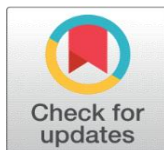
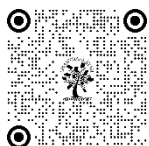


THE INTERSECTION OF ECO-FEMINISM AND MARGINALIZED FANTASY CHARACTER OPAL: EXPLORING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND GENDER IN ADITI AND THE THAMES DRAGON BY SUNITI NAMJOSHI

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ABSTRACT

Eco-feminism is combination of feminism and ecology with the connection of patriarchal domination, exploitation and fear. The term was coined by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book, *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974). This paper explores the intersection of ecofeminism and marginalized fantasy characters through the lens of Aditi and the Thames Dragon, a fantasy narrative that integrates environmental justice with gendered experiences. Using eco-feminist theory as a framework, this research investigates how Opal, a marginalized female character, engages with both environmental and social justice themes in a fantastical world. The paper argues that Aditi and the Thames Dragon not only presents a story of environmental conflict but also utilizes marginalized characters to challenge patriarchal and ecological domination. By examining the interplay between Opal's journey and eco-feminist principles, this study uncovers the transformative potential of marginalized fantasy characters in advocating for environmental sustainability, gender equality and social awareness.

Keywords: Eco-Feminism, Marginalization, Fantasy, Transformation, Environmental Sustainability



1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary fantasy literature, marginalized characters often occupy spaces that challenge societal norms, reflecting real-world struggles of discrimination, oppression, and environmental degradation. The genre of fantasy provides an ideal platform to explore complex social issues, including environmental justice and gender inequality in the fantasy fiction. Aditi and the Thames Dragon serves as a noteworthy example of how these themes are woven together, featuring the protagonist Aditi who navigates both ecological destruction and gender-based marginalization.

Eco-feminism, a critical theory that connects environmental degradation with gender oppression, provides a framework for understanding the interconnectedness of social, environmental, and political issues. For ages, we are successful in holding the title 'most successful species' because unlike animals we too have acquired powers to tame our environment according to our needs. For early humans nature was a supreme and frightening force, which could bring plagues, storms and droughts if it is disturbed. Nowadays, nature is no longer a monster omen or an instrument of the fury of god because we have acquired power to control it. Eco-feminism is a movement which has emerged in mid 1970's with the second-wave feminism and the green movement which believes that the exploitation and degradation of the

natural world and oppression of women are intermingled. According to Mary Mellor, in the introduction to "Feminism & Ecology", defines ecofeminism as follows:

Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements, while at the same time offering a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women.(1997)

Eco-feminism believes that patriarchal society builds on four interlocking pillars; sexism, racism, class exploitation and environmental destruction. It also examines the conjunction of feminist theory and deep ecology - an understanding of the place of humans and other living system within the earth system. It establishes women and nature's interconnection: the domination, exploitation, and posits that both oppression of women and nature are characteristic of patriarchal thinking. It is explained in many ways such as language, literature, psychology, mass-media etc.

This research paper aims to explore how eco-feminism can illuminate the role of marginalized fantasy characters in advocating for environmental justice and gender equality. This focused paper on Aditi and Thames Dragon the second book in the series Aditi and her Friends(1986-2008),deals with a variety of themes such as fighting for the animal and women rights, identity of a woman, nature's fury, friendlessness, guidance for the society which would help the readers to understand the narrative through the visuals. Namjoshi's Aditi stories are original tales written for children. She dedicates these tales to her niece, Aditi and makes her the protagonist. S.Namjoshi has created these tales for her own niece Aditi, who lives in Devon, U.k This adventurous fairy tale inherent elements to increase the environmental consciousness of children tries to highlight the relationship of women with their surrounding ecology - land, vegetations, and the world of other living beings. It shows that how children are taking more interest to save the environment and doing rescue operations to save the animal habitats. "Roshan and Rohit looked fearfully at the Thames. The water level was higher at some places the river had overflowed its banks" (ATD,10).In the case of Aditi and the Thames Dragon, the story of opal, a river dragon interacts with the dragon in a fanciful manner and rescues her from the depths of polluted river Thames .This interaction with the mythical Thames dragon opal offers an opportunity to study the thought process of society and gender-based oppression on marginalized identities.

