

Ecofeminist Resistance and the Politics of Survival in the Selected Works of Kamala Markandaya, Indira Goswami, and Sara Joseph

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Abstract

Ecofeminism offers a critical framework for examining the interconnected oppression of women and the exploitation of the natural world. Within Indian literature, this relationship becomes especially visible in narratives where women's lives are shaped by land, water, agriculture, animals, poverty, and systems of social power. This paper examines ecofeminist resistance and the politics of survival in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, Indira Goswami's *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, and Sara Joseph's *Gift in Green*. Although the three novels emerge from different linguistic, regional, and cultural contexts, they converge on questions of gender, ecology, poverty, patriarchy, economic exploitation, and community survival. Markandaya represents Rukmani's struggle with agrarian insecurity, drought, hunger, poverty, and industrial transformation; Goswami associates women's restricted lives with the exploitation and symbolic captivity of animals; and Joseph foregrounds the destruction of land and water and the emergence of collective ecological resistance. The paper argues that survival in these texts should not be understood merely as passive endurance. Rather, everyday acts of care, persistence, memory, dignity, and community protection can become forms of resistance to structures of domination. Through a comparative ecofeminist reading, the study demonstrates that environmental justice and gender justice are closely interconnected and that literary representations of women's survival can illuminate wider struggles over land, resources, power, and ecological belonging.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Women, Nature, Resistance, Survival, Patriarchy, Ecology, Indian Literature, Kamala Markandaya, Indira Goswami, Sara Joseph

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature has long represented the relationship between human beings and the natural world. In modern contexts, however, industrialization, uneven development, economic inequality, and resource exploitation have intensified conflicts between communities and their environments. Such environmental pressures are not experienced equally. Rural and economically marginalized communities whose livelihoods depend directly on land, water, agriculture, forests, and animals can experience ecological disruption as an immediate threat to food, income, health, cultural continuity, and social security. Women may bear an additional burden because household labour, care work, and subsistence activities frequently depend upon access to natural resources.

Ecofeminism provides a useful interpretive framework for bringing these concerns together. In broad terms, it examines the relationship between the domination of women and the exploitation of nature, asking how hierarchies, ownership, control, and unequal power shape both social and ecological relationships. Importantly, an ecofeminist reading need not claim that women are inherently closer to nature than men. Instead, it can examine the historical and material conditions that place women and marginalized communities in particularly close relationships with natural resources and environmental change.

Indian women's writing offers a rich field for such analysis because questions of gender and environment frequently intersect with rural economies, community life, religion, social hierarchy, and development. The three novels selected for this study illustrate different dimensions of that intersection. Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* focuses on rural poverty, agricultural dependence, and industrial change. Indra Goswami's *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* explores women's lives within restrictive patriarchal and religious structures while giving the elephant a significant symbolic and ecological presence. Sara Joseph's *Gift in Green* presents land and water as the foundation of community life and makes ecological destruction a direct threat to collective survival.

The central argument of this paper is that the three novels move beyond representing women simply as victims. Their female characters negotiate deprivation, social control, ecological instability, and economic change. Their persistence and knowledge can become forms of agency. The study therefore reads survival as a political and ethical category: to preserve family, dignity, memory, community, land, water, or ecological knowledge is also to challenge systems that make such preservation difficult.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To examine representations of the relationship between women and the natural environment in the selected novels.
- To analyse how patriarchy, poverty, economic exploitation, industrialization, religion, and ecological degradation intersect.
- To compare the different forms of survival and resistance represented by Markandaya, Goswami, and Joseph.
- To demonstrate how women's everyday knowledge, labour, dignity, and community participation function as forms of ecofeminist agency.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do the selected novels connect women's experiences with environmental and ecological change?
2. In what ways do poverty, patriarchy, economic power, and environmental exploitation reinforce one another?

3. How does survival develop into resistance in the three novels?
4. What similarities and differences emerge in the representation of women as agents of ecological and social resistance?

4. METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative, and interpretive methodology grounded in close reading. The primary texts are Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, Indira Goswami's *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, and Sara Joseph's *Gift in Green*. The analysis focuses on recurring motifs and structures—land, water, animals, poverty, industrial development, patriarchy, care, survival, and resistance—and places them in conversation across the three novels. The secondary scholarship listed in the source manuscript is used to support the ecofeminist interpretation. The study is literary rather than empirical; consequently, its conclusions concern representation, narrative meaning, and critical interpretation rather than measurable environmental outcomes.

5. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: UNDERSTANDING ECOFEMINISM

Ecofeminism developed as a critical and political approach that connects feminism with environmental concerns. The basic idea is that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are not completely separate problems. Both can be produced by systems that value control, hierarchy, ownership, and domination.

Ecofeminist thinkers have examined the historical connection between women and nature. Women have traditionally been associated with fertility, motherhood, agriculture, food production, and care. Although these associations can sometimes reinforce traditional gender roles, they can also help us understand why women often experience environmental destruction very directly.

For example, when agricultural land becomes unproductive, when water becomes polluted, or when forests disappear, women in poor rural communities may have to travel farther for water, food, or fuel. Therefore, environmental problems can increase women's economic and domestic burdens.

Ecofeminism, however, should not mean that women are naturally closer to nature than men. Such an argument can create another form of gender stereotyping. Instead, an important ecofeminist approach is to examine the social and economic reasons why women and marginalized communities are often placed in closer relationships with natural resources.

The three novels studied in this paper are valuable because they do not simply present women as passive victims of environmental destruction. Their female characters negotiate difficult circumstances, make choices, protect their families and communities, and sometimes openly challenge structures of power.

6. RUKMANI, LAND, AND SURVIVAL IN NECTAR IN A SIEVE

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* tells the story of Rukmani, a rural Indian woman whose life is deeply connected to the land. Her marriage to Nathan gives her a life based on agricultural work. The land provides food and economic security, but it also becomes a source of uncertainty because the family depends almost completely on nature.

The relationship between Rukmani and the land is therefore not simply romantic. It is a relationship of dependence. The family needs the land for survival, while the land itself is threatened by drought, floods, insects, and changing economic conditions. Rukmani's experience demonstrates how environmental insecurity becomes human insecurity.

The novel's title itself suggests the fragility of human hope. Nectar represents something valuable and desirable, while the sieve suggests something that cannot hold it permanently. Rukmani's life contains

moments of happiness, but poverty and environmental uncertainty repeatedly take those moments away.

One of the major changes in the village is the arrival of the tannery. Industrial development brings employment and economic activity, but it also changes the social and ecological character of the village. The tannery gradually becomes a symbol of a form of development that does not necessarily improve the lives of the poor. The expansion of the tannery affects land, employment, food prices, and the social structure of the community. Critical scholarship has similarly identified the tannery as central to the novel's examination of rural transformation and environmental crisis (Patil, 2016).

Rukmani's relationship with the land is particularly important from an ecofeminist perspective. She understands that the destruction of the agricultural economy directly threatens her family. Her suffering is therefore connected to both gender and class. As a woman in a poor rural family, she has limited control over economic decisions, but she experiences the consequences of environmental and economic change very deeply.

Her life also shows the importance of women's labour. Rukmani works, cooks, cares for children, manages scarcity, and emotionally supports her family. Her labour is essential but largely invisible. Ecofeminist criticism can help us recognize this hidden labour because it examines the connection between care, survival, women, and natural resources.

The novel also shows how poverty increases women's vulnerability. Hunger, unemployment, illness, and the loss of agricultural security affect the entire family. Rukmani's children are forced to make difficult choices because the traditional rural economy cannot provide enough opportunities. The natural world in the novel is therefore not simply a background. It actively shapes the lives of the characters. Rain, drought, crops, insects, soil, and harvest determine whether the family can survive. This makes the novel especially useful for an ecofeminist reading.

