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Re-Rooting the Green Feminine: The Postcolonial Ecology of Indian Womanhood in Markandaya, Divakaruni, and Lahiri

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Abstract— *The evolution of Indian ecofeminism—from its early agrarian expressions to its transnational and post-ethnic articulations—reveals a dynamic negotiation between ecology, gender, and postcolonial identity. This paper explores how three seminal women novelists—Kamala Markandaya, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Jhumpa Lahiri—redefine the relationship between women and nature through distinct historical and cultural contexts. While Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve (1954) roots womanhood within the soil of a newly independent India struggling against modernisation, Divakaruni's The Mistress of Spices (1997) expands the ecofeminist imagination to the diasporic and mythic, foregrounding cross-cultural solidarities and ecological spirituality. Lahiri's The Namesake (2003) reconfigures ecological belonging through migration and hybridity, locating environmental consciousness within the flux of identity rather than in geographic fixity. Across these writers, Indian ecofeminism shifts from essentialist notions of woman-as-earth toward a pluralistic and post-ethnic ecology of selfhood, integrating local ecologies with global feminist ethics. Drawing on the theories of Vandana Shiva, Bina Agarwal, Karen Warren, and Tina Sikka, this study argues that Indian ecofeminist fiction transitions from cultural conservatism to an ecocritical pluralism that reconciles indigenous traditions with cosmopolitan modernity. Through close readings, the paper demonstrates that postcolonial ecofeminism is not merely a resistance discourse but a generative narrative strategy that re-roots womanhood in evolving landscapes—material, symbolic, and planetary.*

Keywords— ***Indian ecofeminism, postcolonial identity, ecological feminism, women novelists, environmental consciousness***

I. INTRODUCTION

The discourse of ecofeminism has long been a site of convergence for environmental, feminist, and postcolonial concerns. Originating with Françoise d'Eaubonne's (1974) proposition that "feminism or death" encapsulates the shared oppression of women and nature, ecofeminism soon expanded into multiple philosophical and regional trajectories. In the Indian context, ecofeminism acquired a distinctive texture: it became entwined with postcolonial recovery, Gandhian ethics of self-reliance, and the lived experiences of rural women whose survival was bound to the land. Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive* (1988) and Maria Mies and Shiva's collaborative *Ecofeminism* (1993) grounded the movement in the struggles of grassroots activists—particularly the Chipko women—who resisted ecological destruction by physically embracing trees. Yet, as Bina Agarwal (1992) notes, such cultural ecofeminism risked essentializing women as naturally closer to the earth, thereby overlooking the material and structural inequalities that differentiated women across caste, class, and region.

In the decades following independence, Indian literature became an important medium for articulating ecofeminist consciousness, often before the theoretical terminology had crystallized. Women novelists translated ecological

anxieties into intimate narratives of domestic survival, loss, and belonging. Among them, Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) stands out as one of the earliest postcolonial novels to frame the rural female subject as both a custodian of ecological balance and a victim of industrial modernity. The novel's protagonist, Rukmani, embodies the rhythm of agricultural life while confronting the disruptions brought by the tannery—a symbol of foreign capital and technological intrusion. Through Rukmani's intimate relationship with the soil and her silent endurance of dispossession, Markandaya anticipates the ecofeminist recognition that environmental degradation and patriarchal domination stem from the same exploitative logic.

By the late twentieth century, as globalization redefined migration, consumption, and identity, Indian women writers began to re-imagine ecofeminism beyond agrarian and national boundaries. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, writing from the United States, infused ecofeminist sensibilities with mythic imagination and diasporic hybridity. *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) transforms the eponymous spices into living agents of ecological and emotional healing, situating the female protagonist Tilo between tradition and transformation. Here, nature is not the passive ground of fertility but an active participant in the woman's self-realization. The diasporic context complicates the binary of colonizer and colonized; Divakaruni's ecofeminism is intercultural, linking Indian spiritual ecology with Native American cosmology through Tilo's relationship with Raven. The novel thus broadens ecofeminism into a dialogue between multiple indigenous epistemologies marginalized by capitalist modernity.

The new millennium witnessed yet another shift, from rooted cultural identities to fluid and deterritorialized ones. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) examines how ecological belonging can persist amid urban modernity and transnational displacement. The novel's protagonist, Ashima, inhabits an in-between space that is neither fully Indian nor wholly American. Her culinary practices, domestic gardening, and emotional attachment to food become metaphors of sustainable identity, wherein memory and ecology intertwine. Lahiri's diasporic imagination extends ecofeminism to the terrain of post-ethnicity (Hollinger 2006), where ecological and cultural connections are chosen, hybrid, and consciously maintained rather than inherited.

Across these trajectories—from Markandaya's village fields to Divakaruni's magical diaspora and Lahiri's suburban hybridity—the ecofeminist imagination of Indian womanhood evolves from the earthly to the planetary, from local rootedness to global connectedness. This paper, therefore, traces a continuum:

1. How postcolonial ecofeminism emerges from the agrarian ethos of early Indian fiction;
2. How it transforms within diasporic narratives into mythic-intercultural dialogues; and
3. How it culminates in a post-ethnic pluralism that redefines both womanhood and ecology as dynamic, relational, and de-essentialized.

By analysing these novelists through the theoretical lenses of Karen Warren's pluralist ecofeminism (1987), Tina Sikka's materialist critique (2018), and Agarwal's intersectional environmentalism (1992), this study seeks to demonstrate that Indian ecofeminist literature is not a static mirror of cultural conservatism but an evolving discourse of ecological citizenship and feminist agency. The postcolonial woman, once figured as the "mother-earth," becomes, in the new millennium, a mediator between tradition and transformation, whose ecological consciousness is as much ethical as it is existential.

