

Ecology and its Therapeutic Impact in Select Poetry of Indian Women Bhakti Poets

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Abstract

Ecology, if considered from the vantage point of spirituality, emphasizes the psychological connectedness between humans (especially women) and nature. This article critically analyses how ecology functions as psychotherapy to overcome the challenges of the complex domestic life of women Bhakti poets such as Mirabai, Akka Mahadevi and Lal Ded. It also examines the way it influenced the shaping of the concept of ecofeminism in the Indian subcontinent. The poems of medieval women Bhakti poets demonstrate how nature has helped to emancipate the agonised souls of women. This analysis leads us to arrive at the crossroads of psychology, literature, gender, nature, and religion. This article, by re-reading and exploring Bhakti poetry to highlight how ecology has served as psychotherapy, and by using ecofeminism as an analytical tool, describes how the different florets of gender, nature, psychology, and religion fused to produce a composite flower in an interdisciplinary frame to study Bhakti poetry.

Keywords: bhakti poets, ecofeminism, nature, psychology, religion, women

Introduction

From time immemorial, women have struggled to survive gender discriminations prevalent in society; this struggle now connects to the environmental hazards that have recently dominated our planet. It is accepted that our mental peace is directly or indirectly connected with the well-being of our entire ecosystem, and in order to improve our socio-cultural conditions we often turned towards nature. These two concepts of gender and environment, though implicitly connected, remained ignored by many theorists and were kept apart until and unless the concept of ecofeminism merged them. This lens provided the readers with the freedom to study gender and environment together. Women since ancient times have fought for their rights and have witnessed the necessity of including nature in their life, often as a therapy to remove the pain of life. This is important because it indicates the survival remedy that the Bhakti poets utilized for their emancipation in medieval India. The Bhakti poets delved deep into the mystical essence of nature. It is perceived that mysticism in nature is something that is often more deeply professed by women than men. According to ecofeminist theorists like Karen J. Warren and Vandana Shiva, it is women who are more connected to nature because both of them are aligned within the same line of oppression within a patriarchal society.¹ In this context it is apt to quote Mary Mellor, who states that “although both men and women mediate between culture and

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¹ Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2000).

nature, they do not do so equally. This is because the condition of exploitation and domination affect women and nature differently than they affect men and culture.”²

It is also interesting to note that elements of ecofeminism existed in Indian poems long before the term emerged in the western world in 1974, when it was coined by Francoise d’Eaubonne. This presence of ecofeminism worked as a rehabilitation to relieve the traumatic situation of women in medieval India. One of the most important tenets of ecofeminism that finds expression within the Indian context is spiritual ecofeminism, which focuses upon three aspects: i.e., nature, women, and spirituality.³ It concentrates on how the sense of spirituality connects women and nature more distinctly than it does men. Though some researches have considered ecofeminist aspects of some Indian literature, especially regarding novels, hardly any research has been undertaken to trace the roots of ecofeminism in Indian medieval Bhakti poetical compositions. Hence, this article focuses on how the mystical oneness of women and nature in Bhakti poetry acted as therapy for Indian women poets struggling to survive.

Theoretical Framework

An implicit connectedness between Earth and its systems lie the core of ecotherapy. It is also known as nature therapy or green therapy and was first developed by Theodor Roszak. The question arises, How does ecology act as a therapy? The answer lies in the awareness of incorporating the healing power of nature into psychotherapy. Such a therapy insists on having a healthy mind and connection to a healthy natural world. The theory of eco-psychology also seems relevant, as it focuses upon language to describe the human-nature relationship. It acts as the means for better understanding of this relationship, for diagnosing what is wrong with that relationship, and for suggesting the paths to healing.⁴ Ecotherapy serves as this path itself, advocating a curative approach. The experiences and poetical compositions of the women Bhakti poets of medieval India will reveal this aspect of ecology having a therapeutical implication. It helped these women to improve both their mental and physical being. Besides focusing on ecotherapy and eco-psychological perspectives, we also use the theory of ecofeminism as a tool to explore the presence of ecology as a therapy in the selected poetry of Mirabai, Akka Mahadevi, and Lal Ded. We examine the psychological links that exist between women and nature in literature, art, and religion, connecting women to their surroundings.

