

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN, CULTURE AND NATURE IN KUNTALA
KUMARI SABAT'S FICTION *THE DARK BRIDE* AND
THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE.

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Abstract

*Women, culture and nature all are interconnected. There is an interface between cultural systems and environment. Culture of a place originates from its soil or natural background which, on the other hand, influences people of that area and time. Women are the integral part of the natural world. It reminds us about eco-feminism which equates nature with women and establishes a connection between environmental degradation and subordination of woman. Women's oppression is closely related to the violation of nature as both are owned by men. In some fundamental ways, the injustice done to both is similar. Both women and nature are exploited by men. Kuntala Kumari Sabat (1901-1938) was an eminent Odia poet, novelist, physician, orator, freedom fighter and social reformer. She was the first woman novelist in Odia who contributed four novellas and a major novel: *Bhranti* (Misconception, 1923), *Kali Bahu* (*The Dark Bride* 1925), *Parasmani* (*The Philosopher's Stone*, 1925), *Na Tundi* (*The Woman of Nine Voices*, 1926), and *Raghu Arakhita* (*Raghu, the Orphan*, 1928). This paper attempts to study the representation of women, culture and nature as portrayed in her fiction *The Dark Bride* and *The Philosopher's Stone*. It would highlight how Kuntala Kumari depicts oppression and suppression of women in patriarchal culture of rural Odisha of 1920s and how she connects it to the rural landscape; how she depicts nature's response to the plight of women caused by men.*

Key words- Nature, Culture, Women, Oppression, Eco-feminism, Patriarchy.

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The word 'Nature' is derived from the Latin word '*natura*', or essential qualities, innate disposition, and literally means birth. 'Nature' may also refer to 'natural environment' which includes animals, rocks, forest, beaches etc. It is a part of our lives.

Culture is a system of values and beliefs which we share with others, and which gives us a sense of belonging or identity. It includes history, religion, language, traditions, values, beliefs and customs. It influences every aspect of our lives. It is a system by which people interpret the world around them. It impacts the way we greet each other, the traditions we celebrate and the food we eat.

Nature and culture are interrelated to one another. There is an interface between cultural systems and environment. Culture of a place originates from its soil or natural background which, on the other hand, influences people of that area and time. Women are the integral part of the natural world. It reminds us about eco-feminism which equates nature with women and establishes a connection between environmental degradation and subordination of women. The term 'ecofeminism' was coined by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974). He argues that oppression, domination, exploitation from the Western patriarchal society has directly caused environmental damage. One of the main obstacles to women's advancement is 'patriarchy'. Patriarchy refers to male domination. In this system women are dominated by men and they occupy a sub-ordinate place in family and society.

An anthropologist named Ortner, was one of the first to raise the question about women-nature relationship in the title of her 1974 paper, 'Is the female to male as nature is to culture?' Ortner argues that women, because of their biology, that is, their reproductive functions seem to be closer to nature. However, she maintains that '... it is

not biology per se, but the social construction of it, that places women closer to nature,' (in Sayers 1982: 108). So, women are perceived to be inferior because of their inherent social roles, which are largely undervalued by society with its overriding emphasis on culture.

The relationship between women and nature is not a recent phenomenon. One can see the presence of symbolism that brings female gender close to nature throughout the history of humanity. The 20th principle of the Rio Declaration, 1992, highlights women's importance in environment. (*Gender and environment, Ambiente & Sociedade*) According to Harkness the root underlying the theory of eco-feminism is that:

These women conceptualized the earth as an oppressed being, which was exploited for the economic and political gain of others. They saw similarities in men's treatment of the earth and their treatment of women (Lichtenstein 2018).

It explores connections between women and nature. Oppression of women is closely related to the violation of nature as both are owned by men. Judith Plant in his book *Women and Nature* says that 'Historically women had no real power in the outside world, no place in decision making. Women have been generally passive, as has been nature'. In some fundamental ways, the injustice done to both is similar. Both women and nature are exploited by men. So women, culture and nature are interconnected.

Kuntala Kumari Sabat(1901-1938) was an eminent Odia poet, novelist, physician, orator, freedom fighter and social reformer. She was widely known as the first significant female poet of modern Odisha. She is the Charlotte Brontë of Odia literature. Ms Sabat lived only for 38 years; yet in this small period of time she earned a great reputation not only as the first lady doctor of Odisha, but also as a social worker, freedom fighter and litterateur. Mostly social issues and patriotism featured in her writings. She always raised her voice against the suppression and oppression of marginalized classes like women and untouchables in her fiction and intertwined it with the national struggle for freedom. In her novels she dealt with the position of women in Odishan patriarchal society, their hopes and aspirations, the conflict between female desire and patriarchy and the

contemporary problems such as child marriage, widowhood, polygamy, dowry, bride-price and other social evils. She also explores the female identity in her novels.

