



Women as Custodians of Ecological Knowledge: An Ecofeminist Perspective on Kavery Nambisan's Selected Novels

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Abstract

Ecofeminism offers a critical framework for examining the interconnected relationships between the exploitation of nature and the marginalization of women. Within this framework, ecological knowledge becomes an important area of inquiry, particularly when it is preserved through everyday practices, cultural traditions, agricultural labour, and community relationships. Kavery Nambisan's fiction provides opportunities to explore the relationship between gender, environment, and social transformation in contemporary Indian society. This paper examines the representation of women as custodians of ecological knowledge in selected novels, namely *The Scent of Pepper*, *The Hills of Angheri*, and *A Town Like Ours*. It focuses on women's relationships with land, natural resources, traditional practices, and environmental responsibility. Drawing upon the theoretical perspectives of Vandana Shiva, Karen J. Warren, and Val Plumwood, the study investigates how ecological knowledge is connected to gendered experiences and social structures. The paper argues that women's environmental relationships can be understood not merely as expressions of care but also as forms of practical knowledge, agency, and cultural continuity. Through an ecofeminist reading, Nambisan's fiction invites reconsideration of the value of local knowledge and the need to recognize women's contributions to ecological sustainability.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Ecological Knowledge, Women and Nature, Environmental Sustainability, Gender Studies

Introduction

The relationship between women and nature has occupied an important position in feminist environmental discourse. Throughout history, women have frequently participated in agricultural activities, food production, natural resource management, and traditional healing practices. Their everyday experiences have enabled them to develop knowledge of the ecological conditions surrounding their communities. However, these contributions have often remained unrecognized within dominant systems of knowledge and development.

Ecofeminism emerged as a critical perspective that examines the interconnected forms of domination experienced by women and nature. The term was introduced by French writer Françoise

d'Eaubonne in *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* 1974, where she connected ecological destruction with patriarchal structures. Later scholars, including Vandana Shiva, Karen J. Warren, and Val Plumwood, developed diverse approaches to understanding the relationship between gender, environmental exploitation, and systems of power.

In Indian literary contexts, ecofeminist criticism becomes particularly relevant because questions of land, agriculture, traditional knowledge, and community survival are closely connected with social and cultural practices. Women's relationships with their surroundings cannot be understood exclusively through symbolic associations with nature. They must also be examined through their labour, practical knowledge, social responsibilities, and participation in environmental decision-making.

Kavery Nambisan, an Indian English novelist and physician, explores human relationships, social structures, cultural practices, and changing environments in her fiction. Her novels frequently engage with the experiences of women within complex social worlds. *The Scent of Pepper*, in particular, presents the changing ecological and cultural landscape of Kodagu through the experiences of Nanji and her family across generations. Recent scholarship has examined the novel through bioregionalism and the concept of living-in-place, emphasizing indigenous ecological practices, biodiversity, and the relationship between community and landscape De.

This paper examines women's ecological knowledge as a specific dimension of ecofeminist literary analysis. It investigates how female characters participate in the preservation of environmental knowledge, how their experiences are connected to local ecosystems, and how their knowledge interacts with patriarchal and developmental structures. The study focuses on three selected novels: *The Scent of Pepper*, *The Hills of Angheri*, and *A Town Like Ours*. Through these texts, it explores the relationship between women, ecological awareness, cultural continuity, and environmental responsibility.

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on Kavery Nambisan's fiction has examined her novels from various perspectives, including gender, feminism, identity, environmental concerns, and the relationship between human communities and nature. Studies of *The Hills of Angheri* have discussed the representation of women and environmental concerns from an ecofeminist perspective, while scholarship on *The Scent of Pepper* has explored its engagement with place, biodiversity, traditional practices, and ecological relationships. *A Town Like Ours* has also received critical attention for its treatment of social and environmental issues. These studies establish the relevance of ecological and gender-based approaches to Nambisan's fiction. However, the present study narrows its focus to the specific dimension of women as custodians of ecological knowledge, examining how women's practical experiences, cultural practices, relationships with land, and environmental awareness contribute to the preservation and transmission of ecological knowledge. Thus, rather than treating women merely as victims of environmental degradation, the study considers them as active participants in maintaining ecological and cultural continuity.



Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative textual analysis as its primary methodology and uses an ecofeminist theoretical framework to examine Kavery Nambisan's selected novels, namely *The Scent of Pepper*, *The Hills of Angheri*, and *A Town Like Ours*. The analysis focuses on representations of women, land, natural resources, traditional practices, ecological awareness, and environmental responsibility within the selected texts. Primary textual evidence is interpreted through the theoretical perspectives of ecofeminist scholars such as Vandana Shiva, Karen J. Warren, and Val Plumwood. Relevant secondary sources, including scholarly articles and critical studies on Nambisan and ecofeminism, are used to contextualize the textual analysis and identify the research gap. The study is interpretive rather than quantitative and seeks to understand how Nambisan's narratives represent women's ecological knowledge as a form of lived experience, cultural continuity, and agency.

Theoretical Framework: Ecofeminism and Ecological Knowledge

Ecofeminism is an interdisciplinary theoretical approach that brings together feminist concerns and ecological perspectives. It questions systems of domination that place women, nature, animals, and marginalized communities in subordinate positions. Karen J. Warren, in *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*, argues that oppressive conceptual frameworks often connect the domination of women with the domination of nature. Such frameworks establish hierarchical relationships in which one group is considered superior to another.

Warren's approach is useful for examining literary representations in which women's experiences and environmental exploitation are connected through social structures. It also encourages critics to investigate the cultural assumptions that undervalue both women's labour and ecological systems. Vandana Shiva provides another important perspective through her discussion of women's knowledge in subsistence economies. In *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, Shiva emphasizes the importance of women's participation in ecological production and argues that development models can undermine local knowledge and environmental sustainability.

Shiva's arguments are especially relevant to literary representations of women involved in agriculture, food production, and natural resource management. However, this paper does not assume that women are inherently closer to nature. Instead, it examines how social responsibilities and lived experiences may enable women to acquire and preserve ecological knowledge. Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* further challenges the dualisms that separate human beings from nature and reason from emotion. Her work helps interpret literary characters who demonstrate alternative relationships with the non-human world.

In this study, ecological knowledge refers to practical and culturally transmitted understandings of land, plants, agriculture, natural resources, seasonal changes, and environmental relationships. The term custodians refers to individuals who preserve, practise, and transmit such knowledge. The paper therefore understands women as custodians not because of an assumed biological connection

with nature, but because of their participation in ecological practices and their roles in sustaining community knowledge.

Women, Land, and Ecological Knowledge in *The Scent of Pepper*

Among the selected novels, *The Scent of Pepper* provides the strongest foundation for examining women as custodians of ecological knowledge. Set in Kodagu, the novel traces the transformation of the region and its people across generations. Its narrative engages with agriculture, plantation life, indigenous cultural practices, colonial intervention, and environmental change.

The central character, Nanji, is closely associated with the land and the agricultural activities of her community. Her relationship with the environment extends beyond emotional attachment. It involves practical knowledge of farming, natural resources, and the conditions necessary for sustaining the household. In the novel, ecological knowledge is represented as something acquired through experience and everyday participation. Nanji's understanding of her surroundings enables her to respond to practical challenges and manage agricultural responsibilities. Her knowledge demonstrates that environmental understanding is not restricted to formal education or institutional authority.

