

The Womb as Battleground: Ecofeminism, Silence, and Survival in the Daughters of Madurai

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Abstract

*This study explores the application of ecofeminist theory to Rajasree Variyar's *The Daughters of Madurai* (2022), a novel that exposes the horrors of female infanticide in Tamil Nadu and its long-lasting effects on women's lives. Drawing on ecofeminist theorists such as Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, and Karen Warren, this analysis argues that the oppression of women in Variyar's novel parallels nature's exploitation under patriarchal and capitalist structures. In addition, the study highlights how women's bodies and reproductive capacities are treated as resources to be controlled, reflecting the same utilitarian logic that governs environmental degradation. Through its dual timelines of the 1990s Madurai and 2019 Sydney, the novel dramatizes the inter-generational transmission of trauma and suggests pathways toward healing and resistance. The ecofeminist reading reveals how cultural traditions that normalize violence against women mirror ecological destruction, thereby urging a rethinking of both gender relations and human-nature interactions. Ultimately, Variyar's work aligns with ecofeminist ethics by envisioning solidarity, care, and ecological balance as alternatives to the patriarchal domination.*

Keywords: Degradation, Ecofeminism, Exploitation, Female Infanticide, Healing, Patriarchy, Reproductive Policies, Tamil Culture.

Introduction

The novel *The Daughters of Madurai* by Rajasree Variyar exposes the brutality of female infanticide, which prevailed in Tamilnadu, especially in Madurai during the 1990s, and its impact across generations. The story interweaves the timelines of the 1990s Madurai and 2019 Sydney. Through the protagonist Janani, the novel portrays how women's reproductive roles are reduced to a site of control, conflict, and trauma. The text resonates with ecofeminist concerns, that is, the body of the women becomes a symbolic battleground, much like the body of the earth exploited for profit.

Ecofeminist such as Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies and Karen Warren argues that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature from the patriarchal view point. This research paper analyses ecofeminist theory to illuminate how women's bodies face silences and struggles for survival that are deeply entangled with broader cultural, ecological, and ethical concerns. A close reading of this novel shows silence as a tool of oppression and a force of resistance. In addition, survival acts as an endurance and a mode of reclaiming agency.

Theoretical Framework: Ecofeminism and Patriarchal Logic

Ecofeminism emerged in the late 20th Century combining feminism and environmentalism. Siva and Mies in the work *Ecofeminism* (1993) argue that women and nature are exploited under patriarchy and capitalism. Another famous Ecofeminist Karen Warren, analyses the logic of domination to justify the subjugation of both women and the environment. The female body is often instrumentalized as a site of production of laborers, heirs, or sons, paralleling how the earth is mined, cultivated, and depleted. Such reductionism disregards the intrinsic value of women and nature, treating them as expendable. This ecofeminist critique is crucial to reading *The Daughters of Madurai*, where women's bodies are sacrificed to maintain patriarchal lineage and cultural honor. Female infanticide is not only a gendered crime but also a symbolic act of ecological violence, reflecting the severing of life at its origin.

Literature Review

In recent studies, several scholars have explored ecofeminism in literature by examining the relationship between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature. Tripathi and Saiel recently published a research paper titled. "Tracing the growth of ecofeminism in Modern Indian literature through the selected works of Kamala Markandaya, Amrita Pritam, Manjula Padmanabhan, and Arunthadhi Roy published in *IJRAW* (2024) examines the historical evolution of ecofeminism in Indian literature. Through the works of famous Indian Women writers, the oppression of women and environmental exploitation under patriarchal structures states that ecological justice and gender justice are inseparable.

Similarly, Agarwal et al.. Jha analyzed Diana Cook's *The New Wilderness* through the theories of Vandana Shiva and Greta Gaard, arguing that Patriarchal and Capitalist Systems simultaneously exploit women and nature. This study highlights the themes of environmental degradation, ecological responsibility, and maternal care.

Likewise Mr. P. Ravi kumar and Prof. T. Ashok in their article "Eco Feministic reflection in Indian English Novels stories women, nature, and integrity

(2025) explore ecofeminist concerns across selected Indian novels including *The God of Small things*, *The hungry Tide*, *Rapture* and *The long Silence*. Through ecological symbolism, marginalized communities portray women not merely as victims who preserve indigenous knowledge.

