

**Eco-feminism in Jhaverchand Meghani's 'Charan Kanya'**

Dr. Rashmi Maniar<sup>1</sup>, Ms. Vandana Kaushik<sup>2</sup>, Dr. Hanan Khalid Khan<sup>3</sup>, Ms. Lavanya Paluri<sup>4</sup>, Dr. Priya Raghav<sup>5</sup>

**Abstract**

Literature and poetry are an important part of the Charan identity, literature written primarily during times of peace or shortly after returning from battle, and particularly to record the exploits of fellow warriors. Charani literature is a literary genre in its own right. This caste is primarily responsible for the Dingal language and literature. Jhaverchand Meghani was a prolific Gujarati novelist, critic, and journalist who lived from 1897 to 1947. This paper focuses on his pioneering work in Gujarati folk literature, especially his popular poem "Charan kanya," about a charan girl's valour in saving her calf. Meghani spent many years travelling across Saurashtra, gathering and recording oral culture repositories through folk tales, songs, ballads, and other traditional types. People from different professions, castes, genders, and social classes served as his sources. This paper attempts to analyse the poem "Charan Kanya" through an eco-feminist perspective.

**Key words:** Eco-sophy, Eco-feminism, eco-criticism, Charan girl, valour

Ecological interconnectedness research offers a window into dual and nondual structures for the bio-culturally rooted human identity. This field is part of a broader academic move towards a transdisciplinary, holistic philosophy of science. Before the Covid pandemic, central topics of national debates were related to inequality, war, climate change, environmental destruction, and extinction. We are nearer to the latter topic of near extinction, going by the current mortality rate. There's no doubt that mankind has invited this pandemic upon itself, majorly, due to pan-global industrial capitalism that is being rapidly modernised, interconnected—and fragile.

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<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, SOHSS, Lingayas Vidyapeeth Faridabad, Haryana. rashmimaniar@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, SOHSS, Lingayas Vidyapeeth Faridabad, Haryana. vandanakaushik@lingayasvidyapeeth.edu.in

<sup>3</sup>Assistant Professor, SOHSS, Lingayas Vidyapeeth Faridabad, Haryana.  
hanankhalidkhan@lingayasvidyapeeth.edu.in

<sup>4</sup>Assistant Professor, SOE, Lingayas Vidyapeeth Faridabad, Haryana. Lavanya.magatapalli@gmail.com

<sup>5</sup>Associate Professor, SOHSS, Lingayas Vidyapeeth Faridabad, Haryana. priyaraghav@lingayasvidyapeeth.edu.in

Continuity and disparity are the epitomes of two indirectly divergent deep ecology perspectives. Despite the fact that they both talk of human–nature union through ecological selfhood, they take different paths to the same source, with mixed results. According to Naess and Rothenberg (1989), eco-sophical self-realisation is closely related to identification with the atman, described as 'self' in the Bhagawad Gita.

The other point is summed up by John Seed's well-known exclamation (cited in Merchant 2005: 111):

I am rainforest... You destroy me so carelessly, tearing down so many of my trees for a few planks... You cause my thick layer of precious topsoil to wash away, destroying the coral reefs that fringe me... Your screaming machines tear through my trunks, rip my flesh, reducing me to sawdust and furniture.

This verse, through the personification of a rainforest, describes human existence as coinciding with the Earth, driving home the brutal act of denudation by using the first person about something that is usually spoken in the third person. Trees, planks, topsoil, reefs, machines, flesh, sawdust, and furniture are all descriptors that refer to material part of nature. The transformation of a living tree into non-living furniture is described in a very macabre language. In the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna synchronises with universal dharma by allowing Krishna to direct his chariot of body, mind, and senses, and by enacting his own dharma as warrior. In theory, these two systems of deep ecology and Hindu philosophy seem to be identical.

When Seed says that the rainforest is being destroyed, it does not mean that nature or Gaia as a whole is being destroyed; however, it could be interpreted as a metaphor for that outcome. The debate invokes ideologies such as the death of nature alongside the sacred feminine, and God's Greening (Merchant 1989; Shelldrake 1994; Roszak et al. 1995). As indicated by Seed, the emergence of the "screaming machine" defines a weakening larger Self through the loss or dissolution of many other smaller selves.

According to a post-colonial ecofeminist interpretation of our history, the entire material world in general was meant for the consumption of the white man, the industrial capitalist system who exploited, raped and denuded the weaker countries they dominated. The vibrant ecosystems of the oppressed nations became the "raw materials" for the "machine" that drove modernity, the global west feminised and demonised the global east. This can be compared to the tyranny of the male, the industrialised West of subjugation of the feminine East, replete with her rich cultural heritage and biodiversity.

