



**CASTEED ECOLOGIES: RE-READING ECOFEMINISM THROUGH DALIT
FEMINIST LITERARY THOUGHT**

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Abstract

Ecofeminism has played a transformative role in environmental humanities by foregrounding the interconnected oppression of women and nature under patriarchal and capitalist systems. Within the Indian intellectual tradition, the ecofeminist writings of Vandana Shiva have been particularly influential in conceptualizing ecological sustainability through women's subsistence labour, biodiversity conservation, and resistance to industrial development. Yet ecofeminism's formulation of a universal women–nature relationship often overlooks caste as a decisive axis structuring environmental experience. Dalit feminist scholarship, especially in the work of Sharmila Rege, challenges this universalism by foregrounding caste as a material and epistemological determinant shaping gender, labour, and ecological access.

This paper develops the concept of **casteed ecologies** as a literary and theoretical framework that understands ecology itself as organized through caste hierarchy. Through a critical reading of Shiva's ecofeminist texts alongside Rege's Dalit feminist writings, the study demonstrates that environmental relations in India are inseparable from Brahmanical patriarchy. While ecofeminism frequently spiritualizes nature through symbolic and mythic imagery, Dalit feminist discourse materializes ecology through testimonial narratives, embodied labour, and experiences of exclusion. The paper argues that casteed ecologies reveal how environmental injustice is produced through historical arrangements of purity, pollution, spatial segregation, and caste-based labour. By integrating ecofeminist ecological critique with Dalit feminist standpoint theory, this research proposes a Dalit ecofeminist framework that redefines environmental justice as inseparable from anti-caste politics and social equality.

Keywords

Casteed Ecologies, Ecofeminism, Dalit Feminism, Environmental Humanities, Vandana Shiva, Sharmila Rege, Brahmanical Patriarchy, Environmental Justice.



The accelerating ecological crisis of the contemporary world has compelled scholars to rethink the relationship between nature, power, and social inequality. Environmental humanities increasingly recognize that ecological degradation cannot be separated from systems of domination operating through gender, class, race, and colonial histories. Ecofeminism emerged within this intellectual landscape as a powerful framework connecting the exploitation of nature with the oppression of women. By exposing patriarchal attitudes that treat both women and the environment as resources to be controlled, ecofeminism reshaped global debates about sustainability and development.

In India, ecofeminism acquired distinctive philosophical depth through the writings of Vandana Shiva. Her work situates environmental struggle within the lived experiences of rural women engaged in subsistence economies. Shiva argues that women possess ecological knowledge rooted in everyday practices of seed preservation, water management, and biodiversity protection. Through influential texts such as *Staying Alive*, *Ecofeminism*, and *Earth Democracy*, she constructs an ethical vision in which women become central agents of ecological resistance against industrial capitalism.

However, the Indian social context complicates ecofeminism's foundational assumption of a shared women–nature relationship. Indian society is historically structured through caste hierarchy, a system that regulates labour, spatial belonging, ritual purity, and access to natural resources. Environmental interaction is therefore never uniform across women. The experiences of landowning upper-caste women differ profoundly from those of Dalit women whose relationship with nature is shaped by exclusion, hazardous labour, and environmental stigma.

Dalit feminist thought emerges precisely to challenge such homogenization. Sharmila Rege's work insists that feminist theory must begin from the lived realities of Dalit women rather than abstract categories of universal womanhood. Her writings reveal how caste and gender operate together through Brahmanical patriarchy, shaping social, economic, and ecological existence. When ecology is viewed through Dalit feminist standpoint theory, nature appears not as harmonious space but as a terrain structured by hierarchy and violence.

This paper proposes the concept of **casteed ecologies** to articulate this insight. Casteed ecologies refer to the ways caste organizes environmental space, labour, and symbolic meaning. By reading Shiva's ecofeminism alongside Rege's Dalit feminist theory as forms of literary and philosophical discourse, this study examines how ecological imagination shifts when caste becomes central to environmental analysis.

