

## WOMEN AND WATER: AN ECOCRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

*This article aims to provide an ecocritical analysis, a growing focus within literary theory, to explore the connection between women and water. Ecocriticism examines the intricate relationship between humans and the natural world, offering a perspective that allows literary texts to be interpreted through ecological concerns. This approach is intended to deepen our multifaceted understanding of literature while encouraging critical reflection on ecological responsibilities, particularly related to women and water. The analysis reveals that water is deeply intertwined with cultural constructions of identity, especially femininity. As both a symbolic and physical force, water represents nurturing and destructive qualities that reflect the complex positions women hold within patriarchal and postcolonial contexts. It functions not only as a metaphor for female experience but also as a space of political conflict where bodies, histories, and ecosystems intersect.*

*Key words: women; water; ecocriticism; femininity; resistance; gender*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, sustainable development has emerged as a global concern, driven by the increasing occurrence of natural phenomena that signal climate change and global warming. Clean water and sanitation are one of the targets of global sustainable development, commonly referred to as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This target is crucial not only as a health prerequisite but also enhances work productivity and school attendance (Dwipayanti et al., 2021). In addition, it preserves dignity and helps build resilient communities living in a healthy environment (Dwipayanti et al., 2021).

However, lack of adequate water with proper quality and facilities fails to meet the needs of marginal social groups: women, children, and people with disabilities, especially in sub-urban and remote areas. The first researcher also observed this situation while participating as an enumerator for a water management study in several villages in Sumbawa, West Nusa Tenggara, while the second researcher, who is originally from the Eastern part of Indonesia, has been experiencing problems related to water scarcity and burden on women in her areas. The burden is that women are the ones who are responsible

for the process of taking water far away from their houses for their domestic needs. Women were often assigned the responsibility for ensuring water availability and quality within households but were less frequently included in community-level decisions concerning village water management. This situation presents a considerable irony since they prioritize ensuring effective water management and quality for all family members, which supports the health and daily activities of everyone in the household.

A profound connection between women and water has been evident since early civilizations and within religious teachings. In Islam, for instance, women are often depicted as life-givers. One narrative recounted that during the Muslim conquest of Mecca, a companion of the Prophet wept upon witnessing a woman, exhausted from searching under the scorching sun, finally held her lost son to her bosom (Tekcan, 2005a). The Prophet remarked that God's *rahma* (mercy) toward His faithful servant is even greater than the woman's *rahma* for her child (Tekcan, 2005a). The term *rahma*, which conveys emotion, is etymologically linked to *rahim*, meaning womb (Tekcan, 2005b).

This narrative highlights the biological role of women as life-sustainers. Women produce milk to nourish their infants and possess wombs that contain amniotic fluid, which serves as a protective environment for the developing fetus. Symbolically, the womb and its fluid represent a woman's deep emotional capacity — particularly love and care — ensuring the safety and well-being of the unborn child until birth.

These women's biological characteristics have linked them to fertility and reproduction. As a result, ancient civilizations such as those of Egypt, Greece, and Rome revered female deities who held roles equal in importance to their male counterparts (Tekcan, 2005b). For example, Isis was venerated in Egypt as the goddess of motherhood and fertility (Tekcan, 2005b). Similarly, in Indonesian folklore, Dewi Sri is honored as the goddess of agricultural fertility and successful harvests. These fertility goddesses are, in essence, closely associated with the preservation of ecological balance and natural abundance.

This philosophical idea that water embodies femininity has then persisted in the literature realm, particularly in English literature. This theme is especially evident in early and late modern English literature, reflected in the writings of various authors (Al Fawareh et al., 2023). The environmental movement, which gained its political momentum in the 1970s, gave freedom for authors to highlight and praise the beauty of nature and nonhuman life (Al Fawareh et al., 2023). As a result, ecological literary criticism has evolved and has continuously raised environmental sensitivity.

Ecocriticism represents a multidisciplinary framework that analyzes the interplay between literature, cultural practices, and the environment, particularly within the context of ecological challenges. It seeks to understand how human interactions with the natural world are portrayed in literary texts and cultural narratives. The development and increasing relevance of ecocriticism have been largely driven by the escalating awareness of climate change and ongoing environmental degradation.