In 1974, Françoise d' Eaubonne, a feminist from France, coined the word "ecofeminism." Subjugation and inequality of women, people of colour, and the poor, she claims, was inseparably related to environmental degradation, as, both resulted from patriarchal domination. Ecofeminist ideals are incorporated into today's climate change movement by those who consciously campaign for sustainable change for environment and society.

The fundamental tenets of ecofeminism are that oppression of the oppressed communities and oppression of nature are caused by the same thing. Our culture of exploitation culture to be replaced with a caring culture. All forms of oppression are mistaken they're all interconnected. For unbiased reform, it's crucial to understand these links. It becomes imperative to admire the intrinsic value of everything in nature and develop deep respect for the natural, cultivate biocentrism, rather an anthropocentric approach to the natural world. Thus, the aim of ecofeminism is to empower the downtrodden and to restore the health of the planet.

Ecofeminists promote ancient rituals based on the Mother Goddess, the moon, animals, and the female reproductive system in order to honour the bond between women and nature. An evolving patriarchal culture of male gods to whom female deities were subservient dethroned this prehistoric

period, which was focused on goddess worship. The Scientific Revolution of the 17th century further degraded nature by replacing the nurturing earth with the "metaphor of a computer to be regulated and repaired from the outside...The earth is to be ruled by male created and controlled technology, research, and industry" (Merchant 1992, p. 191).

It is during this time that a poem like 'Charan Kanya' warms the inner cockles of the heart when the poet, Jhaverchand Meghani, glorifies the valour of a young girl of the Charan community and also sings about the pristine beauty of the forests of Gir and its presiding residents, its majestic lions. The poet waxes eloquent about the protective, nurturing nature of women towards their cows, calves, towards the weaker sections and how the motherly instinct of a young girl of the 'charan' community comes to the fore and stands its stead in front of danger to the self before a ferocious lion. Without the use of machines, guns, fire or any other weapons the feminine oppressed protects those under her protection and drives away the savage male oppressor. She successfully subjugates him without the use of any violence.

Zaverchand Meghani was born in the Surendranagar district of Gujarat, in the Chotila town. His father, Kalidas, was a police officer who was frequently transferred, so Zaverchand spent the majority of his childhood in Rajkot. Lalchand and Prabhashankar were his two younger siblings. At the age of 24, he married Damyanti, and after her death, he married Chitradevi, at the age of 36. He had nine children. His college friends nicknamed him *Raja Janak* because of his plain and simple lifestyle. His everyday wardrobe consisted of a white long coat, a dhoti that reached far below the knees, and a turban tied around his head. His matriculation was completed in 1912, and his B.A. was completed in 1917. He went to work for Jivanlal Ltd, an aluminium company in Kolkatta, for nearly three years, during which time he travelled to England. He returned to Bagasra in 1921 after leaving this job. In 1922 he married Damyantiben, in Jetpur. From his youth, Zaverchand Meghani was immersed in Gujarati literature. His stay in Kolkatta introduced him to Bengali literature.

Meghani, who referred to himself as "a boy of the Saurashtra mountains," spent nine to ten years collecting and recording oral culture storehouses through folk tales, songs, ballads, and other types of traditional memory. He recorded them in bits and pieces as he came across them in a wide range of linguistic regional inflections, including Sorathi, Kutchi, and dozens of other dialects, all of which were interwoven with his own knowledge of chaste or shisht scholarly Gujarati. He worked as a journalist, publisher, and writer at the same time, writing for the newly founded journal 'Saurashtra' on some days and travelling and collecting folktales on others. His notes were then freely edited, expanded, and rewritten into the final form of the book 'Saurashtra ni Rasdhar'. Details of the setting, the time of the incident, and dialogue were also inserted into the story to give it the feel of an oral narrative in writing (Doshi 220).

His 'Kurbani ni Kathao,' was the first book to be published in book form followed by 'Saurashtra Ni Rasdhar'. In addition, he began translating Bengali works. He was given the title of 'Raashtreya Shaayar' by Mahatma Gandhi at the spur of the moment (National Poet). He also won several literary awards, including the Ranjitram Suvarna Chandrak and the Mahida Parritoshik. More than 100 books were written by him. However, he died of a major heart attack at his Botad home on March 9, 1947, at the age of 50.