II. THE AGRARIAN BODY: ECOFEMINISM AND POSTCOLONIAL ETHICS IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S *NECTAR IN A SIEVE*

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) offers a paradigmatic scene of Indian ecofeminism in its formative, agrarian phase, where woman, soil, seasonality, and survival are interwoven within a fragile moral economy. Set in the aftermath of Independence, the novel aligns the female subject with land-based rhythms while staging the incursions of an industrial-capitalist modernity that upends ecological balance and the gendered division of labour. Its protagonist, Rukmani, is both emblem and agent: a cultivator, caretaker, and witness whose sensory intimacy with field, seed, water, and weather models a relational ethic that ecofeminist philosophers would later theorize as an antidote to extractive rationalities (Warren 4; Mies and Shiva 14). Read alongside postcolonial critiques of developmentalism, *Nectar in a Sieve* registers how the forces of commodification—most visibly the tannery—recode the village landscape into a site of displacement, scarcity, and new forms of dependency. At once lyrical and austere, Markandaya's prose locates ecological harm and patriarchal harm within a single horizon of experience.

Rukmani's earliest gestures situate her as a reader of the land's signs. In the bullock cart after marriage, she notices "poor beasts" whose hides are already dusty, an empathetic regard that folds animal suffering into her ethical field of vision (Markandaya 5). The remark is not incidental sentiment: it initiates a narrative grammar in which sentience is distributed among nonhuman beings and the

land itself, prefiguring an ecofeminist sensibility that resists hierarchical separations of value. As she begins to cultivate the household plot—pumpkins at first, then beans, yams, brinjals, chillies—labour turns intimate and contemplative. She "often visits the well" and tracks the "green shoots," celebrating the ripening pumpkin with a wonder that her family finds excessive: "One would have thought you had never seen a pumpkin before" (11). The quiet irony here underscores a key insight: subsistence agriculture, undertaken by women in precarious conditions, is not merely toil but a relation of care that sustains meaning, memory, and hope.

Markandaya intensifies this ethic of relation through Rukmani's meditation on seed-life: "each of the dry, hard pellets… had within it the very secret of life itself, curled tightly within, under leaf after protective leaf" (14). The language— "secret," "protective"—casts germination as a sheltered potential, echoing the protective labour women perform in households and fields. In ecofeminist terms, Rukmani's phenomenology of seed-keeping discloses kinship with what Vandana Shiva later articulates as "the living economy of the seed," an indigenous epistemology endangered by masculinist technoscience and market enclosure (Shiva; Mies and Shiva 14). While Markandaya never polemicizes, her poetics align with a subsistence ontology that recognises interdependence—soil fertility, weather cycles, community reciprocity—as the conditions of ethical life.

This agrarian ecology is soon confronted by modernity's emblem: the tannery. Its arrival catalyzes a structural transformation—wage work supplants subsistence rhythms, strangers crowd the village, prices rise, and the soundscape itself changes. The tannery, linked to leather processing and export, condenses the novel's critique of development as a logic of detachment: detaching labour from land, price from use, bodies from their ecological context. Ecofeminist theory names this detachment as a masculinist, dualistic rationality that privileges abstraction, control, and profit over embodied, place-based knowledges (Warren 3–5). For Rukmani, the factory's presence generates a new form of temporal stress—harvest-time, once the communal calendar's pulse, is displaced by wage-time. Nathan and the older agrarian men lose bargaining power; the village's gendered solidarities, already strained by poverty, must be renegotiated under scarcity.

Markandaya's ecological critique is not nostalgic pastoral. Droughts, floods, and crop failures reveal that nature is not a passive ally; it can be indifferent or catastrophic. Yet the novel carefully differentiates calamity without malice (monsoon vagaries) from calamity with agency (tannery-driven inflation, dispossession, coercive labour). Rukmani's endurance across both kinds of calamity exposes the double bind women inhabit: they absorb shocks from the nonhuman environment and from social-economic systems that instrumentalize their labour while marginalizing their voice. Bina Agarwal's materialist ecofeminism clarifies this bind: women's ecological vulnerability in South Asia is mediated by access to productive resources (land rights, water, common property) and by caste/class position, not by any mystical proximity to nature (Agarwal 136–45). Rukmani's family, land-poor and debt-exposed, sits precisely at that intersection.

If the tannery dramatizes developmental violence, Markandaya also depicts the subtler forms of patriarchal violence that traverse domestic life: constrained reproductive choices, the burdens of food rationing, and the moral economy of shame around sexuality and fertility. Yet, crucially, the novel refrains from casting Rukmani as a sacrificial earth-mother. Her voice bears irony, disappointment, and strategic silence, signalling agency without the trappings of modern liberal autonomy. This calibrated portrayal aligns with Karen Warren's insistence on ecofeminism's pluralist, contextual ethics—rejecting single-cause explanations and attending to lived complexity (4). Rukmani bargains with the world: with monsoon, merchants, midwives, moneylenders. Bargain, not surrender, is her mode.

Close reading of the household garden clarifies how Markandaya figures female expertise as an ecological technique. The selection of hardy vegetables (pumpkin as a pioneer crop; brinjal and chillies as staples with culinary and market value) demonstrates tacit agronomy. The daily choreography—soil loosening, mulching, water-hauling, pest vigilance—carries a tacit science honed by observation across seasons. When the pumpkin "matures to yellow and red" (Markandaya 11), the detail is not only sensuous; it indexes ripeness thresholds that guide harvest timing. This know-how is the opposite of the factory's standardised time: it is deeply phenomenological, keyed to colour, texture, smell. Ecofeminist critics have argued that such embodied knowledges, often coded as "women's intuition," are systematically devalued by patriarchal-capitalist epistemologies that recognise only lab-certified or market-validated expertise (Sandilands 19–23). Markandaya's narrative restores epistemic dignity to vernacular cultivation.

The novel's soundscape is equally telling. Early chapters hum with birdsong and the soft hydraulics of well-and-rope; later, the tannery's clatter and commerce intrude. Rukmani's sensory field, initially attuned to cues of germination and rainfall, must now parse prices, wages, and the risk of theft. The transformation of attention—from ecological to

economic signals—materialises the psychic toll of developmentalism. Ecofeminist analysis often underscores this cognitive reallocation: time spent tracking market volatility is time subtracted from ecological care, community ties, and self-repair, a subtraction disproportionately borne by women who manage household resilience during scarcity (Sikka 118–25).