These recent peer-reviewed studies have significantly contributed to ecofeminism literary criticism. Focus on multiple authors' works. Little attention has been devoted to Rajasree Variyar's *The Daughters of Madurai* (2022) from an ecofeminist perspective. The relationship between the womb, female infanticide, reproductive politics, ecological violence, and trauma remains largely unexplored. The present study seeks to fill this research gap by offering an ecofeminist reading of the novel.

Womb as Battleground: Female Infanticide and Ecological Violence

In Variyar's novel, the womb is a space of contestation. Women's reproductive capacity is not celebrated but policed, with the birth of daughters considered a failure. Janani, the protagonist's mother, is forced to undergo female infanticide to preserve her family's status in society.

We can't afford another girl, you know it (Variyar 11)

In chapter 1, Janani's husband is ready to lose his girl child because society has imposed the myth that a girl child is a liability to their family. He created an environment in which women brought expenses rather than financial growth to the family.

This action shows how the womb is weaponised: instead of being a site of nurture, it becomes a battleground where patriarchal expectations wage war on the natural processes of birth and life. From an ecofeminist viewpoint, this parallels the violation of the earth, where fertility and abundance are not welcomed but controlled and destroyed. Just as monocultures and pesticides diminish biodiversity, patriarchal systems diminish generational continuity by eliminating female offspring.

Murugan didn't pay her for the delivery of his second girl (Variyar 29)

The story of the hatred of the girl child is prevalent continuously. This interlinking of biological and ecological destruction underscores Shiva's argument that exploitation of nature and violence against

women are not separable. In both cases, domination is justified; nature is treated as an object to conquer, just as women are under patriarchal systems.

Silence as Oppression and Resistance

Silence in *The Daughters of Madurai* operates in a complex manner. On the one hand, this reflects systemic oppression. Women are silenced about the crimes committed against their daughters, and their grief is muted by the cultural norms. This enforced silence resonates with Warren's ecofeminist observation that both women and nature are rendered "voiceless" under patriarchal discourse. However, silence is a strategy of resistance. Janani's decision to withhold the truth from her husband or community can be read as a survival tactic, allowing her to protect the remnants of her agency. Similarly, Janani, living in 2019 Sydney, embodies the generational weight of silence but also its transformation into storytelling and testimony.

When Janani heard about Acha's illness. She was ready to visit India with her daughter. It brings her past memories to traumatize her present. The following lines clearly state this.

It is her past and her family that she avoids, that she fights to keep away from us, not Acha's. (Variyar 13)

The novel shows that healing can occur when silenced voices from the past are brought back.

Cultural Traditions, Patriarchy, and Ecological Destruction

The author Rajasree Variyar depicts the brutal reality of female infanticide, a tradition that normalizes the killing of female children in the name of culture, which exposes ecological destruction. The obsession with having a son in the family and its preference consider it as preserving the lineage and protecting economic inheritance that reflects a utilitarian view of women's bodies being exploited. This is compared to how natural resources are exploited due to man's greed in the name of improving the economic resources of the nation.

Both perpetuate hierarchies of value, sons over daughters and humans over nature, reinforcing a dualism that ecofeminism critiques. By situating women's oppression within cultural traditions, the novel emphasizes how patriarchy operates not only

at the family level but also as a structural ideology. The continuation of these norms in contemporary society indicates that healing requires cultural transformation, just as ecological restoration does.

Survival, Resistance, and Ethics of Care

The protagonist's survival in *The Daughters of Madurai* shows not only passive endurance but also active resistance. To preserve life against all injustice, women carry silence throughout their journey, even though they are broken inside. This silence is transmitted across generations in the name of womanhood. This survival embodies what Shiva terms the "feminine principle of sustainability," where life is nurtured rather than destroyed. In this sense, Variyar's novel envisions alternatives to patriarchal domination. Solidarity among women, intergenerational storytelling, and the ethic of care form the foundations of a counter-narrative. Just as ecological balance requires diversity, cultural survival requires the recognition and preservation of women. The novel thus aligns with ecofeminist ethics by valuing care, nurture, and relationality over domination.

Relevance to the Current Scenario

While the *Daughters of Madurai* expose the horrors of female infanticide in the 1990s Tamil Nadu, its concerns remain strikingly relevant in contemporary society, as the womb as a battleground continues to define debates on reproductive justice, surrogacy, family planning, and ecological survival.