Synchronizing the oppression meted out to women with such environmental problems in different arenas of life, especially literature, resulted in the formulation of a new awareness among women, leading them to voice the urgent need for gender equality and environmental sustainability. Ecofeminism, by considering women as the curators of nature, reveals the deep bond between women and ecology and hence, proves ecological activities as having therapeutical advantages. It also emphasizes on the idea of how men dominate both the women and nature by their cruel forceful behavior to satisfy their own needs and desires. To quote from *Feminism and Ecology* by Mary Mellor:

² Karen J. Warren, *Ecological Feminist Philosophies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 18.

³ Nisha Singh, *Ecofeminism: From Ecology to Spiritualism* (Delhi: Women Press, 2020), pp. 100-101.

⁴ Robert Greenway, *The Wilderness Effect and Ecopsychology* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1995), p. 5.

ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and the green movements, at the same time offering a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement the 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.⁵

This article, by using the frameworks of ecotherapy and ecofeminism will explore how nature acts as a remedy in liberating the suffering of the women Bhakti poets of India. The article also brings us to the nexus of ecospiritual-psychology, where gender, psychology, literature, nature, and religion merge to attain the twin ends of environmental sustainability and gender parity.

Ecofeminist and Psychological Consciousness in Bhakti Poems

It is interesting to observe that the elements of ecofeminism existed in Indian poems even before the term came into being in the western world. This very presence of Ecofeminism worked as a therapy to relieve the traumatic situation of the women of medieval Indian society. Researchers will arrive at the fact that these women poets deliberately turned towards nature as a mystical comfort. Sometimes their spirituality was so radical that they were often excommunicated from their society. Despite all these struggles, they felt the soothing refuge of nature. This escape from the society to merge into nature acted as an ecotherapy to heal their psychological and physical wellbeing. An analysis of Bhakti poems from an ecofeminist perspective highlights the ways in which nature has demonstrated its value as a healer, offering these suffering Indian women emotional and spiritual support or cure. Neelam Sharma, a researcher, has said that “Poetic creativity” can be used as a “home-made therapy to describe what was repressed, hidden, or falsified within her.”⁶

The Bhakti poets’ devotional poetry often reflects the autobiographical confessions of the womens’ personal problems, as well as their anguish and depression resulting from the unjust treatment meted out to them by the patriarchal society. To quote the words of researcher Karen Pechilis, “A persistent pattern in their voices is the simultaneity of their confidence and vulnerability. Their words expose their realization of devotion not only as ideational but also as bodily praxis.”⁷ This devotion to God could be interpreted as their devotion to the divine being in nature. Their search for God by wandering in the forests exposed their soul that merged deep with the elements of nature helping them to attain peace and liberation. Nature is what that comes to mind when we think of God. The spirituality in nature - the concept of pantheism - is what that connects the poetry of women Bhakti poets, as their spiritual devotion to nature makes them pioneers of ecofeminism. This article will now analyse some poems of women Bhakti poets such as Mirabai, Akka Mahadevi and Lal Ded.

⁵ Mary Mellor, *Feminism and Ecology* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), p. 1.

⁶ Neelam Sharma, *Autobiographical element in Anne Sexton’s Poetry*, Manav Rachna International Institute of Research and Studies (PhD. Dissertation, 2010).

⁷ Karen Pechilis, “Revisiting the Experiential World of Women’s Bhakti Poetry”, *Religions*, vol. 14, no. 6 (2023).

