



Research Paper

Ecohumanist Undercurrents: The Tide of Modernity in *Matsyagandhi*

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Abstract

The research article examines M. Sajitha's *Matsyagandhi* as a poignant monologue that articulates the perspective of ecohumanism, emerging from the intersections of modernity and its profound impact on the fishing community. It delves into deep-seated connections to the fishing community's traditional livelihood, exploring the nostalgic undertones that permeate their experiences. The article also problematizes the challenges posed by modernization, particularly the introduction of motorboats and trawler nets, which significantly disrupt their conventional ways of fishing in postcolonial India. Through a critical lens, it navigates the complex dynamics between the past and present lives of the fishing community, their intrinsic connection with nature, and the resultant transitions and disconnections that ensue. Ultimately, the article interrogates the notion of development, questioning whether it represents genuine progress or a form of maldevelopment that undermines the cultural and environmental fabric of the fishing community.

Keywords: Ecohumanism, the fishing community, modernisation, maldevelopment.

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I. Introduction

The Anthropocene, defined as the current geological epoch in which human activity is the dominant influence on climate and the environment, has profoundly reshaped the attitude of human beings towards nature. The once reciprocal and symbiotic relationship between human beings and the natural world is steadily eroding. Driven by an accelerating reliance on machines, technology, and industrial growth, economic development is now pursued with little regard for ecological balance. In this process, human beings have become increasingly acculturated to a mechanical and instrumental worldview, one that values nature only in terms of utility and extraction. This shift reflects a deeper failure to grasp the true meaning of development, which should encompass not only material progress but also ecological integrity and cultural continuity.

This concern is powerfully articulated by Vandana Shiva, a renowned ecologist, ecofeminist, and activist. She critiques the dominant model of development as one rooted in the scientific revolution and a reductionist paradigm that fragments holistic systems into isolated parts. For Shiva, such development is not progress but 'maldevelopment' – a process that undermines the very foundations of life. As she argues, "Development has meant the ecological and cultural rupture of bonds with nature, and within society, it has meant the transformation of organic communities into groups of uprooted and alienated individuals searching for abstract identities" (Shiva, 2010: 99). Her critique exposes how modern development severs both ecological ties and communal bonds, replacing interdependence with alienation and commodification. The transformation in humanity's outlook towards nature has long preoccupied writers, philosophers, and artists, prompting them to interrogate this rupture through diverse literary forms. Literature becomes a vital site where ecological anxieties, cultural memory, and alternative visions of coexistence are articulated. Drawing from this rich tradition of ecological narratives, the present research article focuses on the monologue Sajitha's *Matsyagandhi* (2014). The text is selected for its nuanced engagement with environmental degradation, gender, and community life. Through a close reading of this work, the article seeks to foreground the urgent need for an ecohumanist

perspective. In a world marked by rapid industrialization, ecological crises, and social fragmentation, such a perspective is essential to restore the delicate and increasingly threatened balance between nature and humanity.

The Tide of Modernity

Why do we study literature that explores the nuances of the natural world? Exploring such narratives offers a unique lens to examine the actions of human beings and their impact on the environment. By delving into stories like the monologue of a fisherwoman, we gain insight into how anthropocentric attitudes—often disguised as progress—harm nature. These stories reveal how prioritizing human interests disrupts ecosystems, eroding our bond with nature. The fisherwoman’s monologue exemplifies this, showing the intrusion of modernity into coastal landscapes, threatening the heritage and marine life of the fisher community. This narrative sheds light on unchecked development’s often-overlooked consequences, like habitat encroachment and traditional ways of life erosion. Through such literature, we are encouraged to reflect on our relationship with nature and our actions and impact on environmental degradation. But can we afford to ignore these lessons, or will we prioritize short-term gains over the planet’s long-term health? The answer lies in recognizing the intricate web of relationships between human beings and nature and working towards a sustainable future.

