

Sacred Waters and Silenced Voices: Ecofeminist Resistance in Na D'Souza's Dweepa and Sarah Joseph's Budhini

Mr. Shivam Shukla

Phd Scholar, English, Jananayak chandrashekhar University

Abstract:

This research paper examines Na D'Souza's *Dweepa* and Sarah Joseph's *Budhini* through the critical lens of ecofeminism, exploring the intertwined oppression of women and nature in contexts of ecological degradation, displacement, and socio-political marginalization. Both narratives are anchored in landscapes threatened by development projects—*Dweepa* set against the submerging island in the Sharavathi River due to dam construction, and *Budhini* foregrounding the dispossession of tribal lands in Jharkhand under the Damodar Valley Project. The paper analyses how these works foreground the shared suffering of women and the environment, using literary representation to critique patriarchal, capitalist, and state-driven exploitation. Drawing from ecofeminist theorists such as Vandana Shiva, Carolyn Merchant, and Maria Mies, the study reveals how the protagonists emerge as symbols of resistance, resilience, and ecological consciousness. The comparative approach highlights the different cultural and geographical contexts but underscores common thematic concerns—loss of home, spiritual connection to the land, and the silencing of women's voices. The analysis contributes to ecofeminist discourse in Indian literature, suggesting that narratives like *Dweepa* and *Budhini* are essential in reimagining development paradigms through a lens of ecological justice and gender equity.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, *Dweepa*, *Budhini*, Na D'Souza, Sarah Joseph, displacement, sacred geography, tribal women, ecological justice, resistance

Introduction:

The intersection of environmental degradation and gender oppression has increasingly become a focal point in literary criticism, particularly under the umbrella of ecofeminism. Coined in the 1970s, ecofeminism articulates the intrinsic link between the exploitation of nature and the subjugation of women, arguing that both stem from patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial systems of domination. In the Indian context, this theoretical framework acquires a particularly potent dimension, given the nation's history of developmental projects that often result in large-scale displacement, environmental damage, and the erasure of indigenous ways of life. The voices of women—especially tribal and rural women—emerge as vital carriers of ecological memory and resistance, challenging the mainstream developmental discourse that frequently marginalizes them.

Na D'Souza's *Dweepa* and Sarah Joseph's *Budhini* are two seminal Indian novels that exemplify this confluence of ecological and feminist concerns. Though separated by linguistic, cultural and geographical contexts—*Dweepa* being set in the Sharavathi river basin of Karnataka and *Budhini* in the

tribal heartlands of Jharkhand—both texts foreground the impact of state-led development projects on local ecologies and the lives of women. In *Dweepa*, the construction of the Linganamakki Dam threatens to submerge an entire island, displacing its inhabitants and severing their deep spiritual ties to the land. In *Budhini*, the eponymous Santhal woman becomes a symbolic victim of both patriarchal stigma and the Damodar Valley Project's displacement of tribal communities.

Both novels operate within a socio-political framework where women are doubly marginalized—first as members of environmentally dependent communities and second as individuals whose gender makes them more vulnerable to systemic oppression. These narratives extend beyond the personal struggles of their protagonists, embodying collective experiences of dispossession, alienation, and resistance. The landscapes in which these stories unfold are not passive backdrops; they are living entities imbued with cultural memory, spirituality, and agency. The submergence of an island in *Dweepa* or the drying up of tribal lands in *Budhini* represents not merely environmental loss but also the erosion of identity and cultural heritage. Ecofeminist theory, particularly as articulated by Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, and Carolyn Merchant, provides a critical lens through which these novels can be interpreted. Shiva's critique of development as a form of patriarchal domination resonates strongly in these narratives, where the language of "progress" masks the realities of ecological destruction and human suffering. Merchant's historical tracing of the mechanistic worldview that alienates humans from nature finds expression in the novels' depiction of how modern engineering projects disregard the organic relationship between people and their environment. The centrality of water in both novels is noteworthy. In *Dweepa*, the rising waters of the dam embody both the inevitability of displacement and the threat of erasure, yet they also become a space where resistance and survival are negotiated. In *Budhini*, water emerges as a life-source turned instrument of dispossession, as the dam that promises electricity and industrial growth instead robs the tribal communities of fertile land and access to natural resources. Water here becomes a contested symbol—of life, loss, and political control.