Markandaya complicates any simplistic nature/woman identity by showing that nature's excess—famine, flood—can force ethical compromises. In hunger, moral vocabularies thin. Yet, even in extremity, the narrative draws a line between making do and making victims. The tannery's labour regime thrives on the latter: it creates winners (moneylenders, contractors) by producing losers (tenant-farmers, landless labourers). The ecofeminist thread here is not merely symbolic; it is political economy. As Rukmani's household cycles through debt, the novel illuminates how women's unpaid ecological labour subsidises the very system that undermines them: when crops fail, women stretch meals, barter, gather fuel, and nurse the sick—absorbing system shocks without compensation. Agarwal's critique of romanticised cultural ecofeminism warns that celebrating women's closeness to nature without redistributing resource rights locks them into perpetual vulnerability (Agarwal 146–52). Markandaya's plot quietly agrees.

Importantly, *Nectar in a Sieve* stages contact zones between indigenous subsistence ethics and incipient market modernity without resolving them into moral binaries. Rukmani admires certain efficiencies; she trades when needed. The novel respects the ambivalence of villagers who seek wage stability even as they mourn communal erosion. This ambivalence is central to a postcolonial ecofeminism that refuses caricature—neither fetishising "pure" tradition nor capitulating to development-as-fate. In Warren's terms, ethics must be contextualist rather than absolutist (4). Markandaya's art lies in situating choices within constraint, not in condemning characters for pragmatism under duress.

Finally, the novel anticipates debates about environmental justice by mapping how ecological degradation (soil exhaustion, water contamination, deforestation for factory expansion) converges with social stratification. Those with the least land and least voice absorb the most risk—as tenants, as migrants, as women. Rukmani's perspective sutures these scales: a cracked pot, a shrivelled gourd, a wage denied, a monsoon delayed. The cumulative effect is a cartography of slow violence whose temporality—seasonal, cyclical, attritional—often escapes spectacular registers of crisis (cf. Rob Nixon's later formulation, though outside our immediate corpus). Markandaya's choice to focalise through a woman cultivator ensures that the sensorium of slow violence becomes narratively visible.

In sum, *Nectar in a Sieve* furnishes Indian ecofeminism with its foundational tableau: a woman's intimate world of tending and making-do encircled by the advancing frontiers of extractive modernity. The novel neither sanctifies Rukmani as earth-goddess nor dissolves her into victimhood; it instead composes a portrait of competent vulnerability—competence in vernacular ecologies, vulnerability before market and monsoon. This portrait resonates with the movement from cultural ecofeminism (valuing connection, subsistence, spirituality) to critical/material ecofeminism (foregrounding rights, labour, and structural inequalities). As we move, in subsequent sections, to Divakaruni's diasporic mythopoesis and Lahiri's post-ethnic domesticities, Markandaya's village remains a necessary "root"—a soil-memory against which later transnational ecologies will be measured, revised, and reimagined.

III. DIASPORIC ECOFEMINISM AND MYTHIC HYBRIDITY IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE MISTRESS OF SPICES*

If Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* roots the ecofeminist consciousness in India's agrarian soil, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) transplants it to diasporic ground, where ecological sensibility and feminist identity are renegotiated through myth, memory, and migration. Written from the vantage point of an Indian American author, the novel reimagines ecofeminism not as a pastoral return to the land but as a spiritual and cultural ecology that crosses boundaries of nation, species, and race. In this mythopoetic terrain, herbs, spices, and natural elements assume agency, while the protagonist Tilo—both priestess and immigrant—mediates between the sacred knowledge of the East and the fragmented materialism of the West.

Divakaruni's diasporic ecofeminism expands Vandana Shiva's idea of "living economies" by relocating them in a transnational setting. While Shiva emphasises the protection of indigenous resources from global capitalist incursions (*Staying Alive* 44), Divakaruni dramatizes the condition of these resources once they are already displaced, commodified and recontextualised within immigrant lives. The spices in Tilo's Oakland shop are survivors of this displacement. They retain their biocultural memory, symbolizing a continuity of ecological wisdom amid fragmentation. As Tilo notes, "The spices of true power are from my birthland, the land of ardent poetry, aquamarine feathers, sunset skies brilliant as blood"

(Divakaruni 3). The language of sensory abundance here performs what Salman Rushdie calls "imaginary homelands," an attempt to re-create a lost ecology through aesthetic invocation (Rushdie).

Yet Divakaruni's nostalgia is strategic, not regressive. She is aware, as Sandhya Shukla observes, that diasporic writing operates in "time and space where the local is transcended and the past must be invoked to support the present" (Shukla 135). The invocation of spices and myths serves this purpose: to construct a sensory ecology that resists alienation without denying modern hybridity. In this sense, *The Mistress of Spices* bridges two modes of ecofeminism—cultural (spiritual, holistic, connected to the feminine divine) and critical (aware of power, commodification, and cross-cultural inequality).

Tilo's initiation into the order of the Mistresses of Spices marks her transformation from an ordinary woman into a guardian of the natural and the mystical. Each spice corresponds to a form of sentient power, demanding respect and discipline. This feminised knowledge system reclaims the sacrality of the natural world without succumbing to essentialist mysticism. The spices speak to Tilo, correct her, and punish transgression—an allegory for ecological accountability. As Ling notes, cultural ecofeminism identifies the cause of nature's subjugation with the patriarchal socialisation of women (68); Divakaruni literalizes this by allowing the spices themselves to educate Tilo into balance and restraint.

However, Divakaruni's narrative departs from Shiva's model of ecofeminism in significant ways. Where Shiva's vision of *prakriti* and *shakti* often privileges the village woman as the archetype of ecological wisdom (Mies and Shiva 23), Divakaruni complicates this ideal by situating her heroine in urban America, surrounded by immigrants negotiating capitalism, racism, and gendered alienation. Oakland replaces the village; the grocery replaces the field. Ecofeminism, here, becomes metropolitan and multicultural, extending care to an ecosystem of human and nonhuman agents within a globalized diaspora.