Mirabai

Mirabai is one of the best-known female Bhakti poets; she sang and wrote highly devotional poems for her soulmate, the Lord Krishna. Though she was a Rajput princess she stood against all the conventional norms of her times to voice her devotion to Krishna. It is important to probe deep into Mirabai's personal life to analyse the traumatic self that she tried to repress, but which finds expression in her devotional love songs for Krishna. She had to endure terrible experiences to realise her utter devotion to Krishna. Her life reveals how the male figures of Indian families tried to manipulate women's mental and physical well-being. Folklore, too, depicts the struggles of Mira's life; there is a story where Mirabai was sent a cobra hidden in a basket, but she was rescued by Krishna's favour. She was also sent a cup of poison but Krishna's blessings saved her every time. Her poetry and songs made her so famous that once the Emperor Akbar and Tansen secretly visited to listen to her devotional songs. This news of meeting with the Muslim Mughals made her husband so furious that she was asked to drown herself in the river because she brought disgrace to her family.

These instances are testimony to how an independent woman like Mira was subjected to dreadful suffering. But her confidence and self-respect made her brave enough to break free from the traditional norms of society. She even refused to commit sati (suicide by self-immolation) on her husband's death because she considered herself the wife of Lord Krishna. As a widow she moved to Vrindavan, the place of Krishna, to spend her days amidst nature and spirituality. Upon examining Mira's poetry using an ecofeminist and psycho-therapeutic framework, it is evident that she sought solace in nature to alleviate the ongoing emotional strain in her life. Hence, it can be said that ecofeminism and ecotherapy are complementary in situations where nature appears to serve as a therapist. Mira's poem "I am Mad with Love" reveals how she merged her emotional sufferings and her need for love with Krishna, and considered her lord as the means of healing her deep wounds. The following lines reveal the suffering of Mira as a woman,

And no one understands my plight.
Only the wounded
Understand the agonies of the wounded
When the fire rages in the heart.⁸

These lines reveal that Mira possessed a sense of pain lingering deep within her heart. Since she was a woman there was no one to care for such a wounded heart. She also says, "Mira's pain will subside/ When Shyam comes as a doctor."⁹ 'Shyam' here, stands both as the manifestation of nature and a doctor whose communication with Mira results in an eco-therapeutic remedy.

The use of the word 'Doctor' exposes the ardent need of Mira for therapeutic treatments to release her frustrations and Shyam in the form of nature perfectly does so. Her poetry shows that Shyam (i.e., Krishna) is the only one who can understand her pain and heal her wounds.

⁸ Mirabai, "I am Mad with Love", *Poem Hunter*, 1 January (2004). At: www.poemhunter.com/poem/I-am-mad-with-love/.

⁹ Mirabai, "I am Mad with Love."

She says, “only the wounded understand the agonies of the wounded.” This intricately connotes that both Mira and her Lord Krishna suffered from the same pangs of love and pain, which was incomprehensible to the common people of the era. Who exactly is Krishna? How did Mira succeed in reuniting with him? From mythology and religion we all know the identity of Krishna, but in the language of ecofeminism, Krishna stands as the index of nature. Mira denounced her domestic life and spent her life in the forest of Vrindavan to reunite with her Lord. There seems to exist a spiritual connection between the forest of Vrindavan and Mira. Thus, if her feelings imparted through the above poetry are read through the tenets of ecofeminist theory, the bond could very well be comprehended as a spiritual one.

This correlation between nature and women as thematically manifested through Mira’s poetry discloses how nature acts as the therapy. According to Roszak, one of the most important principles of ecopsychology is there is a synergistic interplay between planetary and personal well-being.¹⁰ It treats the suffering soul and unfulfilled wishes led them to merge into one another and seek for emancipation. Another poem written by Mira that offers a tantalizing instance of ecofeminism as an eco-therapy is “Torn in Shreds.” Mira clearly states in her poetry that she owes her life to Krishna, whom she describes as the “mountain-holder” and the one who wears “peacock-crown.” Such a description reveals that Mira’s Krishna is purely an embodiment of nature. When Mira says, “I took off my finery of pearls and coral, and strung a garland of wildwood flowers,” she explicitly tries to convey the fact that how willingly she has denounced the luxuries of her married life and has merged into the beauty of nature, preferring flowers to jewels. Hence, she has been embracing the wildness of nature all through her life, in order to search for her beloved Krishna. This search has provided her with a channel to redeem her unbearable emotional crisis. The following lines are again reflective of her intimate oneness and involvement with the different aspects of nature around her:

