
Ecofeminist Appeal in Shreedhar Lohani's Gaia

Raj Kumar Tharu¹ 

Article Information : Received : September 6, 2024 Revised : October 18, 2024 Accepted : November 26, 2024

Abstract

This research article examines Shreedhar Lohani's poem "Gaia" through the lens of ecofeminism, a literary theory that blends feminist ideology with ecological concerns, emphasizing the interconnectedness of the oppression of women and nature. Lohani's use of the term "Gaia," derived from Greek mythology, symbolically represents the Earth as a living, self-regulating organism. The poem reflects Gaia's maternal and nurturing qualities, yet highlights the consequences of human interference with her natural balance. Through an ecofeminist perspective, this study delves into how Lohani personifies the Earth as a female figure and how her suffering parallels that of women marginalized by patriarchal systems. The poem suggests that Gaia, despite being deeply wounded by environmental exploitation, still holds out hope that humanity will heed her warnings and take steps toward restoration. This study primarily employs a qualitative and descriptive research methodology, which involves close reading and textual analysis of Lohani's poem. It also relies on secondary sources, including books, journal articles, and online materials that explore both ecofeminist theory and Lohani's body of work. The methodology further includes a comparative approach, examining the symbolic relationship between nature and gender in the context of ecofeminism. This paper underscores the importance of respecting both the environment and women's rights to sustain a harmonious ecological balance, highlighting the relevance of ecofeminist ideas in contemporary ecological and gender discourses.

Key Words: ecofeminism; feminism; Gaia; hierarchical; matrifocal; physiological system

Assistant Professor, Tribhuvan University, Mahendra Multiple Campus, Nepalgunj, Banke

Corresponding Author: raj.tharu@mahemc.tu.edu.np

orcid :<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8950-7358>

ISSN : 2091-2161

©The Author(s)



Published by Autar Dei Chaudharain Research Centre (ADCRC), Mahendra Multiple Campus, Nepalgunj, Banke

The open access article is distributed under a Creative Common Attribution (CC BY-NC 4.0) licence.

Introduction

Ecofeminism primarily focuses on examining the ecology and environment from a feminist perspective, drawing on recent critical theory developments. The term “ecofeminism,” a philosophical and political theory (OALD, 2015), focuses on two interconnected perspectives: ecology and feminism. So it is a movement or theory that applies feminist principles and ideas to ecological issues” (Webster, 2013). It liberates political and social construction for those who despise nature's and women's labels. Bruna Bianchi's article, *Ecofeminist Thought and Practice*, highlights the inherent interconnectedness among many life forms. Bruna Bianchi highlights the inherent interconnectedness throughout all manifestations of life. Ecofeminism presents an ethical framework that rejects the notions of isolation and abstract individualism. Instead, it emphasises the importance of inclusion, relationships, and the preservation of life and motherhood. This approach starts by recognising the fragility inherent in every individual. The prevalent motif in ecofeminist writing is that of weaving and spinning, which gives rise to an ethical concept known as a "quilt in the making." This concept resembles patchwork, since it involves assembling pieces contributed by individuals from diverse socio-economic, cultural, and historical backgrounds.

Barton and Osborne, in their article *Reconstructing the Harsh World: Science with/for Social Action*, look at the practical application of ecofeminism and describe it as a practical movement for social change arising out of the struggle of women to sustain themselves, their families, and their communities. Wermeskerch examines the essential functions of ecofeminism and asserts that patriarchal society, multinational companies, and global capitalism perpetuate maldevelopment and environmental degradation through ecofeminist movements. Ecofeminists advocate for the maintenance of ecological equilibrium, the establishment of non-hierarchical and culturally diverse communities, the safeguarding of indigenous cultures, and the promotion of economic principles and initiatives that prioritise self-sufficiency and long-term viability. The essence and basis of ecofeminism's existence are rooted in resistance, vision, critiques, and heuristics. Ecofeminism is a diverse and multifaceted ideology, with practitioners expressing various interpretations of their societal engagement. Ecofeminism aims to construct fresh narratives that recognise and appreciate the multitude of biological and cultural variations that support the existence of all living beings. An essential aspect of feminism's evolution is in recognising that biological uniqueness does not necessarily contradict the ability to shape history.