The figure of Raven—Tilo's Native American lover extends this plural ecology further. Through him, Divakaruni juxtaposes two colonized cosmologies: the Indian and the Native American. Raven's heritage, marked by his mother Celestina's rejection of indigenous spirituality, mirrors Tilo's own ambivalence toward her mystical discipline. Lara Merlin interprets this parallel as Divakaruni's effort "to broaden the concept of what it means to be an American" by linking displaced traditions (207). Raven's repressed heritage dramatizes the ecological amnesia of modern America—its erasure of native relationships with the land. Tilo's attraction to Raven is therefore not merely romantic but epistemological: she recognises in him the same lost communion with nature that her spices preserve in exile.

The union between Tilo and Raven enacts what Karen Warren would call a structurally pluralist ecofeminism—an ethics that foregrounds dialogue across difference rather than purity of origin (5). Their relationship breaks both cultural and disciplinary borders: it merges myth and modernity, ecology and sexuality. Through this alliance, Divakaruni challenges what Prayag Akbar, in *Leila*, would later call the tyranny of "purity." In *The Mistress of Spices*, purity—religious, cultural, or ecological—is portrayed as stasis, while hybridity becomes the ground for regeneration.

Divakaruni's ecofeminist vision is therefore intercultural rather than inter-categorical. She does not construct a simple binary of East versus West or nature versus culture; instead, she dramatizes a third space where knowledge systems intermingle. The spices' voices form an ecological chorus, speaking in multiple tongues: Sanskrit chants, whispered admonitions, and modern irony. In one striking passage, Tilo recalls that "the turmeric said, I am the blood of the earth. I heal. But I must be remembered rightly" (Divakaruni 48). The imperative to "remember rightly" encapsulates Divakaruni's diasporic ecofeminism: to remember without mythic distortion, to heal without possession.

Critics like Christiane Schlote have noted that South Asian American women writers move from portraying "submissive emigrant wives to independent individuals investigating their newly discovered subjectivity" (402). Tilo's evolution from a self-effacing Mistress bound by ritual to a woman who claims her own sensual and moral autonomy exemplifies this transformation. Her final act—leaving the shop and embracing mortality—reconciles the mystical with the material, suggesting that ecofeminist liberation requires not transcendence but embodied re-entry into the world.

In this metamorphosis, Divakaruni stages what Tina Sikka (2018) calls the materialist turn in ecofeminism: the recognition that feminist and ecological struggles are grounded not only in spirituality but in the "capitalist mode of production and reproduction" that structures gendered labour (120). Tilo's shop is a microcosm of this economy: it sustains immigrant families, circulates healing commodities, and survives on trade. Her defiance of the spices' commands not to love a man mirrors a rebellion against systems that regulate women's bodies and the natural world alike. By choosing love, Tilo reclaims agency from both patriarchal and metaphysical authorities, signalling an ecofeminism that is neither ascetic nor passive.

Furthermore, Divakaruni's prose foregrounds sensual ecology—the synesthetic connection between taste, touch, smell, and memory—as a form of feminist epistemology. The spices mediate not just physical healing but emotional communication among diasporic characters. This sensory ethics recalls what Catriona Sandilands describes as the "politics of care" that links bodily experience to democratic responsibility (Sandilands 27). Through Tilo's ministrations, Divakaruni literalizes this politics: the act of grinding cardamom or blending turmeric becomes an act of cultural translation and ethical attention.

At the same time, Divakaruni is wary of ecofeminism's tendency toward romantic essentialism. By portraying the spices as sometimes punitive, even tyrannical, she critiques the idea that nature's voice is always benign. The spices demand sacrifice; they punish hubris. This ambivalence restores to nature its agency and alterity, qualities that simplistic eco-spiritual discourses often neutralise. As such, Divakaruni anticipates later post-humanist ecofeminism, which views the natural world as a network of autonomous actants rather than a nurturing mother.

In the final analysis, *The Mistress of Spices* reconfigures Indian ecofeminism within a transnational mythopoetic frame. It decolonizes both American and Indian imaginations by proposing that ecology is not confined to geography but extends into cultural memory and affective labour. Where Markandaya's Rukmani tills the soil, Divakaruni's Tilo tills memory and myth. Both women embody resilience; both bridge suffering and creation. Yet Tilo's journey represents a new phase of ecofeminism—from rootedness to routing, from sustenance to synthesis.

Divakaruni thus offers an ecological cosmopolitanism that neither fetishizes indigeneity nor erases it. Her diasporic ecofeminism foregrounds connection without confinement: a green feminine re-rooted not in the soil of a single homeland but in the ethical practice of care across worlds.

IV. CRITICAL ECOFEMINISM BEYOND CULTURAL CONSERVATISM: RETHINKING POWER, PURITY, AND PLURALISM

The trajectory from Kamala Markandaya's agrarian realism to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's mythic diaspora signals an unmistakable shift in Indian ecofeminism—from reverence to critique, from spiritual naturalism to political consciousness. Yet this shift is not a simple movement away from faith or tradition; rather, it represents a deep interrogation of how cultural ecofeminism can both empower and entrap. Indian ecofeminism, particularly after the 1990s, began to distance itself from idealized depictions of "woman as nature" or "India as nurturing mother," recognizing that these tropes often conceal structural hierarchies. The work of writers and theorists such as Bina Agarwal, Karen Warren, and Tina Sikka demonstrates how gendered and ecological subjugation cannot be undone merely through symbolic reclamations of the feminine divine. Instead, critical ecofeminism foregrounds material conditions, political economies, and plural subjectivities—a movement away from essentialism toward pluralism.

4.1 *The Limits of Cultural Ecofeminism*

Vandana Shiva's influential formulations of ecofeminism in *Staying Alive* (1988) and *Ecofeminism* (with Maria Mies, 1993) galvanised global discourse by linking women's oppression with the exploitation of nature under capitalist patriarchy. Drawing inspiration from Gandhian self-reliance and indigenous traditions, Shiva celebrated the spiritual power of *prakriti* (nature) and *shakti* (female creative energy) as the ethical foundations of a non-violent ecological order. However, this celebratory model, while invaluable in restoring dignity to indigenous women's knowledge, tends to homogenize women's experiences and overlook the hierarchies of caste, class, and religion that mediate ecological relationships in India. Gabriel Dietrich critiqued Shiva's framework for its assumption of a "uniform society equitably coordinated, where each individual owns adequate land to sustain oneself," thus erasing historical inequalities (325).