Review of Literature:

The intersection of literature, ecology, and feminism has been examined extensively in global and Indian scholarship, yet the ecofeminist readings of *Dweepa* by Na D'Souza and *Budhini* by Sarah Joseph occupy a relatively underexplored space in comparative literary studies. The present review synthesizes critical works on ecofeminist theory, Indian environmental writing, and specific scholarly interventions on the two novels, drawing connections between thematic concerns, narrative strategies, and socio-political contexts. Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1988) remains foundational to ecofeminist discourse in India, arguing that women's historical and cultural roles position them as natural custodians of ecological knowledge. Her critique of "maldevelopment" as an extension of patriarchal exploitation resonates with the displacement narratives in *Dweepa* and *Budhini*. Maria Mies and Shiva's *Ecofeminism* (1993) expands on this framework, linking global capitalist structures with the twin exploitation of women and nature, offering theoretical ground for analyzing the novels' portrayal of development projects as tools of domination. Globally, Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (1980) traces the epistemological shift from an organic worldview to a mechanistic, exploitative relationship with nature, illuminating how state-led projects often devalue ecological and spiritual connections to land. Similarly, Greta Gaard's *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism* (1993) provides methodological insights for interpreting texts that integrate feminist and environmental justice concerns.

Within Indian literary studies, scholars such as Meera Baindur in *Nature in Indian Philosophy and Cultural Traditions* (2010) underscore the deep cultural embeddedness of ecological consciousness, a concept mirrored in Dweepa's portrayal of the island as sacred geography. Studies like Kiran Agarwal article "Ecofeminist Concerns in Indian Fiction" (*Journal of Literature and Ecology*, 2016) highlight the narrative centrality of women's resistance to environmental degradation in contemporary Indian fiction.

Objectives of the Study:

The primary aim of this research is to conduct a comparative ecofeminist analysis of Na D'Souza's *Dweepa* and Sarah Joseph's *Budhini*, examining how both novels represent the interconnected oppression of women and nature within the context of large-scale developmental projects in India. The study is guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To explore ecofeminist themes in *Dweepa* and *Budhini*, focusing on the portrayal of women's relationship with nature, their roles as custodians of ecological balance, and their resistance to environmental degradation.
2. To investigate the socio-political implications of displacement as depicted in the novels, with attention to how development-induced migration impacts women's cultural, spiritual, and economic lives.
3. To analyse the role of sacred geography in shaping community identity and resilience, and how its disruption leads to both ecological and social disintegration.
4. To examine the narrative strategies employed by Na D'Souza and Sarah Joseph in depicting environmental injustice and gender oppression, including symbolism, allegory, and historical realism.

Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative research methodology grounded in literary analysis and ecofeminist theory. It integrates textual analysis, thematic comparison, and theoretical application to examine the chosen primary texts: *Dweepa* by Na D'Souza (originally in Kannada, 1993) and *Budhini* by Sarah Joseph (originally in Malayalam, 2015).

1. **Theoretical Framework:** The analysis is informed by ecofeminist theories articulated by Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, Carolyn Merchant, and Greta Gaard. The framework combines materialist ecofeminism, which foregrounds the socio-economic and political structures behind environmental degradation, and cultural ecofeminism, which emphasizes spiritual and cultural connections between women and nature.
2. **Primary Sources:** The novels *Dweepa* and *Budhini* serve as the core primary sources. The study engages with both original and translated versions to ensure textual fidelity while acknowledging the linguistic and cultural contexts of each work.
3. **Secondary Sources :** Secondary materials include scholarly articles, books, conference proceedings, and interviews related to ecofeminism, Indian environmental literature, displacement studies, and literary criticism of the two novels. Sources have been selected for their academic credibility, with preference given to peer-reviewed journals and authoritative monographs.
4. **Analytical Approach:** The research applies close reading techniques to identify ecofeminist motifs, symbolic representations, and narrative devices. Comparative analysis is conducted across three thematic axes:

Analysis and Discussion:

The ecofeminist frameworks articulated by Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, and Carolyn Merchant find vivid literary expression in Na D'Souza's *Dweepa* and Sarah Joseph's *Budhini*. Although set in geographically and culturally distinct landscapes—Karnataka's Sharavathi river basin and Jharkhand's Damodar Valley—both novels share a core thematic concern: the entwined destruction of nature and the marginalization of women under the banner of modern development. The comparative reading reveals striking parallels in how the narratives construct ecological loss, gendered oppression, and resistance.