She was the first woman novelist in Odia who contributed four novellas: *Bhranti* (*Misconception*, 1923), *Kali Bahu* (*The Dark Bride* 1925), *Parasmani* (*The Philosopher's Stone*, 1925), *Na Tundi* (*The Woman of Nine Voices*, 1926), and a major novel, *Raghu Arakhita* (*Raghu, the Orphan*, 1928). This paper attempts to study the representation of women, culture and nature as portrayed in her fiction *the Dark Bride* and *the Philosopher's Stone*. It would highlight how Kuntala Kumari depicts oppression and suppression of women in patriarchal culture of rural Odisha of 1920s and how she connects it to the rural landscape; how she depicts nature's response to the plight of women caused by men.

The Dark Bride (1925) is a poignant story of a child-widow, her suffering and empowerment. In this novella, Kuntala Kumari presents a realistic picture of the suffering of women in the name of culture. In 1920s, widows were ill-treated in the patriarchal society of Odisha. Women were suppressed, oppressed and exploited in the name of social conventions in patriarchal society in India in general and Odisha in particular. They had no space and no voice. They were subordinated to their male counterparts in family and society. The nineteenth century Indian cultural convention required girls to be married at an early age of eight or nine (Jha and Pujari 20). Because of the cultural tradition, Lakshmi is married at the age of seven to ten-year-old Pitamber when she doesn't understand what marriage is. Unfortunately she is widowed at the age of ten. All ornaments are forcibly taken away from her body and the vermilion mark is wiped off the forehead of child-widow, Lakshmi. Kuntala Kumari depicts how Lakshmi, a tender girl, weeps a lot for her ornaments; but nobody pays attention to her. She has to wear white borderless sarees and observe religious ritual like Ekadashi meant for Brahmin widows in which fasting is observed without drinking even a drop of water. Her parents can do nothing about her fasting as it is prescribed for Brahmin widows by Hindu religious scriptures written by men. Kuntala Kumari criticises the society for this cultural practice. She implies that all scriptural and cultural prescriptions are made by men for women in patriarchal society in order to keep them suppressed, oppressed and

subordinated to men. In this fiction, realising the suffering of child-widow Lakshmi, her friend Durlabha sheds silent tears. She says sorrowfully: 'Lakshmi, Scriptures are meant only for us, the woman. In Hindu Society, Scriptures are like knives at our throats' (Sabat 6).

Again Kuntala Kumari severely criticises the society through the portrayal of character of Lakshmi's father, Achyut Mishra. While the culture of Odisha in 1920s did not permit even a child-widow to remarry, it allowed a man to marry many wives, even girls of the age of his daughter.

After the death of her father and mother Lakshmi is tortured by her step mothers. Her life is filled with agony and frustration. Lakshmi's beauty attracts Nabaghana who is the brother of her step mother Saradha. Fed up with all these things, Lakshmi runs away to Brundaban Dham. There also she finds the same thing. One evening while sitting under a Vakul tree on the bank of the Yamuna Lakshmi weeps, looking at the holy waters of Yamuna. Kuntala Kumari depicts as if the river Yamuna is sympathetic to the sorrows of Lakshmi and is singing the song of 'futility of human life:

Her blue waters rising and falling, enchanting Yamuna flows endlessly, dancing wildly on her way, singing and murmuring; as if the futility of human life is the burden of that song (Sabat 26).

Here Kuntala Kumari brings out the connection between nature and women, that is, the river Yamuna and Lakshmi. Out of frustration, Lakshmi tries to commit suicide by jumping into the river Yamuna. Lakshmi sacrifices her life in order to save her chastity. Kuntala Kumari depicts the Yamuna as a mother. Culturally all rivers are portrayed as mothers. So she writes as if the Yamuna performed the duty of a mother by protecting Lakshmi's chastity. The heart of the Yamuna overflows with tender motherly love. And she flows with 'melancholy murmuring' sound brooding over the plight of 'millions of widows'. Kuntala says:

Flow on, Yamune! Flow on. Flow on over the heart of India. Sing the tragic tale of millions of widows there in your melancholy murmuring voice; let India listen to that plangent note; let her make haste to mitigate the plight of widows (Sabat 27).