Shiva's invocation of *shakti* as the feminine principle also universalizes Hindu cosmology as the Indian paradigm, marginalizing alternative epistemologies from tribal, Buddhist, Muslim, or Christian communities (Rao 190). For Dalit, Adivasi, and minority women, such a "sacralized femininity" can replicate Brahmanical patriarchy rather than dismantle it. As Ester Daimari and Ivy Daimary's studies of Bodo mythology suggest, indigenous traditions may themselves encode gender hierarchies that subordinate women and legitimise male dominance over both nature and the female body. The goddess *Obonglaoree*—the feminine creative principle—coexists with a culture that regards men as superior to both women and the environment. Hence, spiritual essentialism can coexist with social exploitation.

Critical ecofeminism thus intervenes by questioning the romanticization of "the indigenous" and demanding a materialist understanding of ecological crises. As Tina Sikka argues, patriarchy is not merely a moral disposition but a systemic mode of production and reproduction, embedded in capitalist economies and reinforced through gendered divisions of labour (Sikka 120). To address ecological degradation, therefore, one must examine the economic and political structures that commodify both nature and women's labour. For instance, the commercialization of seeds, the privatization of water, or

the displacement of rural communities by dam projects are not abstract patriarchal metaphors—they are concrete mechanisms of ecological injustice that disproportionately affect marginalized women.

4.2 Power, Purity, and the Politics of the Feminine

In literary and cultural representations, the notion of purity—religious, sexual, ecological, or cultural—often becomes a tool of exclusion. Prayag Akbar's dystopian novel *Leila* (2017) offers a striking allegory of this danger. The city's walls, dividing citizens into "pure" and "polluted," dramatize how ideals of sanctity can morph into totalitarian regimes. Similarly, within cultural ecofeminism, the fetishization of a pure, untouched nature or the morally "pure" woman can entrench hierarchies rather than subvert them. Divakaruni's Tilo and Lahiri's Ashima both confront this dilemma: they inhabit impurity as a space of transformation.

Karen Warren's framework of structural pluralism (1987) offers a philosophical basis for such impurity. Ecofeminism, she argues, must accommodate multiple, even conflicting perspectives to remain ethically responsive. Warren's pluralism rejects both the reduction of women to natural symbols and the elevation of nature to sentimental purity. Instead, it insists on contextual ethics—understanding oppression and resistance through specific histories rather than universal essences. In the Indian postcolonial context, this pluralism translates into a dialogue among castes, classes, religions, and regions; among rural and urban women; and among different modes of relationship with land and labour.

Tilo's relationship with Raven, examined earlier, exemplifies this pluralist ethic. Their cross-cultural bond dismantles rigid binaries of East/West, feminine/masculine, and nature/culture. Raven's Native American lineage reintroduces an ecology erased by settler modernity, while Tilo's Indian mysticism offers an alternative to consumerist spirituality. The resulting dialogue is not about synthesis but reciprocity—each learns to inhabit ambiguity. By loving Raven, Tilo breaks not only religious vows but ontological boundaries; she becomes both Mistress and mortal, healer and healed.

Similarly, in *The God of Small Things* (1997), Arundhati Roy exposes how purity codes enforce ecological and sexual segregation. The river Meenachal, once a space of childhood play and fertility, becomes "a swollen drain of filth" after industrial pollution (Roy 12). The same logic of contamination governs social relations: Ammu's inter-caste love for Velutha is deemed "polluting," and she is punished with exile. Roy's narrative links the ecological decay of Ayemenem to the moral decay of its hierarchies, showing that environmental degradation and gender oppression are two sides of the same disciplinary system. By ending her novel with Ammu's defiant "Tomorrow," Roy offers an ecofeminist temporality of hope—a future where the boundaries of purity might dissolve.

4.3 From Essentialism to Intersectionality

Critical ecofeminism's most transformative contribution lies in its intersectional turn. Drawing upon Bina Agarwal's insistence on "gendered access to resources" and Warren's contextual pluralism, contemporary Indian women novelists situate ecology within social cartographies of caste, class, and diaspora. The ecological self is not merely female; it is shaped by material conditions, mobility, and memory. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2004), as discussed in the next section, exemplifies this shift toward an ecofeminism of fluid identities—where home, soil, and self are reconstructed through migration and choice rather than inherited essence.

The intersectional model acknowledges that women's relationships with nature differ across contexts: the tribal woman's forest is not the same as the urban professional's potted balcony garden, yet both can embody ecological ethics. This plural understanding resists the monolithic "Goddess feminism" that equates liberation with return to an imagined matriarchal past. Instead, it views ecological and feminist struggles as coalitional—shared projects across differences.

4.4 Toward Ecological Democracy

Catriona Sandilands's notion of the "good-natured feminist" (1999) and Vandana Shiva's later concept of "Earth Democracy" converge here: both propose participatory models of environmental care grounded in justice and diversity. The difference lies in emphasis—Shiva anchors democracy in spirituality, Sandilands in political process. Indian ecofeminist fiction since the 1990s synthesizes these impulses. Roy, Divakaruni, and Lahiri imagine worlds where ethical interdependence replaces domination, but they remain alert to the institutional and emotional labour required to sustain such worlds.

Arundhati Roy's engagement with ecological activism beyond fiction—her essays on dams, forests, and displacement—illustrates how literature and activism intertwine within this critical ecofeminist framework. She warns that romanticizing tribal or feminine purity can obscure state violence and capitalist extraction. Her critique parallels Tina Sikka's call for a "standpoint of the vulnerable," one that situates ecological ethics in lived inequities rather than abstract reverence (Sikka 122).

4.5 Toward a Plural Feminine Ecology

Critical ecofeminism, then, does not abandon spirituality but reinterprets it as ethical pluralism. It calls for reverence

without idealization, resistance without victimhood, and belonging without exclusion. The "green feminine" in Indian postcolonial literature evolves from symbol to subject, from myth to method. Rukmani's prayerful cultivation, Tilo's syncretic healing, and Ammu's transgressive love each reimagine ecological citizenship beyond the binaries of sacred and profane, pure and impure, East and West.

