unspoken reality/political representations. She painfully finishes the poem thus:

“They flow past

Speaking of purity and ancient cultures

These rivers

I see them

And remember

The corpse they held”. (83)

The poem of P.Sivagami “Voice of the Forest” is a critique on urban ecology. In the name of development where developmental projects are converted into real estate business, the lives of bird and animals and biodiversity of the urban areas and cultivating land are challenged. She says, “This shows the malfunctioning of the town country planning divisions of the government and the greed of the new generation”(170) as the reason for the loss of agricultural land in urban areas.

The painful situation of urban life is put by the poet thus:

“Powerless to protect

Human dignity

Destroyed by clashing hordes

Through the dirge of birds

The forest calls out

And gives up”(162)

P. Sivakami as a politician, bureaucrat and poet critiques about the land and gender and the importance of women’s right to land. She views that women contribute enormously for the development of agriculture but in terms of ownership and land rights they are distanced from land and from agriculture. According to her, the growth of commercial real estate results on the loss of agricultural land. The “Voice of the Forest” echoes the inability of the people to protect the forests.

As all feminist literature, these chosen poems also imagine and reimagine the tales and stories of women who wish to live in peace with themselves and with the natural world in poetic form. They imagine and long for a land without hierarchy. All the select poems resonate the purpose of feminist ecology which envisions a land with no hierarchy “among humans, or between humans and animals where people care for one another where the power of technology and military forces prevails” (Salman 855). They demystify the usual romantic conception in the way women and nature is being looked at and magnifies their role in the political economy of the country. All these chosen poems attest the positive connection that women have with nature and women’s ability to protect and preserve nature. They project environmental degradation and protection not as a form of patriarchal oppression rather a duty and responsibility of women.

Conclusion:

All these poems represent earth as a habitat for living organisms and advocate earth and its inhabitants that need to be cherished in each other's company. As environmentalist and feminists they do not accept the use of chemicals and artificial forms of energy, deforestation for commercial purposes, and violence as life defeating and sickness on the planet. These poems affirm that conservation of energy in ecosystem as a mutual exchange between humans and other habitats of the universe. They demonstrate natural process of ecosystem as primary and natural and disturbances caused to such process as a deviant. All the select poems transcends the aesthetic limits and with their simplicity of diction connects local with global. They connect ecological events as cultural phenomena rather than solely scientific or technological ones. Environmental issues are inseparable from human perceptions. Their words alarm the role of social scientists and anthropologists and economists in the policy making process. These poems can be classified as anthropocenic discourses which highlight the causes of serious global problems that affect the world today such as climate change, global warming, habitat contamination and loss of culture. These poems fill up the gap between theory and practice as they speak for the pre-identified environmental research issues. These poems which emerged from the local knowledge contribute to the global welfare through which the activist feminist poets recommend an open dialogue in which ecologists, technologists, lawyers, workers, men and women participate as equals. Though feminists are not comfortable with the essentializing image of a woman as an angel in the house they seem to recommend the image of a woman as an angel of the ecosystem as most often they are the first one to notice the degradation of natural resources and take actions for the protection of nature within the domestic sphere. Third World feminist thinkers usually recommend plurality in strategy formation for the liberation of women but as environmentalists they do not suggest plurality as the protective measures of the land as the protective measures in one place may be applicable to all other places too. Hence these writers' regional voices sound like a globalized mainstream voice.

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