With my tears, I watered the creeper of love that I
Planted;
Now the creeper has grown spread all over, and
Born the fruit of bliss.¹¹

Mira seems to have sacrificed her life amidst the lap of nature because she calls in her poetry as the maidservant of Krishna which could be clearly visible if her following words are quoted: “Mira is the maidservant of the Mountain-Holder: now with love. He takes me across to the further shore.”¹² Thus, it can rightly be said that both women and nature are always found to seek shelter and relief in one another and this element when represented through the creative faculty of poetry helps us to realize how it can lead to their psychological liberation. Mira’s ardent search for spirituality in nature made her emancipate from the bondage of societal domination and set a path of freedom for the rest of the women of the coming centuries.

¹⁰ Theodore Roszak and Mary Gomes (eds.), *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*. (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1995) p. 87.

¹¹ Mirabai, “Torn in Shreds”, *Best Poems Encyclopedia*, 5 July (2015). At: www.best-poems.net/poem/torn-in-shreds-by-mirabai.html.

¹² Mirabai, “Torn in Shreds.”

Akka Mahadevi

Akka Mahadevi was a twelfth century Kannada poet, saint and mystic of the Virashaiva Bhakti movement. Akka Mahadevi offers testimony to the struggles faced by a female mystic in a patriarchal society. She considered Lord Shiva as her husband, and when forced by the Jain ruler to marry him she renounced her family, discarded her clothes, and left the village naked covered by her long tresses. Such an independent deed by a woman of her age shows how her love for the divine being in nature made her so strong mentally that as a devotee she successfully broke herself free from the clutches of the society. Shiva is known both as the destroyer and the creator of the universe and thus, Akka's wish to merge with Shiva could be comprehended as her tendency to merge into nature and its creator. Therefore, Akka's search for Shiva is her search for her own identity, and for love as an independent woman, in the natural forces which could be perceived as ecofeminism's capability to act as an eco-therapy. Considering her poetry through both the lens of psychology and spiritual ecofeminism, we need to take her autobiographical account into consideration, revealing the way she tends to link her own pangs of pains and love to the Lord Shiva. At this point, we perfectly arrive at the juncture of psychology, women and nature in her poem, "Show me Your Way Out."

Akka compares herself to a silkworm. She says that her heart burns with desires and, to get rid of her greedy self, she turns towards nature for liberation. This liberation is not only from societal injustices that were meted out to her, but also from her traumatised psyche. Her roaming around naked could be considered as the reflection of her traumatised self that tried to denounce all the worldly pleasures, for which nature worked as a remedy. She compares her Lord to a jasmine flower, revealing how she has carefully woven her Lord and the elements of nature with the same thread in her poem. She searched for deliverance from mundane desires by merging herself with nature, a theme that demonstrates the Ecofeminist turn in the poem which again connotes the therapeutical implications of ecology. The metaphor of the silkworm deeply connotes the idea of a woman who weaves her home with love by investing all her life but seldom gets anything in return. Akka Mahadevi writes:

Like a silkworm weaving
Her house with love
From her marrow,
And dying
In her body's threads
Winding tight, round
And round,
burn
Desiring what the heart desires.¹³

Thus, both women and nature are wrongly treated by men, and their hard work repays them with a brutal death at the end of their life. Thus, this poem links women and nature and shows

¹³Akka Mahadevi, "Show Me Your Way Out", *Poem Hunter*, 4 May (2012). At: <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/show-me-your-way-out/>.

the fervent search of a woman like Akka for peace in the spiritual presence of nature, which ultimately helped her to live in psychological harmony with the beautiful natural environment.