Vandana Shiva's ecofeminism is not merely environmental activism but a narrative reconstruction of humanity's relationship with nature. In *Staying Alive*, Shiva portrays rural women as bearers of ecological wisdom grounded in subsistence agriculture. She contrasts



women's life-sustaining practices with industrial development models that prioritize profit over ecological balance. The text presents ecological knowledge as embodied rather than scientific, emerging from daily interactions between women and land.

Shiva's language frequently draws upon metaphors of regeneration, fertility, and maternal care. Nature appears as a living organism whose vitality parallels women's reproductive capacities. The conceptual alignment between feminine creativity and ecological renewal transforms environmental protection into an ethical obligation rooted in care rather than domination. Her critique of the Green Revolution demonstrates how technological agriculture disrupted ecological diversity while marginalizing women's traditional roles within agrarian economies.

In *Ecofeminism*, Shiva expands this argument into a global critique of capitalist modernity. She identifies patriarchal science as reductionist, fragmenting nature into exploitable components. By contrast, women's ecological knowledge represents holistic thinking attentive to interdependence and sustainability. The narrative tone of her writing invokes spiritual imagery drawn from South Asian cosmology, presenting nature as sacred and inherently feminine.

Earth Democracy further develops this ethical vision by advocating ecological rights for all beings. Shiva imagines a democratic ecological order in which biodiversity, cultural diversity, and social justice coexist. Through these texts, she constructs a powerful ecological mythos where rural women emerge as guardians of the earth against corporate exploitation.

From a literary perspective, Shiva's ecofeminism produces a symbolic figure of the ecological woman. This figure embodies harmony with nature, resistance to modernity, and moral authority derived from traditional knowledge. Yet the literary construction of this ecological subject depends upon an assumed unity among women that obscures social difference.

While Shiva's ecofeminism successfully critiques industrial exploitation, it rarely interrogates caste hierarchy as an ecological structure. References to "Indian women" or "village women" create an inclusive moral community but conceal internal inequalities. The ecological subject in ecofeminism appears culturally unified even though access to land, forests, and water has historically been mediated through caste privilege.

The spiritual symbolism central to ecofeminist writing intensifies this problem. Sacred groves, goddess rivers, and ritual landscapes are celebrated as examples of indigenous ecological wisdom. However, such sacred ecologies were often inaccessible to Dalit communities who were excluded through purity-pollution rules. When ecofeminism invokes sacred tradition as ecological ideal, it risks reproducing Brahmanical cultural narratives that marginalize Dalit experience.

Ecofeminism's pastoral nostalgia similarly romanticizes rural life as ecologically balanced. The village becomes a symbolic alternative to industrial modernity, imagined as cooperative and sustainable. Yet caste historically structured village economies through unequal labour divisions. Dalit women frequently worked as landless agricultural labourers without control



over seeds, land, or resources. The ecological harmony described in ecofeminist literature therefore represents only partial reality.

The absence of caste analysis reveals ecofeminism's theoretical limitation. Without recognizing caste as environmental structure, ecofeminism universalizes experiences that are deeply unequal.

Sharmila Rege's writings introduce a radically different methodological approach grounded in lived experience. In her formulation of the Dalit feminist standpoint, knowledge emerges from marginalized locations rather than dominant perspectives. Drawing upon Ambedkarite critique, Rege conceptualizes Indian patriarchy as Brahmanical patriarchy, emphasizing that caste purity rules organize gender relations, labour distribution, and social space.

Rege's work is deeply literary in orientation. She treats Dalit women's autobiographies and testimonies as theoretical texts capable of producing knowledge. Through these narratives, everyday experiences of exclusion become analytical tools for understanding power. Dalit women's stories reveal environmental realities shaped by caste location rather than natural circumstance.

In *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, Rege demonstrates how caste structures access to resources such as water, land, and sanitation. Dalit settlements are often located outside village centers near polluted environments. These spatial arrangements transform ecology into a system of hierarchy. The environment becomes readable as social text, inscribed with histories of exclusion.

Rege's emphasis on testimony contrasts sharply with ecofeminist symbolism. Instead of sacred nature, Dalit feminist literature presents contaminated water, hazardous labour, and environmental vulnerability. Ecology becomes material rather than metaphysical, grounded in the body's encounter with toxicity and deprivation.

