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Environmental, Eco – Criticism and Eco – Feminist Perspectives in Rohinton Mistry’s

A Fine Balance & Gloria Naylor’s Linden Hills

Abstract

This paper attempts a reading of Rohinton Mistry’s novel A Fine Balance (1997) and Gloria Naylor’s Linden Hills (1985) envision insights from recent developments in eco-criticism and eco-feminism. Through Gender theory eco-feminism substantiates the silence of women in Linden Hills.

Eco-criticism is a form of literary criticism based on ecological perspectives. It investigates the relation between human and the natural world in literature, such as the way in which environmental issues, cultural issues concerning the environment and attitudes towards nature are presented and analyzed. One of the main goals of eco-criticism concerns the environment and attitudes towards nature and ecological aspects. This form of criticism has gained a lot of attention during recent years (approximately since 2000) due to greater social emphasis on environmental destruction as a result of increased technology. It is hence a way of analyzing and interpreting literary texts. Eco critics investigate such things as the underlying ecological values, what, precisely, is meant by the word nature, and whether the examination of “Place” should be a distinctive category, gender or race. By examining the
eco critical discourse in *A Fine Balance*, the paper posits that Mistry’s vision of development in India is predicated on the conditions of sustainability.

The Ecological Feminism is an interdisciplinary movement which interrogates the new ways of thought process concerning natural world, diplomacy, and mysticism. Eco-feminist speculation has exacting and important association between females and natural world. Eco-feminism understands the suppression of women and their mistreatment in phrases of the subjugation and operation of the environment. Naylor discusses gender conditioned with eco-feminism perspectives. She scrutinizes United States as a “Place”, in relation to race of *Linden Hills*.

The postcolonial feminist theory contends that through novel, *A Fine Balance* comparing with *Linden Hills*, Mistry interrogate the difficulties of maintaining natural and human diversity in the contemporary economic and social development in the Indian subcontinent. The aspects of paper are tailoring sustainability, ecology, eco-feminism and environment, urbanization and modernization, creation of ecological imbalance and the use of nature ‘as an end to all means’.

Keywords: Ecology, Eco-Criticism, Eco-feminism, Environment, Modernization and Tailoring Sustainability.

The writer analyzes the hut in the city of Mumbai with an aspect of tailoring sustainability. His conception of research paper is of ecological perspective. He describes the situation in Mumbai because Mumbai is the place of environmental pollution and ecological imbalance. As the things are piled up in a room, in the similar way twelve people were occupied in a hut. Rohinton Mistry writes in *A Fine Balance*, “The group was shown to a row of tiny huts, to be occupied twelve to a hut. Every one rushed in frenzy to the nearest of the
identical shelters and fought to get inside. The guard drove them back, allocating places at random.” (*A Fine Balance* - 331)

The ecological aspect here shows how so many individuals lived in the same hut; their behavior was to fight with each other. There is problem of over population. In *Ecology and Equity: the use and abuse of Nature in Contemporary India* (1995): the ecosystem which people use to meet their needs in form of natural resources for food, clothing and shelter. All the westernized world and urban Indians believe in the concept of “enjoy the produce of the entire biosphere”. The people are displaced from their sustaining environment because of the beautification of city. Gadgil and Guha talking about development as the use of appropriate technology between the traditional and modern resources, it should make us self reliant, self depended and to attain environmental sustainability.

The term “appropriate technologists” stress on the use of solar energy, water energy, wind energy, these are non – polluting and renewable sources of energy which helps us to sustain environment. In novel Dina make two tailors work in an enterprise of tailoring, “factory made clothes” pollute environment. It could be replaced by “tailoring enterprises”. The tailoring enterprises cause no pollution. Thus helps sustaining the environment.

The characters from diverse backgrounds come together and resided in the same flat, all brought together by the changing economic forces in India. Dina Dalal is a Parsee her father was a medical professional, he worked for the disadvantaged and the poor people. Dina grows up and gets married. She is widowed soon after her marriage, so she starts sewing dresses. Ishwar and Omprakash both of them are outcastes. Ishwar and Narayan took training from a muslim tailor. Omprakash’s father’s skill is transferred to him of tailoring as an inheritance. These outcastes get rid of their leather tanning work which is religiously assigned to them. They do not get work in their town as a result of that they came to Mumbai to make clothes pre – made in a tailoring enterprise. The novel discloses the problems of outcastes as
well as their changing professions for better economic perspectives. Maneck from the mountainous regions came to the Bombay to have a back up degree to his father’s soft drink business. He was a Parsee boy. Farokh and Aban are his parents. He lived in the rented room of the Dina’s flat. Omprakash and Ishwar worked as tailors for Dina’s tailoring enterprise to earn their livelihood.