Another poem, “I have Fallen in Love” by Akka Mahadevi, stands as a great masterpiece that confirms her tendency to merge into the formless spiritual presence in nature. She vibrantly states her strong feelings of love for Lord Shiva, who has all the characteristic features of powerful nature, which is clearly evident in the following lines of her poem:

I have fallen in love, O mother with the
Beautiful One, who knows no death,
Knows no decay and has no form¹⁴

So, when Mahadevi says that the “beautiful one” with whom she has fallen in love has no shape and will never decay, this hints at her inclination for the abstract and spiritual reality of nature. Powerful nature, like divine Shiva, stays forever and knows no death or decay. She also writes,

I have fallen in love, O mother with the
Beautiful One, who is without any family,
Without any country and without any peer;
Chenna Mallikarjuna, the beauty, is my husband.
Fling into the fire the husbands who are subject
To death and decay.¹⁵

In the above lines she directly states that the one whom she dearly loves is without family, power, and friends and hence, she indicates that he is beyond the human circle and resides within the beauty of nature. She even despises real husbands, as she says that they are subject to death and decay, which again implies the withering love of men in patriarchy and their fickle nature where they consider women as their property and hence, keep changing and shifting their love from one woman to other. Therefore, Mahadevi chooses to rely on the formless lord Mallikarjuna (i.e., Shiva) as she knows that he will not deceive her like human husbands. These sentiments uphold the condition of women in society who have turned to nature and to religion, rather than relying on human beings and the materialist world.

Lal Ded

Another Bhakti poet, Lal Ded, too used her devotional poetry as a medium to voice herself and break the social and cultural taboos at a time when feminism was unheard of in India. It is through the mysticism of Lal Ded one comes to know her underlying thoughts, which are of rebellion, revocation, and defiance. Lal Ded’s devotion towards her Lord made her to endure the domestic violence of her husband and mother-in-law. While fetching for a pitcher of water Lal Ded used to meditate and worship her Lord. Her mother-in-law used this practice of Lal Ded as a weapon against her, and complained to her husband, who in turn took Lalla’s visit to

¹⁴Akka Mahadevi, “I have Fallen in Love”, *Poetry Nook*. At: <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/show-me-your-way-out/>.

¹⁵ Mahadevi, “I have Fallen in Love.”

the pond as a conjugal infidelity. Her husband tortured her, which reflects the sad story of her personal life. But she did not endure for long; rather she revolted against the domestic violence by rejecting her married life and choosing to lead a solitary life. She created poetry as a platform for self-expression. Lalleswari observed faith in formless and she attributed free divine and held it to be the highest transcendental vantage point. Lal Ded was stylised differently by each community and co-existed as Lalla Yogini to the Hindus and as Lal'arifa to the Muslims. She followed the mystic tradition of Shaivism. She advocated for a devotion to a formless Lord by wandering in the forests naked. Her nakedness reveals her oneness with nature, where she finds peace and freedom from the worldly tortures. This again serves as an instance of nature acting as a psychological counsellor that has healed women like Lal Ded from worldly pains. Her poems are comprehended as a perfect example of aspects of feminism and the green movement.

Her poem, "A wooden Bow and rush Grass for an Arrow," shows that nothing in the world is in a position to understand the pains and sufferings befallen on a woman exposing how women are always made the subjects of censure. She says this in the following lines.

A wooden bow and rush grass for an arrow:
A carpenter unskilled and a palace to build;
A shop unlocked in a busy bazaar
A body uncleansed by waters holy-
Oh dear! Who knows what hath befallen me.¹⁶

These lyrics, which are related to the idea of ecofeminism, suggest that no one can look past Lala's bareness, which, like the bare nature, was seen to be an object of exploitation. Men even use a wooden bow and rush grass to produce arrows, demonstrating how men appreciate nature and women equally and use both to satisfy their own desires. Women's sorrows are not considered, and the only freedom for them is to merge with nature, their natural counterpart.