In this context, reading this monologue from an ecohumanist perspective becomes imperative, as it highlights the intertwined fate of human beings and nature, urging a shift from domination to reciprocity. Before delving into the text, let us understand ecohumanism: “an equivalence relation between human beings and nature, dissolving dualistic approaches to address ecological crises through consensus” (Patil, 146). It means ecohumanism propounds that human beings—women and men—and nature are part of a complex web, intertwined for mutual survival. Keeping this as a backdrop, this research article will delve into the monologue, examining the undertones of ecohumanism and the implications of anthropocentric attitudes on the natural world.

The monologue depicts the onslaught of modernity on the serene coastal landscape, transforming traditional fishing with giant ships, trawler vessels, and massive nets, displacing lives and disrupting ecosystems, echoing the evocative struggle of fisherwomen to preserve their heritage. The ominous entrance of a giant ship evokes fear in the narrator and marine life, disrupting aquatic animals and threatening the ecosystem. As Della Porta notes, “When one part suffers, the rest also suffers with it... The whole world is knit and bound within itself (Merchant, 104)”, by highlighting the interconnectedness of human beings and the natural world. This leads to the rhetorical question: Can we truly progress while disrupting nature’s balance? This mirrors the fishing community’s experience—their traditional way of life is ravaged, and the ecosystem suffers too. It juxtaposes two lifestyles, underscoring the struggle of the fishing community to preserve heritage and nature amidst modern pressures, echoing the ecohumanist plea to reconcile progress with planetary harmony.

The net symbolises a threat not only to the fish but also to the livelihood of the *mukkuvas*, the fishermen community, signifying their struggle to survive amidst this change. As Sajitha writes, “A giant growing whale of a ship with a flag flying high. (She weeps, terrified) At first, the growling came from within my chest. And then there were several ships growling, growling. Shattering my eardrums. Little baby fishes, terrified, scurried for shelter under my clothes. All of a sudden, a huge net fell down upon us from the sky. (Sajitha, 1).” The quote reinforces the idea that harm to nature ultimately harms human beings, too. It also vividly conveys the agony and pain of human beings and the natural world.

The incursion of giant ships and trawler vessels interrupts the aquatic ecosystem, affecting fish and, by extension, the fishing community that depends on it. These markers of modernisation embody an anthropocentric attitude, prioritising human interests over the natural world. Considering the impact on both men and women in this context—the fishermen struggling to adapt, the women managing households amidst economic uncertainty—raises questions about the nature of anthropocentrism: does it simply refer to the dominance of powerful human beings, or is it a more complex web of relationships that perpetuate the exploitation of nature? This example invites us to revisit and redefine anthropocentrism, acknowledging its far-reaching consequences for both human beings and nature, and perhaps revealing it as a system that privileges some human beings at the expense of others and the planet.

Gradually, modernity crept in—from fishing to the marketplace. Traditional fishing women now struggle to sell their catch, “See, if you don’t reach the market in time, it is such a hassle. All the tidy spots will be taken over by those puffed-up males. And they can put on polyester shirts, spray themselves with perfumes and go around in vehicles. Sons of bitches! And they sell it cheap, the fish (Sajitha, 3).” The impact of the global economy and market strategies is stark here—the women bear the brunt of this shift, highlighting the gendered dimensions of economic change. Local markets are getting swallowed up by global market forces; what was once a space for local vendors is now flooded with commercial players armed with modern tech and marketing

tactics. Traditional practices are shattered, and women are pushed to the margins, struggling to compete with cheaper, mass-produced alternatives. The fish market's transformation into a hub of global commerce epitomises this shift.

The other striking narrative is that modern culture prioritises urban life over rural areas, leaving basic needs unfulfilled. "You have swimming pools and water parks and rain dance and whatnot all over the place. But look at this tap at the fish market—not a drop of water. Let our head and hands and breasts smell of fish (Sajitha, 3)." Economy and development are uprooting tribal and fishing communities, highlighting a stark contrast between luxury and neglect. Before modern culture took over, fishing communities thrived in their own rhythm. The sea was teeming with fish, making it a reliable source of food and income. With fish prices reasonable, families could afford nutritious food, and kids grew up healthy. Selling their catch at the local market could even fetch them a basket full of fresh produce—rice, vegetables, and more. It was a simple, self-sufficient life, where needs were met, and community ties were strong.