A significant aspect of Nanji's characterization is the relationship between knowledge and practice. Her understanding of nature is expressed through action rather than abstract explanation. This recalls Deane Curtin's discussion of women's knowledge as practical expertise, in which knowledge is developed through the integration of thought and labour. Nambisan's portrayal of Nanji challenges the assumption that agricultural and environmental knowledge belongs exclusively to male authority. Her participation in managing land and family resources establishes women's work as an important part of ecological and economic life. The novel also presents the changing environment of Kodagu under colonial and developmental influences. The transformation of agricultural practices and landscapes raises questions about the relationship between economic interests and ecological sustainability.

Subarna De's study of *The Scent of Pepper* emphasizes the novel's representation of biodiversity-based farming, forest regeneration, and the community's relationship with its environment. This scholarship supports an interpretation of the novel in which ecological knowledge is connected to cultural continuity and long-term habitation. Nanji's role can therefore be examined through materialist ecofeminism. Her relationship with the land is shaped by labour, responsibility, and social circumstances. She is not merely a symbolic representation of nature; she is an active participant in the material processes through which the household and community survive.

One of the most significant aspects of Nanji's character is the relationship between environmental understanding and everyday practice. Her knowledge of farming and natural resources is developed through continuous interaction with her surroundings. This representation challenges the hierarchy between formal and informal knowledge. Traditional ecological knowledge, often preserved through families and communities, may not appear in institutional records, yet it remains essential to local survival.

Through Nanji, Nambisan presents knowledge as something embodied in daily life. Agricultural labour, environmental observation, and practical decision-making become forms of expertise. This

aspect of the novel is important because it moves ecofeminist criticism beyond the symbolic association of women with nature. It recognizes women's contributions to ecological sustainability through their actual work and knowledge. Ecological knowledge often survives through transmission between generations. In communities dependent upon agriculture and natural resources, younger members learn through observation, participation, and instruction.

In *The Scent of Pepper*, the relationship between Nanji and successive generations provides an opportunity to examine how cultural and environmental knowledge is preserved within family and community structures. The transmission of knowledge is significant because environmental sustainability depends not only on individual awareness but also on the continuity of practices. When local knowledge is disrupted by modernization or changing economic systems, communities may lose important connections with their ecological surroundings. Nanji's characterization therefore enables an examination of ecological knowledge as cultural inheritance.

Women's Environmental Relationships in *The Hills of Angheri*

Kavery Nambisan's *The Hills of Angheri* provides another context for examining the relationship between women, social structures, and the non-human world. The novel has already received ecofeminist critical attention. S. Sathiyakala and K. N. Sharmila's study, "Contextualising Environmental Virtue and Struggling Woman in Kavery Nambisan's *The Hills of Angheri*," examines the relationship between women and non-human life in the novel. This existing scholarship establishes that the text can be approached through ecofeminist concerns.

Ecofeminist literary criticism sometimes examines the symbolic association between women and nature. However, a more productive approach is to investigate how female characters understand and respond to their physical surroundings. In *The Hills of Angheri*, the relationship between human life and the natural environment can be examined through the characters' experiences, their social responsibilities, and their responses to ecological conditions.

The novel offers scope for considering how environmental awareness may emerge through lived experience. Women's interactions with their surroundings can be understood as part of a broader relationship between identity, community, and place. However, specific claims about women's custodianship of medicinal plants, agricultural knowledge, or environmental practices must be supported by direct passages from the novel. Such details should be incorporated only after verifying the primary text.

The concept of female agency is central to ecofeminist criticism. Women should not be represented solely as passive victims of environmental destruction. They may also participate in decision-making, resist harmful practices, and contribute to the preservation of their communities. An ecofeminist reading of *The Hills of Angheri* can therefore examine whether and how female characters respond to social and environmental challenges. Such an approach connects ecological awareness with agency. It asks whether women possess the authority to act upon their environmental knowledge and whether social structures enable or restrict their participation.

This perspective also avoids romanticizing women's relationship with nature. Ecological responsibility should not be treated as an obligation imposed exclusively upon women. Instead, it

should be understood as a shared social responsibility in which women's contributions deserve recognition.