At the same time, Rukmani's strength should not be misunderstood as simple acceptance. Her continued effort to protect her family is itself a form of resistance. She does not possess political power, wealth, or institutional authority. Her resistance comes through persistence, care, memory, and survival. Her survival therefore becomes political. A system that expects poor women to silently accept hunger and loss is challenged when Rukmani continues to maintain her dignity and humanity.

7. INDIRA GOSWAMI: WOMEN, ANIMALS, AND PATRIARCHAL POWER

Indira Goswami's *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* provides a different picture of ecofeminist struggle. The novel is set in Assam and focuses on the decline of a traditional social order. It explores the lives of women within a restrictive religious and patriarchal environment. The central female figure, Giribala, is a widow. Her position is shaped by the rules imposed upon widows and by the religious and social structures surrounding her. Women are expected to follow strict rules regarding their bodies, desires, mobility, and social behavior.

The novel's treatment of elephants creates an important connection between women and animals. The elephant becomes a symbol of captivity, exploitation, and decline. Recent ecofeminist scholarship argues that the novel presents the oppression of women and elephants as connected forms of marginalization within patriarchal and anthropocentric systems (Kumari & Mishra, 2026).

This relationship is important because both women and animals are controlled by powerful institutions. The elephant is not simply a creature in the background. It becomes part of the novel's larger representation of a society that has lost its balance. The title *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* itself represents decay. The howdah is associated with the elephant and with an older social order. Its moth-eaten condition suggests that the traditional structure is slowly collapsing from within. The physical decay

reflects the moral and social decay of the society represented in the novel.

Women also experience a form of social confinement. Giribala's life is restricted by widowhood, religious expectations, and patriarchal authority. Her body and desires are treated as things that must be controlled. Her struggle therefore becomes a struggle for personal identity. The novel demonstrates that patriarchy does not control only women's social lives. It also influences attitudes toward the natural world and animals. The same mentality that seeks to control women's bodies can be connected to the desire to control animals and natural resources.

This makes the novel particularly relevant to ecofeminism. Ecofeminist criticism does not simply ask whether nature appears in a literary text. It asks how power operates through relationships between humans, women, animals, and the environment. Giribala's resistance is therefore significant. Her resistance does not always take the form of a political protest. Sometimes simply refusing to accept the identity imposed upon her becomes resistance. Her search for dignity challenges the structures that attempt to define her completely.

The novel also shows that survival can be psychologically difficult. Women living under oppressive systems may have very little freedom, but they continue to negotiate their identities within those systems. In this sense, Goswami presents survival as an ongoing struggle between social control and individual desire. Sara Joseph's *Gift in Green: Water, Women, and Ecological Resistance*

Sara Joseph's Gift in Green provides the strongest environmental dimension among the three selected novels. Originally written in Malayalam as *Aathi*, the novel is set in the fictional community of *Aathi* and focuses on the relationship between people and their natural environment.

Water is central to the novel. It is not merely a physical resource but a source of life, memory, culture, spirituality, and community identity. The destruction of water and land therefore means the destruction of the community's way of life. Joseph presents ecological destruction as the result of powerful economic and social interests. The natural environment becomes something that powerful groups want to possess and exploit. In this sense, the novel criticizes a capitalist approach that treats land and water as commodities.

Scholarship on the novel emphasizes its ecological and spiritual dimensions and argues that *Aathi* represents a sacred space where ecological consciousness and resistance come together (Panicker, 2023).

Women are especially important in this process. Their relationship with water and land is connected with everyday life, food, family, and community. When the environment is damaged, women cannot separate ecological problems from their daily existence. This makes environmental resistance a feminist issue as well.

The women in *Gift in Green* challenge the assumption that development must always be accepted. They understand that a development project that destroys the ecological foundation of the community cannot be considered genuine progress.