Ecofeminist literary criticism can interpret *Gaia*, a short poem by poet Shreedhar Lohani, through an interdisciplinary array of approaches, ranging from feminist literary criticisms to ecofeminist theories. Poet Lohani's primary focus is on ecology and the human politics of

neglect when it comes to environmental preservation. Gaia, also known as Mother Earth, is suffering due to our actions, which often irritate her. However, she protects us and keeps us safe because she always maintains a protective attitude towards all her creations. The poet warns us that the earth, or Gaia, will not remain as quiet and loving to us as she has been since creation. Through this poem, the poet wants all of us to realize our responsibility to protect and save the earth's ecology so that we can live in harmony with nature itself.

Review of Literature

Gaia is a short poem by poet, critic, and writer Shreedhar Lohani. He paints a picture of the world as it has existed for ages. Gaia, or Gaea, is the Greek goddess for the earth. Poet Lohani treats Gaia as a symbol of earth or the biosphere. He considers the earth the goddess. Therefore, he represents Gaia as a female embodiment. Many religious traditions commonly depict Gaia, or the earth, as a feminine entity that embodies qualities of tenderness, femininity, and nurturing. However, depictions also portray Gaia as mercilessly harsh towards anyone who crosses her boundaries. The Gaia theory, rooted in science, conceptualizes the Earth as a living organism and promotes a comprehensive, interdisciplinary ecological perspective on human culture as an integral component of nature rather than apart from it. Lohani's "Gaia" offers a unique perspective on the predicament faced by the ecosystem. He acknowledges that the planet, or Gaia, is in distress, but he emphasizes that she perseveres. The explicit meaning is that if humanity continues to exploit the Earth without considering the consequences, Gaia, as predicted by stories from several ancient cultures, may retaliate. The poem reads:

.....Turbulence and hunger

All-around –

Yet --

She endures. (275)

Undoubtedly, the Gaia is acting in the best interests of all its creations, embodying the symbolism of a mother. Despite the constant deterioration of the world, particularly by humans, she prioritizes protection and care for her children as her primary duty. She witnesses all her children's treatment of her but keeps smiling with the hope that they will one day come to realise their responsibility towards Gaia or herself. The poem expresses Gaia's love for all her creations in the lines above. Gaia's endurance bears a striking resemblance to the enduring qualities of a woman or a mother. The earth has been acting in human favor, but at the same time she wants them to respect her love and beauty, not only because she loves them but also because, in return, men will have a secure and radiant future; they'll have a better world.

The Gaia herself is the source of power, beauty, and kindness—exactly like a mother. That's why she manages to balance even the devouring rain and the searing wind among the withered palm trees. The sea, with its vast and foamy mouth, has the capacity to swallow everything, yet Gaia exists to oversee all these natural elements specifically for human beings. The poem describes the motherly role of the Gaia:-

The searing wind among the withered palms –

The devouring rain –

The sea with its cavernous frothy mouth –

The crooked beak of a mountain peak – (275)

The lines mentioned above also depict the ever-changing, unfavorable ecology. In every unfavorable situation, it is the mother or female who first becomes concerned and considers the best possible solutions in a timely manner. Human advancements and developments have ultimately had a negative impact on the earth, also known as Gaia. The earth is struggling to sustain the rapidly increasing human population. Humans are the most responsible species for ecological damages. Gaia, the mother earth, advocates for the protection of her rights and the preservation of her natural beauty. That is why the poet Lohani presents *Gaia* as an ecofeminist, who not only demands her rights but also appeals to maintain the beauty of the earth as it was before. The smell of mildew has covered the earth, and the turbulence is all around. The Gaia wants it to be corrected:

Time plucks at the world

On its gray gaunt wings—

The smell of mildew

Shrouds the house. (275)

The poet's concern for Gaia mirrors the concern of women throughout history, whether it be in legends or in the practical social life of human civilization. A woman is always there to protect both the ecology and children, without even considering her own well-being. It is the women who have brought liberation to humanity in various forms and at different times. In this regard, Bruna Bianchi in her article *Ecofeminist Thought and Practice* writes:

Reproducing and protecting human life in collaboration and harmony with nature is what women have been doing since time immemorial, an unacknowledged

task naturalized, made invisible, slavish, and servile. Recovering the values wherein women have always recognized themselves and initiating a process of economic and cultural change means, primarily, deconstructing the system of thought that has justified and justifies the oppression of women and the exploitation of animals and nature.