Kuntala laments that in this India, Kunti and Satyabati who had given birth to their offspring before marriage, and Draupadi who married to five husbands at the same time did not lose their chastity, but there the socio-cultural conventions of Odisha in 1920s did not allow a child-widow to accept a second husband. Kuntala depicts the motherly river Yamuna weeping saddened by the cruel behaviour of the sons of India. In her words:

The Yamuna was weeping as though upset about the state of society! And she was brooding over man's selfishness, the vanity of scriptures written by men and the misfortunes of women (Sabat 27).

So the identification of nature/ river and woman is complete.

In another novella, *The Philosopher's Stone*, published in (1925), Kuntala once again depicts nature's sympathetic attitude towards the plight of the heroine Lalita. Lalita, the thirteen-year-old indulgent daughter of the village post-master Anand babu, is married to Bimbadhar at a tender age. Bimbadhar works as a clerk at Cuttack and comes home on holidays. After marriage he is enthusiastic to take his newly-wed wife with him; but his dominant mother does not allow saying that people would laugh at them if she takes his wife with him. She makes harsh comments every time Bimbadhar wants to take his wife with him. Kuntala Kumari depicts how a tender daughter-in-law like Lalita suffers intense mental agony and physical torture in the hands her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law in the traditional socio-cultural setup. Even Lalita is not allowed to meet her father and she has to drudge despite her ill health. Kuntala depicts how women themselves ill-treat other women and perpetuate the cruel and harsh socio-cultural practices. Lalita eagerly looks forward to her husband's return. He is her only hope and solace amidst untold suffering. She silently bears all the ill-treatment of her in-laws with the hope of being united with her husband. But she feels frustrated when the bridge of her hope and solace collapses learning her husband has become a drunkard and debauch.

She is devastated and profusely weeps. Kuntala Kumari depicts nature as a living being very much like English Romantic poets. She portrays various aspects of nature like the sky, the 'bhutiari' plant and 'the round laterite stone' sympathising with Lalita when she is shedding copious tears on the bank of the pond alone at night. It is as if the nature surrounding her understands her grief, but not the human beings. Kuntala writes:

Lalita wept and the pitch darkness of the sky wept with her, the bhutairi plants on the bank of the pond shed tears with her; even the round laterite stone understood her woe; only human beings did not share her grief (Sabat 57).

Even the 'pitch darkness' of the sky symbolize the deep darkness of grief and despondency in the heart of Lalita. Frustrated Lalita tries to commit suicide but is saved by Brundaban, her husband's younger brother. She weeps a lot. Kuntala Kumari compares her streams of tears with the rivers Mahanadi and Kathajodi: 'Her tears continued to flow, as though the Mahanadi and the Kathajodi rivers flowed out of her eyes' (Sabat 60).

Brindavan, secretly takes her to her father's house and saves her from agony and torture inflicted by her in-laws. From there, Lalita goes to her husband living at Cuttack with her father. She finds Bimbadhar in debt and ill health. Selling her ornaments, she repays her husband's debt and nurses him back to health. But after some days his bad habits return on account of his bad friends. Again he suffers from tuberculosis and finally meets his untimely end. Bimbadhar repents and weeps for his past deeds at the time of his death. The hard heart of her mother-in-law softens after the sad demise of her son. Brindavan remains a bachelor and takes care of his brother's family. After the wedding of her daughters, Lalita wishes to forsake her worldly life. She gives the entire charge of her family to Brindavan and leaves for Puri to devote herself to God and the service of mankind. Her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law accompany her. Her mother-in-law addresses her as a 'philosopher stone' as she has transformed a cruel person like her and a bad man like her son, Bimbadahar' into good human beings by dint of her love, affection and devoted service. By comparing Lalita to a philosopher's stone that transforms

ordinary earth into gold, Kuntala identifies women with nature that has tremendous power to shape human nature as perceived by the Romantic poet William Wordsworth.

The concept of eco-feminism developed in 1974. But long before that, in 1920s Kuntala Kumari compares women with nature and presents nature possessing womanly qualities of love, sympathy, kindness and tolerance. In these novels Kuntala Kumari portrays nature's sympathetic attitude to the plight of Lakshmi and Lalita. Being a social reformer, Kuntala draws attention to the suffering women who are victimised because of outdated socio-cultural practices. Portraying nature as responsive to the suffering of woman like a mother, Kuntala, in a way, highlights that the whole universe is against the victimisation of women.

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