Surrogacy and the Exploitation of Women's Bodies in Contemporary India

The Surrogacy (Regulation) Act, 2021 officially bans commercial surrogacy in India, permitting only altruistic arrangements to be made. However, investigative reports reveal that this practice continues underground, particularly in metropolitan hubs such as Delhi-NCR. An India Today expose (2024) documented the thriving illegal surrogacy industry, uncovering a network of clinics, middlemen, and agents who recruit poor women, often from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Haryana, to act as surrogates. These women are promised high payouts, yet once contracted, they lose agency over their own bodies,

are kept under strict surveillance, and separated from their infants immediately after birth. The investigation further revealed that commercial packages ranged from 18 lakhs upward, with negotiations based on the surrogate's religion, caste, or physical attributes, reducing women to commodities in a transactional market. Documentation is falsified, surrogates are presented as "close relatives" to bypass the law, and birth certificates are manipulated to conceal the illicit arrangement. Such practices reveal not only the failure of regulatory enforcement but also the persistence of patriarchal and capitalist structures that profit from women's reproductive capacities. This reality underscores the disturbing continuity between the female infanticide depicted in *The Daughters of Madurai* and the modern commodification of women's wombs. Whether through the silencing of mothers in the past or the exploitation of surrogates in the present, the common thread remains: women's reproductive agency is systematically denied. By situating surrogacy alongside issues such as abortion, forced sterilization, and family planning surgeries disproportionately targeted at women, one sees how state policies, social pressures, and global fertility markets converge to make the female body a site of control, negotiation, and erasure. Thus, while Variyar's novel situates the womb as a battleground in the context of infanticide, contemporary India demonstrates that this battleground persists, merely shifting forms from selective abortion to exploitative surrogacy, making the ecofeminist critique profoundly relevant today.

Family Planning and Gendered Burden

In India, family planning campaigns have historically focused on women's sterilization rather than men's vasectomy. Even today, women undergo the majority of family planning operations, reflecting the unequal imposition of reproductive responsibility. Sterilization is a permanent method of birth control. For men, sterilization is a vasectomy (cutting and sealing the tubes that carry sperm), while for women, it is tubal ligation (blocking the fallopian tubes). Current Situation: Men are much less likely to opt for sterilization than women.

To prove this, Medical News reports that 14% of women aged between 15 and 49 in the U.S.

use oral birth control. This evidence confirms that women have become victims of birth control across countries.

Indeed, the burden of contraceptive care Trusted Source in heterosexual relationships predominantly falls on female partners, according to research. (Cohut)

Although vasectomy is simpler, can be performed under local anesthesia, and typically involves a quicker recovery time, very few men choose it. Women undergo tubal ligation more often than men. The female body is the default intervention site. Vasectomy is a safer, simpler, and less invasive procedure; however, far fewer men undergo vasectomy. Instead, women disproportionately undergo tubal ligation, which carries more health risks and requires longer recovery periods. Women's bodies are assumed to be the default site for reproductive intervention and control, as in the novel *The Daughters of Madurai*, where they are the site of violence through female infanticide. The sterilization imbalance reflects how society still expects women to sacrifice, whether in the 1990s Madurai or the 2020s India. Campaigns and information drives should be used to encourage men to share the responsibility of family planning.

Final Observation

The Daughters of Madurai exposes the tragic realities of female infanticide while simultaneously offering a vision of survival and resistance to it. Through an ecofeminist lens, the novel reveals how the womb functions as a battleground, revealing the exploitation of women and nature. Silence is shown to be both a burden and a weapon, while survival emerges as an act of resilience and empowerment. By connecting gendered oppression with ecological degradation, Variyar's narrative compels us to rethink cultural traditions, family structures and human-nature relations. Ultimately, the novel portrays ecofeminism as a lens through which to view healing as both personal and ecological. Warren's ethic of care suggests that resistance emerges not from domination but from solidarity and reciprocity. Finally, through the protagonist, the novel presents the fact that survival is framed through acts of care: mothers protecting daughters, daughters preserving

memory, and women reclaiming narratives. By linking care for women with care for the earth, ecofeminism urges a shift from domination to solidarity and justice. Variyar's narrative invites us to challenge the systems that commodify bodies and nature, envisioning a future in which both are treated with respect and dignity.

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