In sum, postcolonial Indian ecofeminism, through its critical phase, learns to balance indigenous reverence with intersectional critique. It no longer asks women to embody nature; it invites them to co-author ecological futures. This evolution—from the soil-bound ethics of Markandaya to the transnational consciousness of Lahiri—marks a paradigm shift from cultural conservation to ecocritical pluralism, paving the way for what the next section will term the "post-ethnic ecology of womanhood."

V. PLURAL ECOLOGIES AND POSTETHNIC IDENTITIES IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*

If Markandaya's Rukmani roots Indian ecofeminism in the soil and Divakaruni's Tilo reimagines it through diasporic myth, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) relocates ecological belonging within the terrain of post-ethnic identity—a space defined not by geography but by memory, affect, and adaptability. Lahiri's ecofeminism is quieter, more domestic, and yet radical in its implications: she redefines environment not as wilderness or field but as the intimate architecture of everyday life. Within the microcosm of immigrant households, kitchens, and gardens, Lahiri constructs an ecology of emotion, one that mirrors the rhythms of adaptation, migration, and self-reinvention.

While *The Namesake* is often read through diasporic or postcolonial lenses, its ecological dimensions have received less sustained attention. Yet, as scholars like Lekha Roy and Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri observe, Lahiri's characters negotiate the binaries of "inside and outside worlds" where "space begins to exert its own dynamics" in shaping cross-cultural identities (Roy and Khushu-Lahiri 112). For Ashima and Gogol Ganguli, environment is not a fixed homeland but a series of lived ecosystems—each defined by sensory familiarity, community ties, and acts of care. In these environments, Lahiri articulates a distinctly post-ethnic ecofeminism, one that reclaims ecology as a practice of empathy across borders.

5.1 Domestic Ecology: The Politics of Everyday Care

At the heart of Lahiri's ecofeminism lies the domestic sphere, a site long trivialized in both environmental and feminist discourse. Through Ashima's character, Lahiri reclaims the household as a living ecosystem where adaptation becomes a form of ecological creativity. From her first days in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Ashima's effort to replicate Indian food, spices, and rituals transforms the alien apartment into a microcosmic habitat. The act of mixing Rice Krispies with peanuts and chilli powder to make *jhalmuri* (Lahiri 1) dramatizes this hybrid ecology—an act of culinary survival that collapses the distance between continents.

Ecofeminist scholars such as Catriona Sandilands and Val Plumwood have underscored the importance of care labour in sustaining ecological communities. Lahiri translates this philosophy into domestic practice. Ashima's food preparation, home-making, and ritual observances are not passive repetitions of tradition but adaptive strategies that negotiate belonging in a foreign climate. The material texture of food—the smell of mustard oil, the crackle of cumin—becomes an affective bridge between memory and environment. These sensory acts echo what Divakaruni's Tilo performs through her spices, yet Ashima's gestures are non-mystical, embodied, and quotidian. Lahiri thus democratizes ecofeminism, shifting it from divine symbolism to the politics of everyday endurance.

Ashima's domestic ecology is also feminist in its redefinition of labour and identity. Her home is not a confinement but a transitional biosphere where she experiments with cultural hybridity—raising children who are both Bengali and American, cooking with local produce while retaining Indian flavours, and adapting seasonal rituals to new weather patterns. The diasporic woman here does not preserve a static culture; she curates continuity through change. This aligns with Karen Warren's pluralist ecofeminism, which insists that feminist and ecological practices must remain "contextualist, inclusivist, and structurally pluralistic" (4).

5.2 Migration as Environmental Transformation

Lahiri also portrays migration as a form of environmental reconfiguration. The transference from Calcutta to Cambridge is not merely social or linguistic but ecological: it entails new climates, seasons, foods, and material infrastructures. The immigrant body must recalibrate its rhythms—the skin to the cold, the stomach to foreign diets, the mind to urban isolation. Lahiri's prose often renders these adjustments in sensory detail, such as Ashima's first winter when "her breath is visible in the air, the radiators hiss like snakes, and everything smells of paper and paint" (Lahiri 7). This material realism transforms displacement into ecological estrangement.

Unlike Markandaya's or Divakaruni's protagonists, Ashima's agency emerges not through overt rebellion but through adaptive resilience. Her ability to maintain care

networks across space—sending packages of homemade sweets, preserving seeds, cultivating familiarity—epitomises an ecofeminism of continuity-in-motion. As Stuart Hall notes, diasporic identity is defined "not by essence and purity, but by hybridity" (235). Lahiri's ecofeminism mirrors this hybridity: her women find belonging not by returning to origin but by re-rooting through adaptation.

This adaptive ecology contrasts sharply with the alienation experienced by Ashoke and Gogol, whose relationships with the environment remain mediated by abstraction—work, academia, architecture. Lahiri thus feminizes ecological atonement without essentializing it. Ashima's relational intelligence, her capacity to read affective atmospheres, operates as an alternative epistemology—one grounded in care and sensory memory rather than mastery.

5.3 Naming, Identity, and Ecological Belonging

The novel's title itself, *The Namesake*, suggests the ecological and cultural significance of naming. Gogol's struggle with his name symbolises a broader crisis of identity and rootedness. A name, like a species in an ecosystem, marks both individuality and lineage; it locates one within a web of relations. When Gogol legally changes his name to "Nikhil," he enacts a symbolic act of deforestation—severing one root in the hope of replanting another. Yet, as Lahiri suggests, the act of renaming cannot erase ecological memory. Gogol remains haunted by the landscapes and languages of his origin. His return to Calcutta after his father's death resembles a pilgrimage not to a sacred land but to a lost ecology—a sensory archive of childhood monsoons, streets, and food.

Ecofeminist theory helps decode the emotional weight of this return. For Lahiri, identity and ecology are mutually constitutive: to lose one's environment is to lose a part of oneself. The post-ethnic subject must therefore cultivate a portable ecology—rituals, recipes, habits, and attachments that travel across borders. In this way, Lahiri anticipates what David Hollinger calls a "post-ethnic America," one that embraces "voluntary affiliations" over rigid descent (Hollinger 83). Ashima's life after her husband's death exemplifies this: she divides her time between India and the United States, refusing to fix home to a single soil. This is not rootlessness but rhizomatic belonging—a living network of relations extending across continents.