The novel also presents resistance as collective. This is important because environmental problems cannot always be solved by individual action. When land, water, and community life are threatened, resistance must become social. Joseph therefore moves beyond the idea of the woman as merely a victim of ecological destruction. Women become participants in ecological politics. Their knowledge and experience become important sources of resistance.

The novel also combines ecology with spirituality. Nature is not treated as an object separate from human life. Land and water are part of a larger network of life. This challenges the idea that humans have complete ownership over nature. The struggle in *Gift in Green* can therefore be described as a struggle

between two different ideas of development. One sees nature as property and a source of profit. The other sees nature as a living system that supports the community.

The novel supports the second understanding and places women and marginalized communities at the center of ecological resistance.

8. SARA JOSEPH'S GIFT IN GREEN: WATER, WOMEN, AND ECOLOGICAL RESISTANCE

Comparative Study: From Survival To Resistance

Although Markandaya, Goswami, and Joseph belong to different linguistic and cultural traditions, their novels share several important concerns.

First, all three writers connect women's lives with larger systems of power. Rukmani is affected by poverty, industrialization, and environmental instability. Giribala is restricted by patriarchy, religion, and social tradition. The women of Aathi face the consequences of ecological and economic exploitation.

Second, all three novels challenge the idea that environmental problems are separate from social problems. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, environmental uncertainty increases poverty. In *The Moth-Eaten Howdah* of the Tusker, the exploitation of animals exists alongside the social control of women. In *Gift in Green*, ecological destruction threatens the entire community and is connected with economic and patriarchal power.

Third, the novels present nature as something more than a background. The land in Markandaya's novel determines the family's economic survival. Animals and the ecological landscape in Goswami's novel become part of the representation of social decline. Water and land in Joseph's novel are central to community identity.

This approach is important because traditional literary criticism sometimes treats nature as setting. Ecofeminist criticism instead asks how nature participates in the lives of characters and how environmental changes influence social relationships.

Another similarity is the importance of women's knowledge. Rukmani understands the agricultural world through experience. Goswami's women understand the restrictions of their social environment. Joseph's women possess knowledge of land, water, community, and survival. This knowledge becomes a source of power.

The novels also show different forms of resistance. Rukmani's resistance is largely based on endurance and survival. Giribala's resistance is connected with her desire for personal freedom and dignity. The resistance in *Gift in Green* becomes more collective and explicitly ecological.

Thus, the three novels can be placed on a continuum:

survival → awareness → resistance → collective action

This does not mean that Rukmani is less resistant than the women in Joseph's novel. Instead, it shows that resistance can take different forms depending on historical and social circumstances.

9. THE POLITICS OF SURVIVAL

The idea of survival is central to all three novels. Survival is usually understood as simply continuing to live. However, these writers give survival a deeper political meaning.

For poor women, survival often requires continuous physical and emotional labour. They must find food, care for children, manage economic hardship, and negotiate patriarchal expectations. Their labour keeps families and communities alive. Therefore, survival itself can challenge systems of domination.

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani survives repeated economic and environmental crises. Her survival preserves family and memory. She refuses to allow poverty to completely destroy her humanity.

In *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, women's survival challenges a social system that attempts to control their identities. The continued existence of female desire and agency becomes a challenge to patriarchal authority.

In *Gift in Green*, survival becomes explicitly ecological. If the water and land are destroyed, the community cannot survive. Therefore, protecting nature becomes equivalent to protecting human life.

The three novels consequently reject the separation between social justice and environmental justice.

10. WOMEN AS AGENTS OF ECOFEMINIST RESISTANCE

An important feature of these novels is the transformation of women from victims into agents.

Rukmani suffers from poverty and environmental uncertainty, but she also demonstrates strength and endurance. Her connection with agricultural life gives her a deep understanding of the land.