Rachel Carson (1912 – 1964) is widely regarded as a foundational figure in the emergence of ecocritical literature, with her seminal work *Silent Spring* (1962) often cited as a catalyst for the movement (Hebbbar P & Mallya, 2024). In this influential text, Carson sought to alert contemporary society to the detrimental impact of pesticides on agriculture, thereby laying the groundwork for a broader environmental consciousness and advocacy.

Ecocriticism has developed to two waves, beginning in the 1980s and continuing into the 1990s (Al Fawareh et al., 2023). As noted by Buell, these two waves mark ecocriticism within English literary studies (Al Fawareh et al., 2023). The initial wave focused largely on traditional representations of nature

writing, rooted in realist and logocentric frameworks, as well as historicist approaches. This phase emphasized the recovery and appreciation of untamed, non-human environments. In contrast, the second wave expanded the scope of inquiry to include more diverse environmental contexts, such as suburban areas, cultivated landscapes, and human-altered natural spaces. It also embraced a more activist orientation, moving beyond the idealization of wilderness to engage with broader ecological and cultural concerns.

As a literary framework that merges ecological perspectives with critical analysis, ecocriticism encompasses a range of guiding concepts. Among these, ecofeminism and hydrofeminism may stand out as central approaches, particularly in their focus on exploring the interconnectedness between women and water. These key concepts offer valuable insight into how gender and the environment intersect within literary texts.

Ecofeminism examines the ways in which literature reflects the relationship among gender, the environment, and issues of social justice (Hebbar P & Mallya, 2024). It frequently emphasizes the parallel ways in which women and the natural world have been marginalized, dominated, or exploited within patriarchal structures. Feminist ecocritics often advocate for a linked form of liberation, asserting that environmental and gender justice are fundamentally connected and must be addressed together.

On the other hand, hydrofeminism is a progressive, interdisciplinary approach that conceptualizes water through a posthuman lens, challenging traditional binaries and hierarchical structures. This contemporary framework merges feminist theory with water studies to highlight themes such as embodiment, relationality, and the dynamic flow within ecological and social systems. In *Bodies of Water*, Astrida Neimanis reflects on how women's "leaky" bodies constantly recall our origins in amniotic fluid—an aspect often overlooked in mainstream feminist discourse. (Neimanis, 2017). Her observation also underscores the symbolic connection between the female body and the ocean, both seen as sources of life and nourishment. However, in modern feminist thought, it is crucial to move beyond viewing women solely through the lens of reproduction, as this continues to reflect a patriarchal ideology (Maggipinto et al., 2023).

This article explores the representation of the concept of women and water within literature from an ecocritical perspective, which may highlight the intersections between environmental and gender issues. It argues that the ecocritical point of view offers valuable insights into the ways literature can contribute to a deeper understanding of environmental issues and gender dynamics, advocating for a more sustainable and equitable coexistence with nature.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study utilized textual analysis within an ecocritical framework. Texts are inherently multifaceted: as vehicles for action, representations of people, events, and objects, and an influential role in shaping and expressing identities (Fairclough, 2013). Therefore, analyzing text should be approached from multiple perspectives at once, as such an approach helps shape and inform the development of genres, discourses, and stylistic conventions (Fairclough, 2013).

The article applied an ecocritical investigation to some English literary texts that explore themes related to women and water. The analysis incorporates both ecological and cultural dimensions of the texts, following the framework suggested by Das (Das, 2020). This approach may consider several key aspects: (1) the depiction of nature within the narrative, (2) the influence

of geographical settings on the storyline, (3) the use and significance of nature-related metaphors, (4) the interconnectedness among various forms of life, and (5) the impact of modern science, human activity, and contemporary issues on the environment, along with the development of ecological awareness.

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

From an ecocritical perspective, the representation of women and water in literature often portrays water as a symbol of feminine qualities and experiences, as well as a reflection of female resistance, which is particularly within indigenous and postcolonial contexts.