The concept of casteed ecologies arises from recognizing that ecological relations are shaped by caste hierarchy. Caste determines who may access clean water, who owns fertile land, who performs waste labour, and who inhabits polluted environments. Environmental space is therefore socially produced rather than naturally shared.

Purity and pollution ideology plays a central role in this ecological organization. Certain landscapes are designated sacred and pure, while others are marked polluted and assigned to marginalized communities. Dalit women's association with sanitation labour and waste management reveals how caste transforms ecological interaction into stigma. Ecology becomes a mechanism for reproducing social hierarchy.

Casteed ecologies also manifest through labour relations. Tasks such as manual scavenging, waste collection, leather work, and cremation labour expose Dalit women to environmental toxicity. These forms of labour remain largely invisible within ecofeminist narratives that celebrate women's subsistence work as nurturing. Dalit feminist analysis exposes the material



underside of ecological sustainability, demonstrating that environmental systems often rely upon exploited labour.

Through literary testimony, casteed ecologies reveal how environmental suffering is unevenly distributed. Pollution, disease, and ecological risk accumulate in communities historically marginalized by caste.

Dalit feminist theory emphasizes embodiment as a crucial site of ecological analysis. The body becomes archive of environmental injustice, carrying the physical consequences of caste-based labour. Exposure to sewage, chemicals, and contaminated spaces produces chronic health risks and intergenerational trauma.

Unlike ecofeminism's portrayal of women's labour as harmonious engagement with nature, Dalit feminist writing depicts labour as coercive and hazardous. The relationship between women and nature is not inherently nurturing but historically produced through unequal power relations. Ecology becomes lived experience shaped by exhaustion, vulnerability, and survival.

This embodied perspective transforms environmental humanities by shifting attention from symbolic representations of nature to material conditions of existence. Dalit women's experiences reveal that environmental justice cannot be separated from labour justice.

Ecofeminist literature often constructs rural India as ecological refuge from modern industrial destruction. The village appears as site of balance where traditional practices sustain biodiversity. However, Dalit feminist realism exposes the violence embedded within rural structures.

For Dalit women, the village frequently represents exclusion from water sources, restricted mobility, and dependence on dominant castes. Ecological resources become instruments of social control rather than communal belonging. The pastoral imagination of ecofeminism collapses when confronted with casteed ecological realities.

Dalit ecological realism therefore functions as counter-narrative challenging romantic environmental discourse. It insists that sustainability must confront historical injustice rather than idealize tradition.

Bringing Shiva and Rege into dialogue enables the formulation of a Dalit ecofeminist framework that integrates ecological critique with anti-caste politics. Ecofeminism's attention to environmental degradation and women's agency remains valuable, yet it must be transformed through caste awareness. Dalit feminist standpoint provides the methodological foundation for this transformation by centering marginalized experience as ecological knowledge.

A Dalit ecofeminist perspective redefines ecology as political terrain shaped by labour, access, and dignity. It rejects notions of sacred purity that exclude marginalized communities and



instead foregrounds environmental justice as social equality. Literature becomes crucial in this process, enabling suppressed voices to reshape ecological imagination.

Through testimonial narratives, Dalit women articulate alternative ecological ethics grounded in survival, resilience, and collective resistance. These narratives challenge dominant environmental philosophies and reveal new possibilities for democratic ecological futures.

The idea of casteed ecologies fundamentally reshapes environmental thought within the Indian context. Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist writings provide a powerful critique of capitalist development and articulate an inspiring vision of ecological democracy rooted in women's knowledge. Yet their universal representation of women obscures caste-based environmental inequalities. Sharmila Rege's Dalit feminist scholarship exposes these absences by grounding feminist theory in lived experience and testimonial narrative.

Reading these thinkers together reveals that ecology in India is deeply caste-structured. Environmental spaces, symbolic meanings of nature, and distributions of labour are shaped by Brahmanical patriarchy. Dalit women's experiences demonstrate that ecological crisis is inseparable from social hierarchy.

Casteed ecologies therefore redefine environmental humanities by recognizing ecology as socially produced rather than naturally shared. Environmental sustainability cannot exist without dismantling caste inequality. A future ecological ethics must integrate feminist, ecological, and anti-caste struggles to create truly democratic environmental futures.

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