5.4 Feminine Fluidity and Ecological Citizenship

In Lahiri's fiction, ecological consciousness translates into ethical mobility—a willingness to inhabit plurality without domination. The feminine principle here is not the mythic *shakti* of Shiva or the sacrificial mother of Markandaya, but the quietly transformative force of adaptability. By embracing impermanence, Ashima and, eventually, Gogol model what Tina Sikka terms an "inclusive environmentalism" that foregrounds empathy, interdependence, and non-hierarchical coexistence (Sikka 125).

This fluidity also challenges the masculinist logic of control—whether over women, nature, or identity. In a subtle inversion, Lahiri feminizes knowledge and masculine alienation: Ashima learns through relation, while Gogol learns through detachment. Yet it is Ashima's relational learning that endures. Her home in the novel's final pages—half-empty yet warm with remembered gestures—symbolizes an ecology of memory, sustained by care rather than permanence.

The final scenes encapsulate Lahiri's ecofeminist ethos. Preparing to leave her house, Ashima packs spices, saris, and books—tokens of continuity. She walks through empty rooms, each retaining "the smell of their cooking, their laughter, their lives" (Lahiri 281). This domestic residue functions as what philosopher Jane Bennett would call "vibrant matter," the lingering vitality of objects that bear human histories. Lahiri's attention to such material traces affirms that ecology is not only external nature but the interior environment of the lived home.

5.5 Post-ethnic Ecofeminism: A New Paradigm

By the end of *The Namesake*, Lahiri moves beyond the binaries that structured earlier ecofeminism—East/West, nature/culture, female/male—and proposes a model of post-ethnic ecofeminism, where belonging is chosen, layered, and revisable. The immigrant woman becomes not an uprooted exile but a custodian of relational continuity, sustaining life across borders. In this model, ecology itself becomes diasporic: hybrid, adaptive, and interdependent.

Ashima's decision to live "half the year in India, half in America" (Lahiri 282) crystallises this ethic. Her mobility refuses closure; she inhabits multiplicity as home. This is an ecofeminism without fetishised origins, one that aligns with Karen Warren's and Bina Agarwal's pluralist visions and extends them into transnational terrains. In Ashima, Lahiri fuses the maternal ethics of care with the modern ethics of freedom, producing a synthesis that speaks to twenty-first-century ecological citizenship: responsive, relational, and responsible.

Through *The Namesake*, Lahiri demonstrates that the ecological is not only rural or sacred—it is urban, migratory, and affective. The "green feminine" becomes a metaphor for survival through adaptation, not for retreat into essential purity. As Stuart Hall reminds us, identity "lives with and through, not despite, difference" (235). Lahiri's women live precisely in that difference—nurturing, negotiating, and re-rooting themselves in plural ecologies that transcend borders.

VI. TOWARD A LITERATURE OF ECOCRITICAL PLURALISM: RE-ROOTING THE GREEN FEMININE

The evolution of Indian ecofeminism from Kamala Markandaya's agrarian village to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's diasporic myth and Jhumpa Lahiri's urban domesticity reveals a striking trajectory of ecological pluralism. Across this continuum, Indian women writers move from the local to the global, from rooted to routed identities, from essentialist spirituality to critical inclusivity. Each writer redefines what it means for womanhood to be "green"—not merely in its association with fertility or nurture but as an ethical, epistemological, and imaginative stance. The "green feminine," thus, becomes a dynamic principle that re-roots itself in changing landscapes—material, cultural, and psychological.

6.*1 The Journey from Rootedness to Relationality*

Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) establishes the first contour of this journey by grounding ecofeminism in the agrarian ethos of newly independent India. Through Rukmani's bond with the soil, seed, and monsoon, Markandaya articulates a subsistence ethic based on care, reciprocity, and endurance. Yet her narrative also registers the vulnerability of this ethos under industrial capitalism, represented by the tannery. Nature and woman are neither idealized nor victimized but rendered as co-sufferers in the modern project of progress. The ecofeminism of Markandaya is thus proto-critical—it recognizes the necessity of change even as it mourns the erosion of organic interdependence.

Divakaruni, writing four decades later, relocates this interdependence in the mythic transnational. Her Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices* becomes a mediator between worlds—the mystical and the modern, the Indian and the American, the ecological and the erotic. Here, the environment is no longer a field or forest but a network of memories and myths circulating within diasporic commerce. The spices, endowed with sentience, speak to the ecological wisdom displaced by globalisation. Yet Divakaruni's ecofeminism is neither nostalgic nor purely spiritual; it is dialogic, negotiating between indigenous knowledge and multicultural realities. In the relationship between Tilo and Raven, she dramatizes an intercultural solidarity grounded in mutual vulnerability, not purity of tradition.

Lahiri extends this trajectory into the twenty-first century, where ecology is reframed as post-ethnic consciousness. In *The Namesake* (2003), the domestic sphere replaces the sacred grove as the site of ecological engagement. Ashima's acts of cooking, nurturing, and adapting transform the immigrant home into a living ecosystem. Migration becomes an ecological process: one of recalibration, care, and coexistence. Lahiri's ecofeminism is marked by humility—it celebrates continuity through change and portrays belonging as a practice rather than a place.

Across these stages, Indian ecofeminism transitions from rootedness to relationality—from the ethics of soil to the ethics of solidarity. Each writer preserves the green feminine but refashions it to match her historical moment.

6.2 From Symbol to Praxis

This evolution signifies a movement from symbolic ecofeminism, which idealizes women as nature, toward pragmatic ecofeminism, which situates ecology within everyday practices and social structures. The Indian ecofeminist imagination thus matures from sacred reverence to social activism, from metaphysical purity to plural praxis. As Bina Agarwal insists, ecological justice depends not on mythic celebration but on "gendered access to resources" (Agarwal 142). Literature participates in this justice by reshaping perception—by teaching readers to see interdependence where ideology has taught hierarchy.