Eco-feminism as a theoretical framework examines the ways in which environmental destruction and gender oppression are interconnected. For instance the pollution in river Thames and suppression of river habitants especially the breathlessness of river dragon opal highlights the gender oppression."Something is making the River Dragon angrier and angrier when she lashes her tail the river overflows. What we are really afraid of is that one of these days the River Dragon will wake up properly and then the river will really boil over and destroy all our houses and our school and drown this area in river water"(ATD,17). It argues that the exploitation of women and nature share common roots in patriarchal ideologies, both of which are often devalued and dominated for the benefit of a hierarchical, capitalist system as the river dragon opal is suffering because of the polluted river Thames. Eco-feminism posits that women, particularly those from marginalized communities, have an intimate connection to the earth and its ecosystems. As such, eco-feminism calls for an integrated approach to environmental justice, recognizing the intersections of gender, race, class, and ecology. Suniti criticizes human beings for destroying animal habitats especially focusing on the survival of the River Dragon, Opal. Opal a symbol of female society fighting for her rights. The River Dragon says in chapter five that, "I threaten no one...I was in pain...The river has been poisoned."The voice becoming weaker and weaker.(ATD,33)

In the context of Aditi Adventurs, a fantasy literature, eco-feminism provides a lens through which to analyze the relationships between marginalized characters and the natural world. Opal is representing the female world and polluted river is representing the natural world which highlights the metaphor for the exploitation and suppression of marginalized communities. By engaging with these issues, marginalized fantasy characters like one-eyed monkey, sirl the ant,ele the elephant and opal the fire dragon becomes agents of resistance and change, capable of challenging both gender norms and environmental degradation. Susan Baker in her book The Principles and Practice of Ecofeminism, a review,. defines eco-feminism that:

Ecofeminism refers to a diverse range of women's environmental activity. It is also a critique of the dominant philosophical and cultural attitudes that underline Western society's approach to nature and the natural world. It arose from what had hitherto been two different social movements: the environmental movement and the women 's movement and, within the latter, it draws especially upon the women 's peace and spirituality movements. (2)

Aditi and the Thames Dragon follow the story of Opal a river dragon who lives along the banks of river Thames in a fictional version of London. Opal's identity is shaped as a mythical character but representing the contemporary cultural

heritage of England's gender, and socio-economic status. It has an autobiographical element too because the diasporic writer S.Namjoshi herself lives in England. The river, once a thriving ecosystem, has been plagued by pollution and environmental neglect, reflecting the broader societal and ecological crises that Opal faces. In *Aditi and the Thames Dragon* Suniti has worked in the framework of postcolonial discourse. She has used a comparative approach in selecting subjects such as study of east and west culture, concept of gender rights and ecofeminism in producing a neo-textual universe in this book. Comparative study of cross-cultural identities is central part in Namjoshi's work. Suniti attempts to do so through her fables and fairy tales, as they are imaginative and are woven around a world of fantasy. Environmental concern is one of the most serious issues confronting us in the present times as we could see the covid 19 pandemic in the world.

In the story, Aditi befriends the Thames Dragon, a mythical creature that represents the river's spirit and the natural world's power. The dragon, once a protector of the river's health, has been weakened by human actions and environmental harm. It shows how the young adults are so awoken and how the society is suppressing woman in the image of Opal and The River Thames. They discover after investigation, that it is not the cult but the agony of the dragon at the root of the problem. "Things, What Things? Things that people have thrown into it over the years".(ATD,49). Suniti has constructed an 'alternative universe' for woman in her textuality. "Stay here and keep up her spirits. I'll run to the shed and fetch the pot of sandalwood ointment so that we can make her smaller and rescue her.(ATD,34).

This novella not only deals with the amusement of the children but also aims to foster social and cultural values and a deep awareness of the society and the environment they live in. In the chapter Eight Opal says, "Well, we'll show them that River Dragons exist, but that if they keep throwing rubbish into the water, they won't exist for much longer"(ATD,52). Aditi's quest to heal the dragon and restore the river's vitality symbolizes her struggle to reclaim her own agency in a world that seeks to silence and marginalize her. The story intertwines Aditi's personal journey with her responsibility as a caretaker of the land, challenging patriarchal structures that limit her potential. As she navigates her quest, Aditi must confront the intersecting forces of gender, environmental destruction, and cultural oppression.