#### 3.1. Symbolism of Water in Literature

Water is often associated with femininity. In literature and culture, it is frequently symbolized as feminine due to its shared characteristics with traditional notions of womanhood: fluid, nurturing, live-giving, yet also wild, chaotic, and powerful. This dual symbolism mirrors how femininity is often constructed: both revered and feared. In addition, water is commonly linked to maternal metaphors. Natural bodies of water such as rivers, oceans, and springs are often described using maternal imagery, drawing connections between women's reproductive roles and ecological systems. This association is reflected in expressions like 'Mother Earth' and 'Womb of the Sea'. In this article, the researcher explored an ecocritical perspective through the analysis of two novels that prominently feature the interconnected representations of water and women.

In *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison intricately weaves the symbolism of water with the experiences of her female characters, using it as a powerful motif to explore themes of birth, trauma, memory, and healing. Water, often linked with femininity and the maternal body, becomes a vehicle through which Morrison interrogates both individual and collective histories of Black womanhood.

One of the most powerful representations of this symbolism occurs during Sethe's childbirth. As she flees slavery, she goes into labour and gives birth to Denver in a canoe on the Ohio river with the help of Amy Denver, a white indentured servant. Here, water is more than a backdrop since it becomes an active participant in Sethe's painful journey, reflecting both suffering and renewal. The river serves as a liminal space, a boundary between slavery and freedom. Moreover, the birthing process, which happens together with crossing the river to Ohio symbolizes fluidity between femininity and nature. In other words, the fluidity refers to the unity of Sethe as a human and the river as the universe to welcome Sethe's healing process from her past for a better future in Ohio.

Water also takes on a more spectral role in the novel through the character of Beloved, who emerges from a body of water, seemingly reborn. Her first appearance is described in this sentence: "A fully dressed woman walked out of the water" (p. 60). Beloved's watery entrance positions her as a manifestation of submerged trauma—her body linked to the amniotic waters of Sethe's motherhood as well as to the Middle Passage, the trauma memories, and drowned ancestors. Water, in this sense, symbolizes memory that refuses to remain buried, constantly surfacing to challenge the characters' attempts to move forward. For Sethe, this return of the past in a human form forces

her to confront what she has tried to forget: “She is the one. She is the one I ran from. She is the one I never told. I never told Beloved” (p. 200). The act of remembering, like the flow of water, cannot be controlled or contained.

Finally, Morrison’s depiction of women and water aligns with the theoretical principles of hydrofeminism, which emphasizes embodiment, relationality, and the porous boundaries of self. The female body in *Beloved* is consistently portrayed as fluid, leaky, and deeply connected to the natural world. Sethe reflects on her leaking breastmilk as she recalls the violation of her body: “They used cowhide on you?” And they took my milk.” That’s what they came in there for. Held me down and took it” (p. 20). The theft of her breastmilk, which was meant for her child, represents a violent rupture in the natural maternal flow, a bodily trauma that reflects the historical exploitation of Black women’s reproductive labour under slavery. Here, Morrison shows how water (milk, blood, amniotic fluid) is not only life-giving but also a site of profound loss and violation

Water as a symbol of femininity is also intricately and powerfully elaborated in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997). Meenachal River, for example, is depicted throughout the novel as a silent witness to the evolving dynamics of the people and culture in the small village of Ayemenem, particularly related to caste intersections and patriarchal oppression of women. The silence of the river becomes a conduit for emotional release for the main characters, especially Ammu, whose life is circumscribed by these societal restrictions. In the river, Ammu feels liberated to express herself without secrecy and openly expresses female sexuality through her romantic and sexual encounters with Velutha, a man of lower caste. The imagery of the river here evokes purity and refuge from social taboos, contrasting with the polluted social system that condemns Ammu for her desires.

However, the same river that momentarily shelters Umma becomes the setting of ultimate devastation, especially for her twins, Estha and Rahel. In the novel, water is employed to emphasize emotional memory and the passage of time, especially in how trauma lingers within the female body. The river recalls the drowning death of the twins’ half-British cousin, Sophie Mol, while they were powerless to save her. This event shatters the twins’ lives since Sophie Mol’s status as a mixed Indian-British person, who commonly is a member of higher social classes, intensifies its impact. Following the tragedy, the twins are separated and forbidden from seeing their mother again. Ammu is punished by the most powerful male relative in the family, sent away, and confined alone in a lodge until her death. The twins’ emotional reaction to the river reflects how water preserves the past, making it ever-present and inescapable, much like the societal judgements that shape the female characters’ fates. The duality of water as both sanctuary and site of destruction reflects the precarious position of women in patriarchal structures; desired, yet condemned; nurturing, yet blamed.