Human indifference in the case of environmental and ecological destruction on the Gaia is similar to exploitation and suppression on the females on the analogy that both have the common tendency of endurance: like the earth, women too have been found bearing innumerable tortures, exploitation, discrimination, and so many other social, political, and administrative injustices almost all around the world; but they are bearing them not because they are fragile but because they have the bearing capacity like that of the Gaia itself. Nature's ancient identity as a nourishing mother has led to a connection between the history of women and that of the environment. Carolyn Merchant in *The Death of Nature, Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* writes that the feministic history needs to be looked at also from the viewpoints of society and race, mixing with the issues of the natural environments:

Feminist history requires that we look at history with egalitarian eyes, seeing it anew from the viewpoint not only of women but also of social and racial groups and the natural environment, previously ignored as the underlying resources on which Western culture and its progress have been built. (3-5)

Research Methodology

I have used Shreedhar Lohani's poem, Gaia, as the primary source for the preparation of this qualitative research paper. This work employs an ecofeminist approach to reading the text. In this paper, I have extensively used other books of literary theory and criticism for the critical reading of the poem Gaia, and I have given high priority to interpretations and analyses of the poem's theoretical reading of ecofeminism. I have analyzed and critically read the poem "Gaia," by Shreedhar Lohani, using materials from libraries, the internet, and blogs. The research paper aims to investigate the relationship between women, nature, and religion, all of which appear to complement each other in various ways. This exploration of interconnectedness leads to a deeper understanding of the entire human civilization, with an ecofeminist perspective at the forefront of the discussion. The paper not only explores the similarities between the oppression and indifference of nature and women but also highlights the poet's call for preserving ecology and the earth in a more sustainable manner, ultimately leading to a more natural human civilization.

Results

Gaia has an appeal for the protection and preservation of the environment. She has been functioning as a mother to all the creatures in general on the earth and also for human beings in particular. Despite countless mistakes from human beings, Gaia, the mother earth, has not turned frustrated but is still taking care of us in the way she can. However, there must be a limit to her endurance; one day, she could become quite dangerous to us due to her equally devastating nature. She has the capacity to devour the rain; she has a cavernous, frothy mouth. Her condition is like that of a woman who can be quite hostile if angry, but still, she remains quiet, kind, and loving—caring to us due to her natural traits of saving others' lives. The poem speaks about the ecological issue vividly, and the earth itself is a representative of the females. That is why the poem has a strong ecofeminist tone.

In Shreedhar Lohani's poem "Gaia," feminine imagery personifies the Earth, portraying it as enduring despite the harshness of the natural elements. The searing wind, devouring rain, and the sea with its cavernous, frothy mouth represent the violent and destructive forces of nature, while the figure of "she" endures through it all. This aligns with ecofeminist perspectives, which celebrate the resilience and nurturing qualities of women and nature. The personification of Gaia as a feminine entity underscores the intrinsic value and respect due to both women and the environment, suggesting a deep connection between femininity and the natural world (Lohani lines 1–9). The poem vividly illustrates the interconnectedness of environmental exploitation and the subjugation of women. We can see the turbulent natural elements and the pervasiveness of hunger and mildew as metaphors for the systemic oppression that both the environment and marginalized groups, particularly women, face. Ecofeminist theory posits that patriarchal ideologies prioritize control and dominance, leading to both environmental degradation and gender-based injustice. Lohani's imagery of a world ravaged by natural and human-made disasters reflects this interconnected oppression, highlighting the need for a holistic approach to addressing these issues (Shiva, 25).

Lohani's depiction of the Earth's ravaged state serves as a critique of patriarchal exploitation. The poem's references to withered palms, mildew, and a cavernous, frothy sea symbolize the destructive impact of human actions driven by patriarchal systems that value profit over sustainability. These systems harm the environment and perpetuate gender inequalities, as women often bear the brunt of environmental crises. This critique aligns with ecofeminist arguments that advocate for a more balanced and respectful relationship between humans and nature, emphasizing the need to dismantle exploitative structures (Warren, 45). Despite the poem's depiction of natural and social turmoil, it ends with the assertion that "she endures." Gaia's enduring presence calls for a renewed respect for nature and a collective

effort to restore harmony. Lohani's poem resonates with ecofeminist ideals that emphasize cooperation and nurturing relationships over hierarchical and exploitative ones. The enduring nature of Gaia symbolizes hope and resilience, echoing the ecofeminist vision of a society that values sustainability and care and highlighting the need for societal change that includes both environmental stewardship and gender equality (Lohani line 11; Merchant 38).