Two of the needs for survival are food and clothing. ‘Shelter’ as people created space for living in a tiny hut. In modern era, the society in which we live the requirements are multifold, not just a place for ‘shelter’.

Dina’s newly married life began with the dingy walls and a dark kitchen which depicts her past.

“Dina made tea in a gloomy kitchen while he watched the kitchen which was the dingiest room in the flat, the ceiling and plaster blackened by smoke. Rustom’s mother had cooked over coal fire all her life”. (A Fine Balance - 40)

Dina’s husband Rustom wanted to paint the kitchen before the wedding along with the other rooms but the money had refused to stretch that far. The problem of poverty is also enhanced in this novel. The life sustaining development is the place where they live in. people are not used to be living like this. These were the horrible walls of her new married home which required paint and maintenance. ‘Life sustaining development’ means people develop their own skills as professionals, the place where they live or take shelter in complete harmony with sleep, food, rest and working. The lack of development is because of lack of funds.

In the same manner Maneck faced the problem of unhygienic conditions and insufficient water. The hostel had been a big disappointment when Avinash and Menack came:
“They carried back the suitcase and boxes, swept up the dead cockroaches, and made the bed, ‘do not push it to wall again’, said Avinash, ‘Safer to leave at least a foot’. He also suggested immersing the bed’s legs in cans of water, to discourage things from climbing up, ‘we can do that tomorrow. You will be okay tonight’’. (A Fine Balance - 239)

Maneck has made complaints to warden’s office that nothing has happened when he pulled the chain in the toilet. No cleanliness caused cockroaches to emerge on the hostel floors. No life sustaining development could be seen. As the water is primary source to promote hygiene, as there was no water supply in tank because the building contractor did not connect the pipes to save money.

The problem of dirtiness and the chaos are resulting from such adjustments. The problems of city lives are depicted by Mistry’s characters in eco-critical perspectives. Avinash told Maneck “The problem with you is you see too much and smell too much. This is a big city life, no more beautiful snow covered mountains. You have to learn to curb your sissy eyes and nose.” (A Fine Balance - 240) Again the significance of outcastes is shown. These people used to clean others dirt but with the scarcity of water even these people are not able to provide proper hygiene. Avinash further on discusses that one should distract one’s senses. The theory is that our sight, smell, touch, hearing and taste are all calibrated for the enjoyment of a perfect world. But since the world is imperfect we must put blinkers on the senses. This passage depicts lack of hygiene, cleanliness, compromising beautiful natural life to the most degrading city life. The life in mountains were clean and pure, Maneck feels home sickness for the clean and healthy environment which he has left. The contrast could be seen in big city life with the life of hilly areas which is imbibed with natural beauty.

Farokh and his family continue to live in their home in the hills praising always, “The air and water so pure, the mountains so beautiful.” Like his father, son Maneck too loves his home in the mountains that his temporary departure for the city for education makes him
nostalgic. “...at this hour it would be swirling fancifully, encircling the snow – covered peaks. Just after dawn was the best time to observe the slow dance, before the sun was strong enough to snatch away the veil. And he would stand at the window, watch the pink and orange of sunrise, and imagine the mist tickling the mountain’s ear chucking it under the chin or weaving a cap for it”. (qtd. AFB, p.201)

Farokh lived nearby the hillside. Farokh on his long evening walks through the hillside forest he would admire for the tenth time the beauty of the place. His wife Aban too enjoyed the magnificent view of the valley from the back of the general store. Not only for Farokh and his family, but also for his friends like Major Grewal and others the mountain was a part of their life, like a living intimate friend as if they lived together side by side. However their’s, harmonious relationship with the nature was soon disrupted by the government’s plan to connect the hill town to the cities. They who never dreamt of leaving the mountain were shocked to find the mountains leaving them. Mistry has his subtle ways of depicting the problems. “These were to be modern roads…………roads that would hum with the swift passage of modern traffic. Roads wide and heavy duty, to replace the scenic mountain paths too narrows for the broad vision of nation builders and World Bank officials.” (AFB – 214) The forces of modernization and urbanization have destroyed the green mountain and the environment of the hill-town, Farokh and his friend Major Grewal organized meetings to condemn “the flawed development policy, the shortsightedness, and the greed that was sacrificing the country’s natural beauty to the demon of progress” (AFB - 215). They protested against the authorities. To their utter dismay, the authorities were development equipped with the western ideas of technology and urbanization turn a deaf ear to their appeal. The road was built. It was swallowing everything on its path. The invasion of technology is presented by Mistry:
“The beautiful hills by its side become gashed and scarred. From high on the slopes, the advancing tracks looked like rivers of mud defying gravity as through nature had gone mad. The distant thunder of blasting and the roar of earth-moving machines floated up early in the morning and the dreaminess of the dawn mist turned to night-mare.” (AFB - 215)

The nature too reacts sharply against the technological invasion unleashed upon it as Mistry note: “Then the seasons revolted. The rain which used to make things grow and ripen descended torrentially on the denuded hills, causing mudslides and avalanches. Snow, which and provided and ample blanket for the hills, turned skimpy. Event at the height of winter the cover was raged and patchy.”