### 3.2. Women, Water, and Resistance in Indigenous and Postcolonial Contexts

In *Solar Storms* (1994), water is not only a life-sustaining force but also a sacred entity, deeply embedded in indigenous spiritual and ecological knowledge. Linda Hogan portrays water which is inseparable from the bodies and experiences of women. It emerges as protectors of land and life in the face of colonial violence and environmental destruction. The female protagonist, Angela Jensen, reconnects with her native American roots in Adam’s Rib, finding water as a source

of healing, identity, and activism. As she connects more to her ancestral land and its living creatures, she begins to appreciate nature and uncovers inherited family gifts, such as the ability to see fish beneath the water's surface and locate medicinal plants through her dreams.

From the outset, water is used as a metaphor for ancestral memory and belonging. Angela's journey to find her biological mother, Hannah Wing, takes her north to the land of her people, where the presence and pollution of water reveal both the violence of colonial industry and the resilience of indigenous life. The journey becomes a ritual of return: back to nature as spiritual healing and a political movement to preserve it. Angel reflects: "This land, the rivers and lakes, held something of me, something of Hannah. We were made of it, our bodies as much water as bone" (p. 89). This passage emphasizes the ontological bond between women and water. It means that water does not simply surround life but constitutes it.

Bessie Head in *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968); on the other hand, includes the symbolism of women and water to articulate themes of resistance and regeneration although the novel tends to focus more on fighting colonial influences. Set in the fictional village of Golema Mmidi, the novel centers on efforts to transform agricultural life and resist oppressive systems either inherited from colonial rule or those rooted in traditional hierarchies. In this context, both water and women become symbols of sustenance, change, and future possibility.

Water in the novel is a powerful metaphor for life, hope, and transformation, especially in an arid landscape marked by scarcity. Its presence or absence directly affects the survival of people, animals, and crops. Just as the villagers depend on water to grow food, the community depends on progressive, nurturing female figures like Maria and Mma-Millipede, who embody care, knowledge, and quiet resistance against patriarchal control. Maria, the village midwife and herbalist, is deeply tied to the rhythms of nature and the health of the community, echoing the nurturing, life-giving qualities of water. Her wisdom, like water, flows quietly but persistently. In this way, Maria becomes a vessel of traditional ecological knowledge: feminine, indigenous, and resistant to colonial medicine.

Furthermore, rain in the novel serves as a symbol of both literal and spiritual renewal. The title, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, speaks to the anticipation of a shift, a turning point where new life can emerge after struggles. The rain clouds reflect political and emotional tension, but also the promise of rebirth. In one scene, villagers pray for rain while working together on the collective farm. Their unity here is an act of resistance against colonial-style capitalism and authoritarian tradition. Women are also presented at the heart of that unity in the novel. They do not come through over rebellion but their nurturing presence and unwavering support for communal well-being.

Ultimately, both *Solar Storms* and *When Rain Clouds Gather* weaves a narrative in which women and water function as agents of survival and change. Both sustain life and challenge systems of control to the hope for a better future. It is also stressed in both novels that the feminine force of resilience and renewal becomes the enduring form of resistance against the politics and legacies of patriarchy and colonies.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The intersection of women and water within ecocritical thought reveals how deeply intertwined natural elements are with cultural constructions of identity, especially femininity. Water, as both a symbolic and material force, embodies nurturing and destructive potentials that mirror the complex roles women occupy within patriarchal and postcolonial societies. It serves not only as a metaphor for female experience but also as a site of political struggle, where bodies, histories, and ecologies collide. To expand this discourse, future research could explore queer ecologies, climate fiction (cli-fi), and comparative studies across cultures and genres, deepening our understanding of how water and gender shape narratives of resistance, survival, and renewal in the face of environmental and social crises.

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