The maternal imagery in the poem, depicting Gaia as enduring despite adversity, underscores the ecofeminist principle of embracing nurturing and caring roles in environmental stewardship. The poem advocates for society to embrace a more maternal approach to Earth care, seeing it not as a resource for exploitation but as a living entity worthy of cherishing and protecting. This perspective is central to ecofeminism, which values the roles of caregiving and nurturing traditionally associated with women (Lohani lines 10–11; Mies and Shiva 56). The poem's conclusion, asserting that Gaia endures despite the challenges, serves as a call for empowerment and activism. This aligns with ecofeminist principles, which advocate for social change and the inclusion of marginalized voices, particularly those of women, in environmental decision-making. Lohani's vision of an enduring Earth reflects the ecofeminist ideal of a future where humans live in harmony with nature, embracing cycles of renewal and regeneration (Lohani line 11; Gaard 72). The poem's hopeful assertion that Gaia endures despite adversity symbolizes rebirth and renewal, which are central themes in both ecological and feminist thought. Ecofeminism envisions a future based on equality, sustainability, and respect for all forms of life. Lohani's poem aligns with this vision, advocating for the dismantling of patriarchal structures and the creation of a society that values cooperation and sustainability (Lohani line 11; Plumwood 80).

Discussion

Ecofeminism, a subset of feminism, regards environmentalism and the connection between women and the world as fundamental to its examination and application. Ecofeminist scholars utilise the notion of gender to examine the connections between human beings and the environment. The term Gaia represents women, both in terms of their protective roles and from a religious perspective. On one hand, the poem Gaia speaks clearly about the environment that is degrading day by day due to unwise human activities. Human beings have not acted sensibly so that she has started getting worried about the human future. She is aware that she possesses the same hostile, devastating, and tremendous qualities as mother Kali, a fierce manifestation of goddess Durga in Hindu mythology, but she has managed to maintain her composure thus far due to her feminine qualities of endurance and forgiveness. Gaia means the earth, the place for creation. Humans perceive the earth as a feminine entity, both revered and neglected, particularly when they lack a sense of responsibility. In the words of the poet,

Lohani himself the earth (Gaia) endures despite the turbulences and hunger around us. In the poem, the poet urges us to protect the environment. The poem portrays a woman pleading with her family members to protect her home from severe degradation. In a sense the poet himself stands in the form of the earth, makes this appeal to the Gaia and thus he connects his idea of environmentalism with the feminist approach. In another poem *A prayer to the Goddess* that has been included in the INTRODUCTION of Arun Gupto's book *Goddesses of Kathmandu Valley Grace Rage Knowledge*, ShreedharLohani explains how the female divine power of creation, mercy, punishment, and beauty interconnects with ecology and the environment:

..... The rose complete with thorns-
The cloud dark with rain-
The life pulsating with emotions-
The end with its eternal beginning-
All emanate from you
Glory to you!
May be Time-Transcending Mother
Bless you all Now
And beyond all Nows to come!

The poet Lohani's idea of prospecting the female relationships with the nature or the mother earth Gaia can be associated with the opinions expressed by many other scholars and the authors of the world for the evident fact that the relationship between the earth and females has been a subject of profound exploration by scholars and philosophers, often through the lens of mythology, ecology, and feminist theory. One significant perspective comes from ecofeminism, a movement that connects the exploitation of nature with the oppression of women. Prominent ecofeminist Vandana Shiva in her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (1988) argues that the patriarchal system, which dominates women, also exploits nature, treating both as resources subject to control and manipulation. Shiva underscores the inherent bond between women and the Earth, highlighting that both serve as life-givers and nurturers, yet patriarchal forces have subjected them to dominance and exploitation (17).

People often personify the Earth as a female entity in mythology, symbolizing fertility, nurturing, and life. The Greek goddess Gaia is a prime example, embodying the Earth itself. This personification reflects a deep-seated cultural association between women and the natural world, suggesting a symbiotic relationship. In *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the*

Scientific Revolution (1980), Scholar Carolyn Merchant explains that ancient cultures viewed the Earth as a nurturing mother, fostering a sense of respect and stewardship towards nature. However, the rise of mechanistic and capitalist ideologies shifted this view, portraying the Earth as an inert object for exploitation, paralleling the historical subjugation of women (3-4).

Philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, in her seminal work *The Second Sex* (2011), also touches upon the connection between women and nature. Historically, women have been associated with the 'immanence' of nature, while men have been associated with 'transcendence' and culture. This dichotomy has contributed to women's marginalization, positioning them as closer to nature and therefore less capable of intellectual and cultural achievements. According to De Beauvoir's analysis, these gendered associations have reinforced social hierarchies and justified the exploitation of both women and the natural world (266).