But then everything flipped. The modern juggernaut swept in, depleting fish stocks and displacing the fishing community. Big players took over, exploiting resources and pushing locals to the brink. Now, the same sea that once provided is now a struggle to survive.

Undercurrents of Ecohumanism

The narrative unfolds with the fisherwoman's anguish, revealing an undercurrent of ecohumanism. She speaks of *Kadalamma*, the sea goddess, with reverence, highlighting the spiritual bond of the community with nature. The *mukkuvas* trust *Kadalamma* to protect them on the seas, and this connection runs generations deep. In her anguish, the fisherwoman grapples with leaving her ancestral shores for cities, asking, "But when my stomach's on fire, how can I stay back in my hut? Where am I to go, leaving *Kadalamma* and all my ancestors who roamed these shores? How can the children of the sea live be forgetting their mother? (Sajitha, 1)" —her words echoing a longing to preserve tradition and harmony with nature. This poignant question underscores the struggle of the fishing community to balance survival with their sacred ties to the sea, as economic pressures and modernity threaten to uproot them.

The fisherfolk's way of life is deeply intertwined with nature, evident in three key aspects. Their dependence on stars for guidance highlights a symbiotic relationship with the natural world, where celestial cues ensure safety and reflect respect for the environment. This ancient practice connects them to their ancestors and the land, fostering a sense of continuity and tradition. The community's use of eco-friendly nets showcases a commitment to sustainable fishing practices, minimizing harm to marine life and preserving the balance of the ecosystem. Moreover, their approach to fishing prioritizes livelihood over economic growth, catching food for sustenance rather than profit, fostering harmony with nature, and preserving resources for future generations.

Their nets are made of cotton threads, and boats are eco-friendly, unlike modern plywood ones. Life was comfortable once. Unscathed by modernity, they lived like free birds in sync with the sea. But modernity flipped their world. Fish catches dwindled, and hardship set in. Before, they would earn wages, buy ice, sawdust, transport, and get fresh fish. Now, it is stale, stinking fish, if they catch any. The woman reminisces, "There was a time when the sea was full of fish. Fish was cheaper, and kids were healthy (Sajitha,4)." This ecohumanist perspective asks: Are we developing, or just disrupting natural world? Progress seems to have cost them their livelihood, culture, and harmony with *Kadalamma*, leaving the community to wonder if the price of modernity is too high. Their future hangs in the balance of the ecosystem, as they grapple with the consequences of a changing world.

Conclusion

This research article has engaged with the moving monologue in Sajitha's *Matsyagandhi*, examining it from the perspective of the fisher community to offer a profound exploration of her community's traditional culture and lifestyle. The study has foregrounded the symbiotic relationship between the fishing community and nature, highlighting a way of life intricately bound to the sea. This harmony has been juxtaposed with the relentless march of modernity, analysed here as a force that threatens to rupture the delicate balance between human existence and the natural world.

Through a close reading of the text, this article has shown how Sajitha weaves together the threads of human life and ecology, emphasizing their interconnectedness and mutual dependence. The analysis has raised critical questions about the nature of progress, the meaning of sustainability, and the hidden costs of

development. It has illuminated the fisherwoman's struggle to safeguard cultural heritage and environmental integrity against mounting modern pressures, underscoring the persistent tension between preserving tradition and accommodating change.

The study concludes with the haunting question that the monologue leaves behind: Can tradition and progress coexist without disturbing nature's fragile equilibrium? This question, as argued here, becomes a call to introspection, calling for a critical re-evaluation of human-nature relationships and the consequences of development for ecosystems and marginalized communities. By tracing the undercurrents of ecohumanism in *Matsyagandhi*, this article advocates a more nuanced understanding of modernity—one that recognizes the intricate web of relationships between human beings and the non-human world. As the tide of modernity continues to reshape our lives, the findings caution us to move forward with care, mindful of the delicate balance that sustains all existence.

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