Markandaya's Rukmani, Divakaruni's Tilo, and Lahiri's Ashima share a pedagogy of care. Each teaches through quiet endurance rather than didactic speech. Their lives embody the ecofeminist principle that knowledge is relational and iterative, emerging from cycles of cultivation, adaptation, and remembrance. In Rukmani's farming, Tilo's healing, and Ashima's homemaking, ecology becomes an epistemology of care, rooted in doing rather than declaring.

Such representations move beyond the myth of woman as static nurturer. They present women as agents of ecological translation—figures who mediate between nature and culture, local and global, past and present. Through them, Indian ecofeminist fiction transforms spirituality into strategy, affection into analysis.

6.3 Ecocritical Pluralism: Theoretical Synthesis

Karen Warren's model of structural pluralism (1987) offers a useful lens for understanding this synthesis. For Warren, ecofeminism must remain open to multiple frameworks—spiritual, material, cultural—without collapsing them into a single moral truth. Indian ecofeminism embodies this pluralism by combining Gandhian ethics, indigenous cosmologies, feminist theory, and postcolonial critique. The result is a hybrid discourse that accommodates both the symbolic resonance of *shakti* and the material realities of labour and migration.

Tina Sikka's notion of "inclusive environmentalism" (2018) complements this pluralism by highlighting how ecological care must engage with social inequities—class, caste, gender, and geography. Lahiri's Ashima exemplifies this inclusivity: she practices sustainability not through rhetoric

but through adaptive continuity—preserving seeds, recipes, and rituals across continents. Similarly, Divakaruni's Tilo enacts ecological empathy by forging cross-cultural bonds with marginalized others, while Markandaya's Rukmani embodies subsistence ethics amid structural scarcity.

Ecofeminism in these texts is thus intersectional and dialogic. It draws equally from Shiva's reverence for nature and Agarwal's critique of essentialism, from Sandilands's democratic ecology and Sikka's materialist standpoint. Together, they form an Indian ecofeminism that is neither purely spiritual nor purely political but relationally critical—a dialogue between feeling and reason, faith and reform, earth and diaspora.

6.4 Literature as Ecological Mediation

Indian women's literature becomes, through this process, a form of ecological mediation. Fiction performs what policy cannot: it makes ecological ethics felt. Through narrative empathy, readers inhabit the perspectives of women who negotiate hunger, displacement, and cultural hybridity. This empathetic engagement constitutes what Arundhati Roy calls the "politics of the small"—the moral force of lived particularities against abstract systems of domination.

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy's ecological imagination fuses with her feminist politics, anticipating the pluralism explored by Lahiri. The Meenachal River's contamination mirrors the corruption of caste hierarchies; Ammu's forbidden love becomes an act of environmental as well as social defiance. Roy's fiction, like that of Markandaya, Divakaruni, and Lahiri, situates ecological renewal in the reclamation of intimacy—between humans and between humanity and the nonhuman.

By drawing connections among these writers, one discerns a collective literary movement: from the representation of ecological crisis to the cultivation of ecological consciousness. These texts are not only mirrors of environmental decay but models of ethical imagination. They train readers to perceive interdependence, vulnerability, and resilience as the true metrics of progress.

6.5 Postcolonial Ecofeminism and the Global Future

The global relevance of Indian ecofeminism lies in its ability to reconcile tradition and transformation. In a world fractured by climate crisis, migration, and technological alienation, the Indian ecofeminist paradigm offers a vocabulary of care-based modernity—a synthesis of spirituality and sustainability, rooted in relational ethics rather than domination.

Under the lens of postcolonial theory, this synthesis also resists the Western monopoly on environmental discourse. By grounding ecological awareness in women's lived realities—agrarian, diasporic, domestic—Indian ecofeminism provincializes global environmentalism. It insists that sustainability is not a technocratic project but a cultural practice of belonging. The reclamation of indigenous and feminine epistemologies becomes, therefore, an act of decolonization.

This decolonial ecofeminism converges with contemporary global movements such as eco-spirituality, slow living, and climate justice, yet it contributes something unique: an emphasis on ethical hybridity. The Indian ecofeminist heroine—whether sowing seeds in a drought-stricken village, invoking spices in exile, or preserving recipes across borders—embodies the possibility of sustainable life amid instability. Her resilience anticipates the planetary citizenship envisioned in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and India's own "Viksit Bharat 2047" vision of equitable growth through ecological balance.

6.6 Re-Rooting the Green Feminine

The metaphor of re-rooting captures the spirit of this evolving ecofeminism. To re-root is not to return but to renew—to plant consciousness in new soil while preserving the memory of the old. Markandaya's soil, Divakaruni's spice, and Lahiri's home are all forms of re-rooting—gestures of continuity in the face of displacement. They testify that ecology is not a static geography but a dynamic relation sustained through care, imagination, and remembrance.

This process of re-rooting also challenges the binary of nature and culture. In Indian ecofeminist fiction, nature is never external to human life; it is the very texture of existence—its food, language, and rhythm. The "green feminine" thus becomes a symbol not of fertility alone but of creative adaptability. She is the farmer and the teacher, the healer and the migrant, the nurturer and the critic. Her strength lies not in purity but in plurality.

VII. CONCLUSION: TOWARD ECOLOGICAL CITIZENSHIP OF THE SELF

In bringing together these writers, the study reveals that Indian ecofeminism has matured into a discourse of ecological citizenship—a moral and imaginative participation in sustaining both environment and equality. It advocates not withdrawal into nature but engagement with community, not worship of the earth but responsibility toward it.

Rukmani, Tilo, and Ashima exemplify this citizenship in different registers: subsistence, healing, and adaptation. Their lives mark the phases of Indian ecofeminism—its rooted beginnings, its diasporic expansion, and its plural culmination. Together, they enact a shift from reverence to

relation, from conservation to creativity, from monologue to dialogue.

Thus, "re-rooting the green feminine" means reclaiming womanhood as a transformative ecological force—responsive to history, open to diversity, and committed to sustainability. Indian ecofeminist literature, in tracing this transformation, offers the global South's most enduring contribution to world environmental thought: the insight that the health of the earth depends upon the ethics of empathy.

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