In *Aditi and the Thames Dragon*, the environment and gender intersect in a powerful narrative that highlights the exploitation of both women and the earth. Through Aditi's journey, the story illustrates how marginalized identities—particularly those of women of color—are often relegated to the margins of both social and environmental concerns. Opal's marginalized status is the central to the story. As the opal says in chapter three that, "The river wasn't always the way it is now," she added softly. "There was a time when the water was sparkling and clear. But what is it exactly that has poisoned the river?" Goldie asked "Things." "What Things?... Things that people have thrown into it over the years."(ATD, 49)

The patriarchal system in the story is represented by the societal figures that control the means of production, land, and resources. These people often dismiss the importance of nature and the environment, furthering the degradation of the Thames River. In contrast, Aditi and her friends connection to the river and the dragon underscores a feminine, nurturing relationship to nature, suggesting that a more holistic and balanced worldview could restore both social and environmental health. The Thames river itself plays a crucial role in the eco-feminist narrative of the story. As a once-thriving ecosystem, the river's deterioration symbolizes the exploitation of both the earth and marginalized communities. The pollution of the river mirrors the social pollution created by patriarchy, where the exploitation of nature is paralleled by the exploitation of women and the disenfranchised. The Thames Dragon, a mythical guardian of the river's health, serves as a symbol of nature's spirit and the need to protect it. The dragon's weakening is a metaphor for the erosion of feminine power and the silencing of marginalized voices. As Aditi seeks to heal the dragon, she also attempts to heal the river, demonstrating the intimate connection between environmental restoration and the empowerment of marginalized individuals, particularly women.

Eco-feminist framework emphasizes that environmental justice is inextricably linked to gender equality. In *Aditi and the Thames Dragon*, the protagonist's journey to restore the river and its mythical protector is also a process of self-discovery and empowerment. Aditi learns to confront the patriarchal forces that seek to control both her and the natural world, realizing that her ability to heal the river is directly tied to her ability to assert her own autonomy and strength. By positioning Aditi as the protagonist who confronts both environmental and gender-based oppression, the story critiques the societal structures that contribute to both ecological destruction and gender inequality. Aditi's journey is not only one of environmental restoration but also reclamation of voice, agency, and power.

Aditi and the Thames Dragon serves as a compelling example of how marginalized fantasy characters can embody eco-feminist principles, blending environmental justice and gender equality within a fantastical narrative. The story

highlights the profound connections between the exploitation of nature and the marginalization of women, particularly those from disenfranchised communities. By exploring Aditi and her friend's relationship with the Thames River and its mythical guardian, the story critiques patriarchal and capitalist systems that perpetuate both environmental and gender-based oppression.

Apart from marginalized human beings, (as the other writers) she includes other oppressed subjects like animals, natural resources, and natural norms. The talking animals represent the intertextuality of Namjoshi's works. Some refer to Aesop's Fable while others are inspired by the Panchtantra. The confluence of Christianity and Hinduism can also be seen. Monkeyji in conception relates to Hanuman, the monkey-deity of The Ramayana. Beautiful Ele is inspired by Ganesha, the half human, half- elephant Hindu god. The Blue Donkey relates to the Bible where it is the only animal who speaks. It was also the chosen animal of Christ to ride into Jerusalem. The Romantic poet William Wordsworth makes a strong criticism of developing materialism at the cost of Nature in his oft quoted sonnet *The World is too Much With Us*. Imbued from tip to toe with Rousseau's philosophy Wordsworth snipes at the growing lust for materialistic craze among modern men urges them to return to nature. Because he believes that Nature always return to man what it receives from him. Whatever it may be love, respect faith etc. The emotion would be exchanged with similar attributes but in a greater degree.

The idea is to provide the identity to the unprivileged animals and give a chance to the subaltern and elevate them. The tale also attempts to explore the psyche of the children in contemporary modern world. While providing amusement to children, the tales establish respect and affinity with creatures other than the Anglo-Saxon heterosexual male. They breakdown stereotypes, boundaries and categories and challenge the stringency of norms applied to society by patriarchy. The readers are taken around the world to peep into multiple cultural traditions and the type of marginalization prevailing there. However, the usual fairy tale are meant to amuse, but Aditi stories are highly philosophical which not only deal with children's issues but also consider feminist aspects in general and act as a guide to train them to defy and distort the biased patriarchal societal norms.

In analyzing Aditi and the Thames Dragon through an ecofeminist lens, this paper demonstrates how marginalized characters in fantasy literature can act as agents of resistance and transformation, advocating for both ecological sustainability and gender equity. The healing of the river and the empowerment of Aditi are intertwined, suggesting that the restoration of the earth is inextricably linked to the liberation of marginalized individuals. Through this intersection, the narrative offers a vision of hope and transformation, where the empowerment of women and the healing of the environment are not only possible but essential for a just and sustainable future.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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