

# AN ECO-FEMINIST UNDERSTANDING OF THE PERSPECTIVES OF THE OPPRESSED: A STUDY OF 'RATHRIMAZHA'

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**Abstract:** The idea of Ecofeminism is a worldwide phenomenon that identifies women and nature as the oppressed. Language like English has seen multiple works related to ecofeminism and has, over the course of time, been subjected to various studies. Sugathakumari is one of the most noted writers and activists in Malayalam. One of the most famous and critically acclaimed work of hers would be the poem 'Rathrimazha' (Night Rain) which won the Kendra Sahitya Academy Award in 1978. 'Rathrimazha' or Night Rain is a poem that talks about the loneliness, dejection and despondency of a woman through the image of a rain. Though overtly talking about rain, the poet accentuates the plight of oppressed women and their acceptance of this oppression which becomes quite problematic. Rather merely presenting the poem as the feelings of two oppressed female identities, the poet enables her readers to recognize oppression in all forms, even towards nature. Sugathakumari's poetry brings to the larger Malayali audience the fluid nature of Malayalam language.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Mankind, Eco-Feminism.

**Introduction:** Any form of written word succeeds when it not only touches the hearts of its readers, but also, presents a question against the imbalances of the society. Sugathakumari has always been such an author in Malayalam literature who gave importance for issues faced by women and nature. One can even say that she introduced Eco-feminism to the Malayali audience through her poetry and other works. *Rathrimazha* (Night Rain) is a poem of hers that celebrates the amalgamation of poetry and ideology. Though a poem that shares the feelings of two oppressed women prima facie, the deeper we look into it we see the unravelling ideas of oppression, similarity between women and nature etc. Western critiques have identified the branch of feminism that identifies women and nature as the victim of oppression as Eco-feminism but the question of whether it is known by all excluding academicians is relevant, particularly when ideas like these take a long time for dissemination among common people. Sugathakumari, skilfully weaves a large ideology like Eco-feminism into the craft of poetry, frees it from any kind of form and meter and presents it to the reading community of Malayalis, so that anyone can understand the gist of the same.

**Rathrimazha as The Downpour of Women's Feelings:** The speaker of the poem is hospitalized and during the night she looks out of the window to find out the rain is quite similar like her. Sugathakumari, opens the poem by comparing night rain to 'some young madwoman, weeping,

laughing and whimpering'. This comparison towards a woman can be seen throughout the poem, especially in metaphors like 'pensive daughter of the dusky dark'. The speaker soon remembers that the rain had there been with her during all her life- comforted her when she was sick, witnessed her love and grief. Towards the end the speaker realises the rains suppressed rage, sobbing and forced smiles as her own- that she herself is the night rain.

The use of imagery to convey the suppression and the mental agony that women faces are abundant in the poem. The opening lines, which compares woman to a mad woman who laughs, weeps and whimpers can be understood as a portrayal of the myriad emotions that women usually suppress in them. The moment a woman expresses them overtly; she becomes a 'mad woman'. In another image, rain or woman is described to be gliding slowly like a long wail, extending her cold fingers and touching the poet. Women being compared to tears are universal and up to an extent, accepted by women of the past generations. Sugathakumari, tries to break this conventional notion by transforming the rain (who already is weak as she is a 'wail') into a brave and compassionate being who helps her friend, like the true nature of women. But in the end, the speaker identifies that though they are different in a lot of things, Night rain and herself are alike. This shows that women are alike everywhere- their rage is always suppressed, them having to wait for the night to be all alone to cry, and in the morning forcing a smile. Judith Butler, a renowned feminist, talks about the two identities that women have to encounter. One being the socially desired and the other what they really are. Here, the speaker is the socially desired character of women and Night rain, becomes the actual identity of women who expresses her emotions. Simone De Beauvoir, an exponent of the feminist movement, argues that women themselves accepted the stereotypes set by man and thus became instruments of their own oppression (Nayar 88). Here, the rain signifies this aspect of women- the all sacrificing woman, and the only difference is that the poet brings to us the other side of these women which we have never seen. The crying and the rage of these women are only seen at night, when nobody is present, and by another woman- thus making them realise their oppression.

