Preface

This research study titled “Women and Ecology in the Selected Works of Kamala Das and Sugathakumari” is an interdisciplinary, comparative and analytical work. Kamala Das (1934-2009) is a renowned Indo-Anglian writer and Sugathakumari (1934-) is a well-known Malayalam writer. Both these authors have been subjected to various critical perusals, but none of them brings together these women writers for an Ecofeminist analysis. The present thesis focuses on the nature of representation of women and ecology, in the Ecofeminist perspective with the ‘female body’ and ‘landscape’ as extended metaphors of Nature.

Kamala Das is often accused to be the ‘Queen of Erotica’ for her uncanny delineations of the female body in her short stories, poems, memoirs and autobiography. While her poetry is given a confessional label, her memoirs and short stories and autobiography remain unexplored as the literary sites where the female body becomes a metaphor for Nature. Her memoirs recount the lost glories of the matriarchal culture that thrived in a pristine milieu. A probe into her highly autobiographical memoirs reveals how she experiences an ecological epiphany in the unpolluted landscape of Nalapat, which is also an affirmation of the Earth-Woman association that Ecofeminism extols. Her short stories are other works where she exposes the debased female body, as a social inscript, so construed by patriarchy and she makes her rebel heroines most of whom in the family context protest their negative colouring.
Sugathakumari, the highly acclaimed vernacular writer has added many gems to her crown. She is a poet, social activist, a grassroots level environmental activist and also the former chairperson of the State Women Commission. Her poetry and all her non fiction essays (a special genre that the Ecofeminist Literary Criticism encourages in Nature Writings) and her ecological autobiography *Kaavu Theendalle* (1993) have been brought into the analysis of this thesis. Her pioneering leadership in the Silent Valley Struggle is also a turning point in her literary career, from which onwards she develops ecological and Ecofeminist visions in her works. The thesis investigates the nature of the perception of Nature, as pure and polluted, in the various phases of her literary career. Nature is a co-text and context in literature since time immemorial. It also has become an all inclusive term for both the female body and landscape within the theoretical parlance of Ecofeminism. “The body repeats the landscape” is a key concept in Ecofeminist Literary Criticism, as propounded by Stacy Alaimo, Debora Slicer and Vandana Shiva. In a very recent work *Seeing Like a Feminist* Nivedita Menon also argues how the female body is policed by the patriarchal society in the Indian context.

Ecofeminism is perceived to be a theory which fights for justice in environmental issues, and argues that women become hapless victims to patriarchal schemes of development. Originating in the 1980s as a philosophy, Ecofeminism substantiates its theoretical base by drawing a lot from the philosophical concepts of the ancient traditions of the world. Since the 1970s women were to be instrumental in organising a large number of protests against environmental hazards, irrespective of colour, caste and regional boundaries. Though it is said that the Bhopal disaster of 1984 marked the birth
of modern environmentalism in India, Ecofeminist activism within the country was inaugurated by two women led struggles the Chipko of the Northern Himalayas and the Silent Valley agitation of Kerala. Now the theory opens new frontiers in literary criticism, providing an equal platform for feminist and ecological concerns.

The following theoretical concepts and cultural constructs form the matrix for the arguments in this thesis.

**Ecocriticism**

Ecocriticism, which originated in the 1970s looks into the delineation of Nature in works of literature, and sees if it is perceived to be light/dark green in the work. With the large increase in ecological concerns today, which in turn is reflected in literature, the theoretical possibilities of Ecocriticism have much widened. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* ed. by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (1996) is an important work in Ecocriticism.

**Ecofeminism**

Coined by the French feminist Francoise D’Eaubonne in the 1970s, Ecofeminism sees through the pitfalls of Environmentalism and Feminist theory that failed to address the increasing ecological hazards all around and the victimisation of women in them. It was the writings of Annette Kolodny that initiated Ecofeminism in English literature. The theory enriches its base by adopting the various cultural constructs embedded in the ancient civilisations of the world, and provides a déjà vu experience in its philosophical orientation. All the interrelated disciplines of Ecofeminism—liberal, cultural, spiritual and social/socialist address the various dimensions of the exploitation of women and nature, from different perspectives. The following titles are of much help.
Ecofeminism by Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy, and Nature Ethics: An Ecofeminist Perspective by Marti Kheel.