Ecological Responsibility and Social Change in *A Town Like Ours*

A Town Like Ours provides a further context for examining the relationship between social inequality, environmental transformation, and women's experiences. Existing scholarship has approached the novel through ecofeminist perspectives, particularly in relation to environmental degradation and its effects on women's lives. Such studies indicate that the novel can be examined through the relationship between ecological conditions and social marginalization. The present study extends this discussion by considering whether women's experiences also reveal forms of environmental awareness and practical knowledge.

Environmental degradation rarely affects all members of society equally. Socially and economically marginalized communities may experience greater difficulties when access to land, water, livelihood, and other resources becomes restricted. Ecofeminist criticism examines these unequal relationships by connecting environmental concerns with questions of power and social justice.

In *A Town Like Ours*, the relationship between social transformation and environmental conditions can be studied through the experiences of women and other marginalized individuals. Their lives provide opportunities to examine how environmental changes affect livelihood, security, and community relationships. However, it is important to distinguish between experiencing environmental injustice and possessing ecological knowledge. Where the novel presents women responding to environmental or social challenges, their actions may be interpreted through the concept of ecological agency.

Ecological agency refers to the capacity to recognize environmental problems and participate in decisions or practices that influence ecological conditions. This concept allows the paper to examine women's roles without assuming that all female characters possess the same relationship with nature.

Intersections of Gender, Knowledge, and Environmental Responsibility

The three selected novels provide opportunities to examine different dimensions of the relationship between women and ecological knowledge. In *The Scent of Pepper*, the relationship between Nanji, agricultural labour, and the Kodagu landscape offers the clearest example of practical ecological knowledge. *The Hills of Angheri* provides scope for exploring women's environmental experiences and the relationship between female agency and the non-human world. *A Town Like Ours* allows an examination of environmental change within broader questions of social inequality and community survival.

Taken together, these texts invite consideration of three important dimensions of ecofeminist analysis.

1. Ecological Knowledge as Lived Experience

Women's environmental knowledge may emerge through everyday interaction with land, plants, food, water, and other natural resources.

Such knowledge is not necessarily acquired through formal education. It may develop through family traditions, occupational activities, and community participation.

2. Ecological Knowledge as Cultural Continuity

Traditional ecological knowledge often connects generations. Its preservation contributes to the continuity of cultural practices and community identity.

When such knowledge is ignored or displaced, communities may lose valuable environmental practices.

3. Ecological Knowledge as Agency

Women's environmental knowledge becomes particularly significant when it enables them to make decisions, respond to ecological challenges, or challenge dominant systems of resource management.

This perspective recognizes women as active participants rather than merely symbolic figures associated with nature.

Conclusion

An ecofeminist reading of Kavery Nambisan's selected fiction offers valuable opportunities to examine the relationship between women, ecological knowledge, and environmental responsibility. Through *The Scent of Pepper*, *The Hills of Angheri*, and *A Town Like Ours*, this paper has explored the significance of women's relationships with land, natural resources, cultural practices, and changing environments. Nanji's characterization in *The Scent of Pepper* provides a particularly meaningful example of how women's practical knowledge contributes to agricultural life and community continuity. Her relationship with the land demonstrates that ecological knowledge is closely connected to labour, experience, and social responsibility.

The other selected novels provide broader contexts for examining women's environmental experiences and the relationship between ecological concerns and social structures. Their inclusion also encourages further investigation into the ways women's knowledge and agency are represented in different social settings.

The study argues that women's ecological knowledge should not be romanticized or understood as a result of biological closeness to nature. Rather, it should be recognized as knowledge shaped by cultural practices, labour, social responsibilities, and lived experiences. Nambisan's fiction, therefore, offers a productive literary space for examining the relationship between gender and environmental consciousness. By bringing women's experiences into discussions of ecological sustainability, her narratives encourage readers to reconsider whose knowledge is valued and how communities can develop more responsible relationships with the natural world.

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