In her spiritual message, she compares both nature and women, making nature once more the key to freeing the enmeshed psyche. She also elaborates on the concept of ecofeminism. It is shown in her sentence, "coursing in emptiness, I, Lalla, dropped off body and mind, stepped into the secret self,"¹⁷ showing Lal Ded felt empty and alone as a result of patriarchal brutality. Hence, she wanted to leave everything behind to merge into a self-isolated state, just like a sedge flower that blossomed as a lotus. This imagery of the lotus is indicative of how a woman's self-understanding results in the rejoicing of every element of nature. Her love and devotion for Shaivism¹⁸ shows her utter devotion and search for spirituality in the natural world. Even in other pieces of poetry Lalla makes us aware of the fact that the divine being in nature and her soul have united, and this notion expressed in her poem "I am Nothing." can be comprehended again as her tendency to incorporate ecofeminist elements in her poetry:

When my mind was cleansed of impurities,

¹⁶ Lal Ded, "A Wooden Bow and Rush Grass for an Arrow", in *Lalleshwari Poems* (Poem Hunter: Online Publication, 2012), p. 5.

¹⁷ Lal Ded, "A Wooden Bow and Rush Grass for an Arrow."

¹⁸ Swami Shankarananda, *The Yoga of Kashmir Shaivism: Consciousness is Everything* (Delhi: Motilal Banarasisidass International, 2022), p. 33.

Like a mirror of its dust and dirt,
I recognized the self in me,
When I saw Him dwelling in me,
I realized that He was the Everything
And I was nothing.¹⁹

The above lines are indicative of the notion how Lal Ded has realized the presence of her dear Lord within her own self which in turn expresses the fact that divine nature and her soul both are intertwined with one another. Lal Ded considers the world as a web of traps for the unwary as long as one's own self remains amnesiac towards its true nature.

Therefore, her poems make us realize that the world is a playful expression which is occupied with the sense of divinity, and the self and the divine are nothing but a single aspect which in turn results in the transportation of the soul from anguish and alienation to joyful recognition. This sense of oneness with nature exposes the psychological state of women that makes them parallel themselves with nature. The framework of ecofeminism rightly conveys how nature has always served as a therapy that helped women to be liberated from both existential crisis and patriarchal violence. Thus, Lal Ded in many of her poems tries to draw a line of connection between both the suffering of nature and herself, which in turn could herald her as the precursor of the theory of ecofeminism in the medieval past of India. Her poetry also proves the concept of ecology as a therapy to heal people psychologically.

Conclusion

In light of the above discussion, it can be demonstrated that ecology's therapeutical implications are precisely upheld by the female Bhakti poets of medieval India through their poetical compositions establishing a connecting link between nature and women. The female poets of the Bhakti movement were hailed for the spiritual presence of nature and its healing properties. The way these women denounced worldly pleasures to roam in forests is indicative of the therapeutical implications that nature had for them. Centuries before these theories emerged in the Western world, the concepts were already being practiced by these Indian female saints expressed via their literary excellence. Though the different Bhakti poets were devoted to different forms of God, they all emphasized on the similar perspective of oneness with nature. This inherent concept of ecofeminism in their work has contributed to the society in a positive approach to attain the common goal of liberating both women and nature to accomplish sustainable development of the society as a whole. This parallelism between women and nature drew attention to the oppression and injustices meted out to women on earth.

It can be concluded that one of the most important factors that has helped society flourish successfully is ecology's contribution to psychological comfort and welfare. The creative women writers like the above discussed Bhakti poets through their writing rightly try to communicate, "This earth is our home and our creator. . . . The mountains, the seas, the endless prairie, the grasslands, the wetlands, the deserts and rain forests are all infinitely precious, both

¹⁹ Lal Ded, "I was Nothing", *Poet Seers*. At: www.poetseers.org/spiritual-and-devotional-poets/sufi-poets/lalla/lalla-poetry/i-was-nothing/.

manifesting and partially constituting a proper object of religious concern.”²⁰ Nature, thus, acts as the peaceful home to give comfort and freedom to these struggling women, acting as a therapy to heal them both psychologically and physically. These women used their creative faculties and nature as their weapons to revolt against their domestic life, and their self-isolation in nature resulted in their unconditional love for someone who could be considered as formless spiritual being present amidst the elements of nature. Thus the medieval Indian women Bhakti poets are among the great contributors to the modern concept of spirituality and ecocriticism.

²⁰ Ned Hettinger “Ecospirituality: First Thoughts,” *Dialogue & Alliance*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1995).