The poem "Gaia" by Shreedhar Lohani and scholarly discussions converge on the themes of suffering, resilience, and the intrinsic connection between nature and women. Lohani's poem uses vivid imagery to depict the earth's struggle and resilience. Ecofeminist scholars, like Vandana Shiva, draw parallels between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women, both subjected to patriarchal domination. Mythological personifications, such as Gaia, highlight the cultural association of women with nature. Carolyn Merchant explores how exploitative ideologies replaced ancient views of the Earth as a nurturing mother, paralleling the subjugation of women. Simone de Beauvoir explains how gendered associations reinforce social hierarchies, marginalizing women by linking them with nature.

Thus, Lohani's poem and these scholarly perspectives advocate for a renewed respect for both the Earth and women, emphasizing their roles as life givers and urging an end to their exploitation. Recognizing these interconnected oppressions can lead to a more sustainable and equitable relationship with nature.

Conclusion

Most cultures and religions view the Earth, often referred to as Gaia, as a feminine entity. Gaia's enduring power is frequently associated with the feminine, reflecting a patriarchal expectation for women to tolerate and maintain balance. History has witnessed the fierce manifestations of both Earth and women, especially during moments of crisis. Many writers, critics, and philosophers assume that Gaia maintains the ecological balance through forgiveness, a quality that makes her great. However, her endurance has limits. While protecting her creations, she suffers, pleading with humanity to listen to her and safeguard her rights. Her acts of endurance align with the core principles of ecofeminism.

Shreedhar Lohani's poem "Gaia" encapsulates ecofeminism through its depiction of Earth as a resilient, feminine entity confronting environmental and social turmoil. Using metaphorical imagery of searing winds, devouring rain, and turbulent seas, Lohani portrays Gaia as a female figure facing the consequences of human exploitation and patriarchal dominance. The poem critiques systems that prioritize profit over sustainability, harming both the environment and marginalized groups, particularly women. By showcasing Gaia's endurance in the face of adversity, Lohani calls for renewed respect for nature and a collective effort toward environmental stewardship, aligning with ecofeminist principles of interconnectedness between environmental sustainability and social justice. Additionally, "Gaia" symbolizes hope and resilience, advocating for societal change that dismantles exploitative systems and promotes cooperation and sustainability. The poem echoes the ecofeminist vision of a future where humanity coexists harmoniously with nature, embracing cycles of renewal and regeneration. Lohani's work serves as a call to action, urging empowerment, activism, and inclusivity to address environmental and gender-based injustices.

Works Cited

- Adams C. J. (ed.) *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*. New York: Continuum, 1993.
- Allen Taylor Ann. "Feminism, Social Science, and the Meaning of Modernity: The Debate on the Origin of the Family in Europe and the United States 1860-1914." *The American Historical Review*, 1999, 4, pp. 1085-113.
- Barker D. K.-Kuiper E. (eds.) *Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Economics*, Routledge, London-New York: 2003.
- Barton, Angela Calabrese, and Margery D. Osborne. "Reconstructing the Harsh World: Science with/for Social Action." *Counterpoints*, vol. 210, 2002, pp. 167–84. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42977985>. Accessed 30 June 2024.
- Bianchi, Bruna. *Ecofeminist Thought and Practice* paper presented on 3rd International Conference on Degrowth for Ecological and Sustainability and Social Equity (Venice, 19-23/9/2012)
- Birkeland, J. "Ecofeminism: Linking Theory and Practice.Ecofeminism." *Women, Animals, Nature* edited by Greta Gaard, Temple University Press, Philadelphia: 1993, pp. 13-59
- Cantrell, C. H. "Women and Language in Susan Griffins Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her." *Hypatia A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* (1994): 225- 238.
- Carson, R. *Silent Spring*, Boston: Riverside Press, 1962, de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage Books, 2011.

Gaard, Greta. *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*. Temple University Press, 1993.

Gupto, Arun. *Goddess of Kathmandu Valley Grace Rage Knowledge*. Routledge, p. 1. 2016.

Lohani, Shreedhar. "Gaia." *Flax Golden Tales An Interdisciplinary Approach to Learning English*, edited by Nissani, Moti, and Shreedhar Lohani Kathmandu: Ekta Books, 2008. pp .275

Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. HarperOne, 1980.

Mies, Maria, and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism*. Zed Books, 1993.

Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 1993.

Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development*. Zed Books, 1988.

Warren, Karen J. *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000.

Warren K. J. (ed.) *Ecological Feminism*. London-New York: Routledge, 1994.

Wermeskerch, Christian. "Ecofeminism and Rogue One". *Porgology*, 16 Mar. 2018, porgology.wordpress.com/2018/02/20/ecofeminism-and-rogue-one/.