**Women and Nature- The Oppressed:** The idea behind the genre of eco-feminism is the realization that women and nature are significantly similar in multiple ways- be it in the reproductive way or in being subjects to the oppression of patriarchy/ humanity. For a long time, and even in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, women have been 'other'ed by the patriarchy and have colonised their thoughts. Through this elaborate process, women have always felt as if they were inferior to men and that the oppression- both physical and mental were natural. *Ecriture Feminine*, works predominantly to upset the notions of language, form which are inherently patriarchal by essentially creating a language that is fluid, non-linear and mystic in nature (Nayar, 98). In *Rathrimazha*, Sugathakumari explores a new style of writing, which is fluid in nature. This is expressed not only through the imagery of rain but also through her stanza structure, which is not linear.

Nature, or the ecology that we humans belong to, on the other hand, faces a similar oppression that has been long considered or constructed as 'natural'. The depletion and exploitation of forest resources and usage of items that are harmful for the environment has been rationalized as something done for survival while it's clearly a practice of assertion of human superiority that has been assumed by humanity. Nature, like women are thought be silent and as something that can be

consumed. Their identity and feelings are not given any worth and are often overlooked. Even in the current scenario where actions have been taken against the violation of environment and women, we see that passive actions like ideological superiority is maintained by Patriarchy/humanity.

'*Rathrimazha*' discusses the complex relationship between nature and women as victims of exploitation. It explores the tolerant nature of both women and our eco system as they passively accept the grief and distress of sufferings. The poem, being written in 1978, does not overtly question patriarchy but tries to bring in the realization that women should recognize their oppression and sufferings and react against it.

Sugathakumari, skilfully weaves another idea in the poem- that of giving the readers a rough image of the similarity between the two oppressors- patriarchy and humanity. Both have been, in different phases, placed in the privileged context of the history (or in other words, have acquired the privileged position). Being on top of the hierarchy, they exercise their self-given power on the others- women, nature etc. It is also interesting to note that over a long period of time, the representation when it came to humanity was always given to men. Women and nature were always presented as things that were meant to be marvelled by the patriarchy and humanity- thus stripping them off from their voice.

Filled with intense and exquisite imagery, the poem reflects a quest for woman's identity and integration, through nature. Night rain symbolises womanhood, who has been suppressed that she rains/cries at night. This aspect of the poem extends largely to the feminist theory that it becomes a fine example for the same. The tone of the poem is in a way of realization of one woman towards another woman. To begin with, this tone sets the basic ideology of feminism- that only women can understand other women even in their absence of voice.

**Sugathakumari and Eco-Feminist Writing:** Dr. Prathibha. V, in her essay *Eco Feminism: An overview*, traces the word eco feminism back to Francoise D'Eubonne and her book *Feminism or Death?* published in 1974 (13). But the modern idea of eco feminism was mostly elaborated to us for the first time by Reuther. According to Reuther, women must understand the fact that there is no liberation for them (from the existing societal shackles) and no solution to any environmental issue as we live in a society whose fundamental model of relationship continue to be one of domination. The author of the essay also identifies the dramatic expansion of eco feminism during 1980s and this gives an insight to the issues discussed during that decade all over the world, resulting in a poem in a language like Malayalam, proving itself being ahead of times.

Suja T. V, in her study on the writings of Sugathakumari as reflective of Eco-feminism, identifies the poet's conscious efforts in bringing out the sensitive aspects of similarity in both woman and nature and not to turn it into a vulnerable feature. (20). *Rathrimazha*, true this statement, brings out the emotins of two unhappy female identities- women and nature (the poet assumes the gender of nature to be female, just as the eco feminists). However, Sugathakumari also makes it a point to not portray at any point the women as weak.

Dr. S. Saradakkutty, explains Sugathakumari's poetry as the ideal example of eco feminism. She says "The eco-feminist perspective that only by the protection of woman and nature, who share similar experiences of victimization due to pollution and exploitation, can peace and prosperity reign in the society, can be found in the poems and activism of Sugathakumari" (Saradakkutty 113). Even during the initial stages of ecofeminism, Sugathakumari identifies who the oppressed are gives them a voice through her works.

When one reads Rathrimazha closely, it is recognised that what the poet tries to do is not merely voicing the voiceless, but brings them to a position where they realize their oppression. Recognition, according to Sugathakumari, is one of the primary milestones in the fight against Patriarchy or Mankind. The idea of placing patriarchy and mankind on the same line is to make her audience identify the oppressing forces that the world has. For this, the author consciously breaks away from the rigid language of her times set by the larger patriarchal society. Instead, she uses a fluid language in the poem and a nonlinear structure, free from any format of the traditional poetry, or considering the time she wrote her Rathrimazha- she deconstructed the contemporary poetry of her times.

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