Eco-aesthetics

It is an interdisciplinary approach bringing together the arts, humanities and social sciences and explores what aesthetics might mean in the new cultural paradigm of the 21st century. It proposes alternative ways of thinking about art practice, social science and environmental crisis. Malcolm Miles’ Eco-Aesthetics: Art, Literature and Architecture (2013) illustrates the relevance of eco-aesthetics in the changing global scenario.

The Female/Feminine Principle

The cultural construct of the female principle is adopted from the ancient Indian concept of Prakriti. Ecofeminists like Vandana Shiva uses the concept to describe the innate essence in woman that enables her to celebrate life. It is synonymous with the life sustaining energy in women.

Environmental Racism

It is the purposeful exclusion of the victim groups from the helms of power and policy planning, which in effect turn them victims to environmental hazards, largely man made. The term was coined by Benjamin F. Chavis Jr, taking cues from an African-American conflict in 1982. Vandana Shiva sticks to ‘environmental apartheid’ a better coinage for the heterogeneous Indian situation. The forced evacuation of the target group and the unfair treatment meted out to the tribal provide ample illustration to environmental apartheid in the Indian context.
**Landscape**

It is the portrayal of Nature, in its pristine and polluted forms in works of literature. With the atrocities against Nature, on the increase, often an outcome of the patriarchal reign, the representation of landscape has become a serious Ecofeminist critical concern.

**The Female Body**

The ‘Female Body’, since time immemorial is associated with Nature and has found corresponding representation in literature. But the body is reduced to a mere matter in the modern times. With the advent of Ecofeminism, the female body too has become an element of grave concern, an extended landscape that is made to bear on it the patriarchy’s cultural inscripts often in conflict with the innate energy of the ‘feminine principle’.

**Gender Performativity**

It is a theory propounded by Judith Butler which says that gender is a social construct propagated by roles assigned. Body is yet another site, where the reigning cultural codes are inscribed, transforming it into a culturally conditioned object. A ‘debased female body’ yet another site of domination, where patriarchy reigns.

For the purpose of this study, I have taken Kamala Das’ short stories, prose, autofiction/memoirs and autobiography. Das is desirably called ‘Queen of Erotica’. I argue here that she celebrates love by taking the female body as a metaphor for Goddess/Nature where violence is supplanted by worship. Through her works, Das attempts to ‘unscript’ the scripted ‘inscripts’ of patriarchy about the female. Das uses Hindu myths like Radha-Krishna consort, Prakriti-Purusha concepts and constructs like matriarchy, sacred groves, and the like to reinforce
her strong stance that patriarchy should be made null and void by harnessing the ‘female principle’ and effecting a healthy (Wo)Man/Nature/God relationship. Sugathakumari’s pre Silent Valley writings and post Silent Valley writings include her poems, prose and ecological autobiography. Landscape as metaphor is employed in the analysis of her concept of Nature which in turn is extended to the pristine Nature/debased Nature binary to negate violence which is used as a construct in the context of ecological development. Both Sugathakumari and Kamala Das advocate the Hindu concept of Prakriti-Purusha which is similar to the postulates of Ecofeminism for a lasting solution to women and ecological issues.

Since this is a comparative study, I have listed all the primary works of both the writers chosen for study and in addition provided a list of relevant title translations. Required portions of Kamala Das’ works in Malayalam have been translated by me for citation. Sugathakumari is a vernacular writer and as this study focuses largely on her post-Silent Valley struggle literature, much translations are not available for the specific aspects to be investigated. Hence I have translated those texts keeping to the veracity of its contents. The methodology prescribed by M.L.A. Handbook 7th Edition is followed quite meticulously.

Chapter 1 of this thesis is titled “Redefining Ecofeminism: The Indian Scenario”, Chapter 2 is “Dismantling the Patriarchal Fantasies: An Overview”, Chapter 3 is “Re-reading Kamala Das: An Indian Ecofeminist Perspective” Chapter 4 is “Pioneering an Ecological Renaissance: The Sugathakumari Effect” and the concluding chapter is “A Hand in Hand Credo: A Vedic ‘Ethic of Care’.

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