The nature revolted, the rain which was helpful caused landslides. Farokh felt a perverse satisfaction at nature’s rebellion. He was not alone in being appalled by the hideous rape of the environment. But the seasonal disorder continued year after year. The snow melted and reduced in quantity. The beauty of snow covered hills have gone because of urbanization and increased use of technology. The residents living there felt miserable because of their human emotions to that place. Mountains were drilled and cut down creating ecological imbalance. A Fine Balance, novel starts with ecological balance and ends towards ecological destruction. Ecological imbalance was caused by ecological destruction through modernization, urbanization and flawed development adopted by western ideas at the cost of bewildering nature.

The phrase given by Charu Chandra Mishra, “Modernization and development through technology and science”, a concept of the Western culture is not an unwelcomed idea, the major concern Mistry seems to be suggested that its mindless execution without proper introspection and planning, would adversely affect the Nature, which created ecological destruction and caused harm to environment. Rohinton Mistry raises his voice for
Ecological movement to save environment by saving trees and thus makes a mass appeal by writing his novel *A Fine Balance*. This paper is a response for the creation of ecological balance by adopting of eco friendly ideas for economic, social and national development.

Ironically, the purpose of the peaceful writings is to protest the destruction of the mountains and trees in Rohinton Mistry’s, *A Fine Balance*, and to thereafter, bring in the eco – feminist perspectives in *Linden Hills* by Gloria Naylor. This paragraph does not examine the meaning of nature or environmentalism for the protestors in *A Fine Balance*. Nature becomes a mere background for the gendered human novel that unfolds the mysterious lives of Needed wives in *Linden Hills*. It is essential to analyze the grounds, purposes, and consequences of linking environmentalism and feminism in the novel *Linden Hills*, by analyzing the text of the novel with particularly places and contexts. It is beneficial to merge feminism and environmentalism though it remains a challenge for the text of *Linden Hills* as there is no eco – critical discourse for these marginalized black women because of their weak economic conditions:

An eco-feminist problem provides ways of understanding, eliminating, and creating alternatives to the oppression of women. In minimum, “nature and the environment” is an eco feminist issue because an understanding of nature and environmental problems often helps one understand how and why women's oppression is linked with the unjustified domination or exploitation of nature. The below mentioned lines are from *Linden Hills*.

The amaranth seeds, snake root and dove’s heart that Evelyn Creton kept mixing and measuring page after page, month after month. A little more of this, a little less of that. His coldness and distance, the feeling that things weren’t the way they should be must lie in something that she just wasn’t doing bright. If she hung in there long enough, he will change (*LH – 148*).
Another Needed woman Priscilla McGuire who is Evelyn’s daughter-in-law is also led to a slow bewildering death owing to the stifling surroundings and environment of her life. The story of her life is portrayed through a bunch of snap shots which Willa finds in the basement where she has been captivated like the previous generations of Needed wives. In the first photograph she is depicted as having ‘soft compassionate eyes’ and ‘slender arms’, “Large, oval wells with a bottomless capacity to absorb any seen or unseen challenge” (LH – 205 – 06). The photographs taken after her marriage show her sitting in the wing chair whereas Luther Needed is standing beside her with a hand firmly placed on her shoulder. Despite being attired in formal stiff dress, Priscilla conveys a sense of spontaneity with “the arch of her brows and lips seemed set to burst into laughter” (LH – 206). However in subsequent photos her spontaneity gradually evaporates and she allows herself to be dominated by her husband and son. Priscilla was an enlightened woman as can be deduced from the text of the novel; she voted the socialist ticket in the 1920 polls – a significant date in the chronology of feminist movement, was familiar with the works of Darwin and Lawrence and had seen the stage show of A Doll’s House. Yet her resolve is gradually shattered and she blots out her face in her latest photographs – “Cleaning fluid. Bleach. A drop of hot grease” – writing “me” in the empty space. (LH – 249) Eco – feminist perspectives could be sorted as the silence of these Needed women has been thwarted by the patriarchal forces and tells us how that their very core of existence had been influenced. Linden Hills becomes a particularly poignant novel as it focuses on the victimization of Black women by Black men which serves as an eco – criticism stance. By adopting Eco – Feminism, it is a new direction to feminism. “Eco – feminist theory has particular and significant connections between women and nature. Eco – feminism interprets the repression of women and their exploitation in terms of the repression and exploitation of the environment” (Ecofeminism.net.). Some writers claimed that “nature is a feminist
Feminism is stated in detailed account of eco–feminists’ viewpoints. Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin in their Introduction of Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism (1994) has talked about the significance of Tillie Olsen’s talk at the Radcliffe Institute in 1963. Olsen had talked about the unnatural silences which result from circumstances of being born in the wrong sex, race or class. She “pioneered a new critical territory” by putting the issue of silence at the center of feminist enquiry. The Needed women in Linden Hills are unable to maneuver away from the silence which has imprisoned them. The eco – feminist standpoint is that this silence is a question raised for these black women. Their struggle to retain their lives and sanity allows them no scope to negotiable their unvoiced incarceration. This unvoiced incarceration had led to the development of eco-critical and eco-feminist perspectives. Back grounding is one of the ways in which both ‘woman’ and ‘nature’ have been devalued”. Thereby; it has shown the disaster of Needed wives by their oppression from their own men.