Meghani's works are dominated by the term "Shaurya rasa" (valour). His poems are energising, inspiring, and full of courage. Charan Kanya is a masterpiece that prominently features Shaurya Rasa. It tells the story of Heerbai, a 14-year-old girl from Gujarat's Charan tribe. Raw grit is still

a distinguishing characteristic of many Gujarati tribes, including the Charan. They used to live in the Girnar foothills, which were home to ferocious Lions. The Charan community has great poets, they not only respect women but go a step further, and deify their women. Charan history is replete with how the Rajputs, fierce warriors, who could not be daunted by a naked double-edged sword, were weary of a Charan's sharp tongue which could make or break a man. The community worships cows, they protect their cattle, consider them to be family members. Fearless and proudly independent, the Charan's are praised for their bravery.

Meghani was present watching the struggle between the male and female, between the man and the beast, between the oppressor and the oppressed. He was so taken aback that he is said to be speechless. He uses words to paint an image of what he saw. Meghani's words convey emotion, anger, grit, and bravery.

*Lion roars!*

*The King of the Jungle roars! (lines 1-2)*

The structure of the poem is such that it paints a vivid picture of the ferocious fight between the girl and the lion and the unexpected result of the girl driving the beast away. Written in free verse, the poem is replete with repetition and imagery, the poet's ample use of anaphora makes the poem a feast for the mind and soul. This is the reason that the poem is enjoyed and narrated or sung in many a 'Dayra' or social gathering, to this day.

The Lion's ferocity is discussed in the first half of the poem, including his spine-chilling roar, fire flaming eyes, and the fear he instils in the hearts of people and animals alike. He himself was death personified. The "angan" or the courtyard of the house where Heerbai lived is invaded by such a terrifying lion who grabbed one of the tethered calves. Cows and calves have hold a special place in the hearts and minds of Hindus of all communities and creed since the beginning of time. The level of affection and respect is comparable to, if not greater than, that which dog owners have for their pets. Cows are more likely than other species to reciprocate human feelings, not only by providing milk and ghee, but also by providing bulls to tend the farms.

*Roars in the babul tree*

*Roars in the hills*

*Roars in the fields of cannabis*

.....

*Roars in the river cliffs*

*Roar in the gems of the hills.....(lines 10-16)(rough, self translation)*

The lion is free to roam about in the hills and valleys, jungles and babul thickets of the Gir in Gujarat. Even the leaves start trembling at the lion's roar.

*Start trembling!*

...

*Birds tremble at midnight*

*Leaves tremble on trees...(lines 17-18) )(rough, self translation)*

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While having lions as neighbours isn't exactly a fantasy, it does have a lion-like quality to it. On Heerbai, they certainly did. As a result, when the lion dares to reach her property and scoops up her calf, the young Heerbai, enraged and unfazed, chases the lion with only a stick.

It's no surprise that when Heerbai saw her calf being carried away, she lost her temper. She ran towards the Lion, swinging a stick in her hand, without flinching or hesitation— how dare he strike her calf, how dare he approach her beloved cat. She's not going to let the calf die until she's confident in her own skin. She roars, burns, and leaps in front of the Lion like Durga. The Lion loses his vigour due to her terrifying spirit and courageous determination. He reverses his course and walks forward, leaving the calf behind.

*...Lioness, your brave ran away!*

*Coward, left the battlefield... (lines 24-25) (rough, self translation)*

The poet beautifully, melodiously tells the story of how the weak can overpower the brave and ferocious and chase him away with a mite of a stick and a mighty courage. The resolve of the feminine nature to protect her young calf from becoming the meal of a hungry male beast embodies the tenets of ecofeminism.

The society in general, is a social structure dominated by men, their women are marginalised. The selected poem demonstrates the poet's love for the inherent worth of everything in nature as well as appreciation for the natural environment, demonstrating a biocentrism rather than anthropocentric approach to the natural world. There has always been a plethora of descriptions of nature and her residents. Yet, as a poet, Meghani transforms the mundane into the divine. The corpus of his literary work is made up of ordinary incidents in his personal wanderings in search of folk tales and poetry. He has a remarkable ability to transform the personal into the radical using a subjective tone.

When one examines the numerous protest movements, it is shown that ecofeminists' claim that women have a special relationship with nature is false. Women's interactions with nature and responses to environmental degradation needs to be examined and contextualised within the material reality of gender, caste, and race-based labour, property, and power divisions. Women are both victims and agents of environmental degradation. The loss of indigenous information structures and subsistence strategies, which poor, rural women depend on, reflects the negative class-gender impact of these processes. But, the poem under study refutes all of the above-mentioned claims of ecofeminists. Women do have a special relationship with nature, in fact this poem stands up for the fact that a woman is capable of fighting the fiercest of beasts, she can fight the male dominance, can overturn the patriarchal society upside down on its toes and fight for what is hers, if she decides to do so.

The poem is a supreme ode to women's influence. A poem that needs to be read in order to be felt and lived. It is indeed a poem whose each line screams the doctrines of ecofeminism.

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