Giribala suffers because of patriarchal restrictions, but her consciousness of her own identity creates a challenge to the social system around her. Her story demonstrates that women cannot be reduced to passive victims.

In *Gift in Green*, women become part of a wider ecological resistance. Their understanding of their community and environment makes them important participants in the struggle against environmental destruction.

This representation is significant because it changes the meaning of ecofeminism. Women are not presented as naturally peaceful or naturally closer to nature. Instead, they become environmental agents because their social and economic lives are directly affected by ecological change.

11. DEVELOPMENT, CAPITALISM, AND NATURE

Another common concern in these works is the idea of development.

Nectar in a Sieve shows the effects of industrial development on rural society. The tannery creates the appearance of economic progress, but the benefits are not equally distributed. Poor villagers experience economic and social disruption.

The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker examines a society experiencing historical and political transformation. The decline of traditional structures creates uncertainty, while old forms of power continue to influence people's lives.

Gift in Green presents perhaps the strongest criticism of development based on exploitation. Land and water are treated as resources that can be controlled and used for economic gain.

These novels therefore encourage readers to ask an important question: Development for whom?

If development improves economic statistics but destroys the environment and makes poor communities more vulnerable, can it truly be called progress?

The three writers suggest that genuine development must consider human dignity, ecological balance, and social justice.

12. DISCUSSION

The comparative reading indicates a movement from individual endurance toward increasingly visible forms of social and ecological resistance. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, the land structures the family's economic

existence, making environmental insecurity inseparable from poverty and gendered labour. In *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, the relationship between women, animals, and institutions of control expands the ecofeminist question from material survival to bodily and social autonomy. *Gift in Green* makes the connection between ecology and collective survival most explicit by placing land and water at the center of community identity.

Across the three texts, nature is not merely decorative scenery. It participates in the narrative economy of survival. Agricultural land determines livelihood; animals carry meanings of captivity, decline, and power; and water sustains community life and memory. This shift—from nature as background to nature as an active condition of social existence—is central to the paper's ecofeminist argument.

The novels also complicate the idea of development. Industrial or economic transformation may produce employment or the appearance of progress while simultaneously redistributing costs toward poor communities and the environment. The recurring question is therefore not simply whether development occurs, but who benefits, who bears the cost, and what forms of ecological and social life are displaced in the process.

13. CONCLUSION

The selected works of Kamala Markandaya, Indira Goswami, and Sara Joseph demonstrate the close relationship among gender, ecology, poverty, power, and survival. Although the writers belong to different literary and regional traditions, their novels share a concern with the consequences of domination for women, communities, animals, and the natural world.

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani's life reveals how agrarian dependence, environmental instability, poverty, and industrial development affect rural women. In *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, Goswami links women's restricted lives with a broader representation of social and ecological decline, while the elephant becomes a significant figure of captivity and exploitation. In *Gift in Green*, Joseph presents the protection of land and water as inseparable from the survival of the community and foregrounds collective ecological resistance.

The study's central conclusion is that survival in these novels is not merely passive endurance. It can become a form of resistance through care, memory, knowledge, dignity, persistence, and collective action. The novels thus challenge the separation of social justice from environmental justice. An ecofeminist reading makes visible how gendered vulnerability and ecological vulnerability can be produced through related structures of power.

At the same time, the three texts demonstrate that resistance does not have a single form. Rukmani's persistence, Giribala's struggle for dignity and identity, and the collective ecological consciousness represented in *Gift in Green* operate under different historical and social conditions. Taken together, they suggest a continuum from survival to awareness, resistance, and collective action. The literary significance of these narratives lies precisely in showing how apparently ordinary acts of survival can carry ethical and political meaning.

The paper therefore concludes that the survival of women and the survival of ecological communities are deeply interconnected in these selected works. The novels invite readers to understand environmental justice as a question of social justice and to recognize the experiences and knowledge of those whose everyday lives remain most closely tied to land, water, animals, and community.

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