1. Ecological Degradation and Displacement: In *Dweepa*, the Linganamakki Dam project slowly swallows an island, transforming fertile land and sacred spaces into a watery grave. The submergence of the island represents more than physical displacement; it is the obliteration of a way of life rooted in agrarian rhythms, spiritual rituals, and intimate ecological knowledge. Nagi and Ganapa, the central couple, resist leaving until the rising waters make survival impossible, embodying the painful temporality of displacement where the loss is foreseen but unavoidable. Similarly, *Budhini* depicts the Damodar Valley Project's encroachment into Santhal territory, flooding fertile fields, uprooting forests, and severing communities from ancestral lands. Here, displacement is not a sudden catastrophe but a gradual erosion of ecological stability, marked by the drying of rivers, deforestation, and the introduction of alien industrial structures. The novel draws heavily on historical reality, portraying the project as a "temple of modern India" that demands sacrificial victims—both human and environmental. In both works, water emerges as a double-edged force. It is life-giving in its natural form but becomes destructive when controlled and commodified by the state. The transformation of rivers into reservoirs mirrors the transformation of free communities into dependent, marginalized populations. Ecofeminist theory identifies such projects as patriarchal appropriations of nature, converting it from a sustainer into a resource for industrial exploitation.

2. Gendered Marginalization : The women in both novels experience a double burden, they suffer the ecological consequences of displacement while also enduring patriarchal constraints within their own communities. In *Dweepa*, Nagi's voice is often the moral compass of the narrative. Her connection to the island is deeply spiritual—she perceives the land and water as kin rather than resources. While male characters debate logistics and survival strategies, Nagi articulates the emotional and cultural stakes of leaving, making her the symbolic heart of the island's resistance.

In *Budhini*, gendered oppression intersects with tribal marginalization. The protagonist Budhini Mejhan's ostracization for garlanding Prime Minister Nehru at the dam's inauguration is a stark illustration of how patriarchal codes punish women for actions beyond their control. The stigma attached to her "transgression" outlasts the immediate ecological loss, shaping her life's trajectory long after the dam is built. Joseph's narrative makes clear that the destruction of the environment and the policing of women's bodies are interconnected expressions of power.

In combining these perspectives, *Dweepa* and *Budhini* illuminate the ecofeminist principle that environmental justice and gender justice are inseparable. Both works show that the loss of land is also a loss of language, ritual, and memory, and that women's survival strategies—rooted in cultural continuity and ecological stewardship—offer a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse of "progress

Conclusion:

The narratives of *Dweepa* by Na. D'Souza and *Budhini* by Sarah Joseph stand as powerful literary testaments to the entwined struggles of women and nature in the face of systemic exploitation. Through

the lens of ecofeminism, both works reveal how environmental degradation, displacement, and patriarchal oppression are interlinked forces that marginalize both the land and the female body. Dweepa portrays the gradual submergence of an island under a dam's backwaters as a metaphor for the erasure of cultural roots, while Budhni depicts the exploitation of tribal communities through the silencing of a woman whose body and voice become political battlegrounds.

By juxtaposing these texts, the study underscores that environmental destruction is not merely an ecological crisis but also a social and ethical one. The struggles of Nagi in Dweepa and Budhni in Budhni mirror each other in their resistance to dispossession, reclaiming identity, and challenging the dominant power structures. Their voices reveal that true environmental justice is inseparable from gender justice.

Ultimately, these works emphasize the necessity of ecofeminist thought in both literary analysis and policy discourse. They remind us that safeguarding ecosystems must go hand-in-hand with empowering marginalized women, whose lived experiences and indigenous knowledge hold the key to sustainable and equitable futures. The synergy between human survival and ecological preservation, as captured in these narratives, offers not just a critique of the present but also a vision for a more harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature.

Works Cited

1. D'Souza, Na. Dweepa. Bangalore: Sapna Book House, 1987.
2. Kasaravalli, Girish, director. Dweepa. 2002.
3. Shiva, Vandana. Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development. Zed Books, 1989.
4. Plumwood, Val. Feminism and the Mastery of Nature. Routledge, 1993.
5. Merchant, Carolyn. The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution. Harper, 1980.
6. Warren, Karen J. "The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism." *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1990, pp. 125–146.
7. Shiva, Vandana. Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit. South End Press, 2002.
8. "Submergence and Displacement." *EPW*, vol. 34, no. 9, 1999, pp. 517–520.
9. Rao, Rajeswari Sunder. The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print. Permanent Black, 2018.
10. Kaul, Suvir. The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India. Permanent Black, 2001.