Alaimo, Stacy discusses in her abstract of Ecofeminism without Nature? Questioning the Relation between Feminism and Environmentalism that “Moore does include the statement from the “Welcome Handout” for the camp, which says that “sexism, racism, and homophobia are forms of oppression which are linked to the oppression of nature” (Alaimo – 287). After that, however, nature disappears; it is assumed that the feminist contestations that follow are ‘eco/feminist’ but it is not clear what, exactly, the relation is between environmentalism and feminism. The eco - feminist contention that sexism is “linked to the oppression of Nature” (Alaimo – 288), this articulation between masculinity and the domination of women and nature deserves more consideration as well. (Eco-Feminism and Environmentalism.net)

Conclusion
All Luther Needed controlled their wives and Linden Hills also. In her article Gloria Naylor’s: “A Modern Inferno” (1987), Catherine C. Ward has argued that the Needed women have betrayed themselves, their husbands have distorted them:

“Each has cooperated with her husband’s denial of her value Luawana is Luther’s silent victim, who renounces God instead of renouncing her husband’s treatment. Evelyn tries to earn her husband’s love for a while, but finally gives up and destroys her own body. Priscilla is worse. Without a fight, she watches as the shadows of her husband and son blot out her soul. (Ward 80)

Richa Shrivastava writes in her writings, Feminist Voices in Gloria Naylor’s Fiction, (2016): Catherine C. Ward holds these women accountable for their own obliteration, comparing them with the three arch-traitors whom Satan chews on an inner Circle Ten of Dante’s Inferno. She however overlooks the finality of their situation which has left them without any tools to fight the tyranny of their husbands. Traditional gender roles also assign certain power to men and/ or its lack of power to women in any society. Economic dependence of women in the given setting, as well as the cultural norms of the society, compels women to accept their inferiority as fact. The issues of race are further aggravated by gender related constrictions as female psyche is conditioned to accept her inferiority within power relations. (Shrivastava – 98 – 99)

These differences/priorities are so ingrained in the psyche that even Sigmund Freud maintained – as quoted by Alsop et al. – that “conventional gender position provide the best defense the individual has against painful and inhibiting neurotic symptoms because they fit with the requirements of culture; they are therefore comfortable to live with” (quoted Alsop et al. 47).

If Naylor has presented the painful silence of women in Linden Hills, she also presents an amelioristic vision through Willa’s actions. Willa Prescott Needed is the wife of the fifth
Luther. She is able to recall her self-hood and the chronology of events leading to her imprisonment in the basement by her husband. She knew as a child that her feet “could take her anywhere in the world” (LH 277). She also chose to marry Luther because she wanted to be his wife (278). She also knows that if tried by any court sheet would be acquitted as a good mother and a good wife and she could claim that identity for six years, till the moment Luther decided to punish her for her perceived treachery (279).

Willa was pale-skinned, of a dull brown shade. Her dilemma had started when she had given birth to a son who had a fair skin, even though Luther V looked at the whiteness of the son as an illegitimate child. This Needed family tree has been distorted by Luther Needed V; the father of the son. He killed his own son and punished his wife for the fair complexioned son, ironically; the development of ecocritical and ecofeminist perspectives has shown the tragedy of Nedeed family.

Under the purview of Eco-feminism the black women are worst oppressed. Firstly, this paper helps one understand how the lives and status of women are connected to contemporary environmental problems, For Example – Dina and her tailoring enterprise in A Fine Balance. Secondly, the key issue for ecological imbalance is not sex-gender difference but the gendering of human societies which resulted in women victimization of the world. For Example- Needed wives in Linden Hills. “It is the marginalization of the interests of women and nature alike by the patriarchal society that sees both the women and nature as a source for exploitation and oppression. Eco – Feminism as a movement, thus, voices the common wants and needs of women and nature against their shared oppression at the hands of men”.

(Ecofeminism and Hell.net)
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