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## Girish Karnad's Cheluvi: Taking 'Eco Feminism' to a New Height

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### Abstract:

*Eco feminism has hardly been used as a subject matter in Cinema. There are very few movies which have used the subject as a major theme. In India, it has not just remained untouched by the filmmakers but also been unsuccessful in gaining a space in Popular culture and to spread awareness about itself. Only a few people know about the concept. In such a scenario, Girish Karnad's Cheluvi is definitely an exceptionally stunning and outstanding film which not just introduced the subject to Indian cinema but also took it to a different level, beyond one's imagination, with its unusually emotional and heart touching story line and extraordinary use of symbolism. Karnad has brilliantly brought to light many issues related to the life of a woman in Indian society in the background of the theme of deforestation. This paper is a close textual analysis of the movie.*

**Keywords:** Indian Cinema, Cheluvi, Eco feminism, ecology, women, Indian society

### 1. Introduction

Eco feminism has always been a major concern for the environmentalists and feminists but it has rarely been used as a subject in the field of art and culture. Consequently, in cinema, it has hardly been used even as a minor theme. India lags more behind in this respect. But, Girish Karnad's Cheluvi is an exception. It has been proved to be a mile stone in the history of Indian cinema being the only of its kind focusing on the subject with an unusually sensitive touch. This paper is an endeavour to study in details about the depiction of the subject in the movie.

### 2. Objective

The objective of the paper is to study in details about the depiction of eco feminism as well as portrayal of women and environmental issues in the movie.

### 3. Methodology

A close textual analysis was done of the movie and content analysis method was applied to the various parameters selected for the study.

### 4. A Brief Note on Eco Feminism

Eco feminism is a movement that sees a connection between exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. It emerged in mid 1970s alongside second wave feminism and the green movement. Eco feminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements, while at the same time offering challenges to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women. (Meller Mary, 'Feminism and Ecology' New York University Press, 1997)

The term is believed to be coined by French feminist Francois d'Eaubonne in 1974 in her book 'La Feminisme ou la Mart' (Britannica Encyclopaedia). In this book she attempted to popularise a philosophy that acknowledges a holistic connection between nature and women and holds a commitment to the environment and the betterment of the condition of women.

Eco feminist activities grew during 1980s and 1990s among women from the anti nuclear, environmental and lesbian feminists movements. The 'Women and life on Earth: Eco feminism in the Eighties' was the first eco feminist conference held at Amherst in 1980 inspiring the growth of ecofeminist organisations and actions. Since then the movement took a revolutionary form. (V.Plumwood, Eco feminism: An overview and discussion of positions and arguments, Asian journal of philosophy, volume 64)

A popular essay titled "Uprooting the Patriarchy" by Joy Pinnus in WN Magazine contributed a lot in the late nineties to make the issue a prime concern for the scholars. It stated "We are in a state of emergency and must do something about it now. Around the world, economies, cultures and natural resources are plundered, so that 20 percent of the world population can consume 80 percent of its resources in the name of progress". Scholar Lynn Wenzel quoted in the essay, "Eco feminists say 'No more waiting;". Eco feminism is still playing an active role in spreading awareness about the condition of nature and women in today's world.

## 5. An Introduction of the Movie

Cheluvi is a 1992 Kannada movie directed by the grand old veteran of Indian cinema, Girish Karnad, loosely based on R.K. Ramanujan's flowering tree, an English translation of a popular Kannada folklore. The film was awarded national award in 1992 for its unusually direct and effective communication of a threatening problem – deforestation, under the category of Best film on Environment Conservation/ Preservation.

The plot revolves around a fictional tale of a girl who has a mystic power and can turn into a flowering tree with the magic of a spell. During the progression of the narrative, the movie tends to explore many environmental issues and attempts to throw light on the condition of women in Indian society.

## 6. Analysis

### 6.1. Symbolic Construction of Eco Feminism

Throughout the movie, one can witness the portrayal of essentials of the nature of a woman behind the depiction of the issue of deforestation. It is true that Cheluvi does raise the issue of deforestation primarily but behind that simple plot several vital issues are dealt with. Like the delicate flowering tree a woman too keeps on serving her loved ones throughout her life and that too without any expectations. She fills the life of others with her sweet fragrance while she herself undergoes a lot of pain. In the film too Cheluvi lends her flowers to her sister so that her family could eke out a living by selling these flowers. After her marriage she uses her mystical powers to please her husband who is completely enamoured by the delicate scent. Cheluvi even goes to the extent of sharing her deepest secret with the children who leave her mutilated. The film raises one of the most pertinent questions: the role of the women in the Indian society. She is always blossoming for others but will she ever blossom for herself!

### 6.2. Depiction of Patriarchy

Though the movie challenges the dominant notions of patriarchy, on some points it reinforces some stereotyped ideas of patriarchal society too. Any kind of speciality of a woman has to be acknowledged by a prince and all the extraordinarily talented women will have to get married either to the king or the prince or any other man of equal social status. That is the only and the ultimate award a capable woman can expect from society. She cannot do anything on her own using her god gifted talent to make a contribution to society. No matter, how powerful and capable of a woman is she has to depend on a man for survival.

Depiction of patriarchy gets even more emphasised, when Kumar comes in rescue of Cheluvi, promises to cure her completely and get her back whatever she has lost. It makes the notion stronger that a woman has to depend on a man for her protection and well being, no woman but a man, and no surprisingly, her husband has to come to make the promise that he will manage to bring her back to normal life. The sequence emphasises the fact that in a patriarch society a man is the warden of a women and the social status of women is always subordinate to that of men.

### 6.3. Social Position of Women

#### 6.3.1. Commodification

The issue of commodification of women has been handled very critically by the movie; it has shown that a woman is treated as commodity everywhere by everyone. Husband, in laws, children, siblings even the parents have certain kind of expectation from her. Unfulfilment of that leads to dissatisfaction and ill treatment. No one accepts that she has a life of her own and tends to take her for granted.

Cheluvi's ability to turn into a flowering tree proves to be beneficial for everyone at the paternal house. After marriage, just because of that speciality, she becomes an object of pleasure for everyone. She is forced to become a wish fulfilling tree whenever they desire, not a single time she is asked, whether she is willing to. It reflects the condition of thousands of Indian women who live their lives only to satisfy the husband and the family.

#### 6.3.2. Exploitation

The movie attempts to show, a woman is exploited at every point of life in a very interesting way comparing the protagonist to a tree. The husband loves her only because of the attractive looks and fragrance of the flowers. The children from the in laws family break her into parts plucking the flowers from her branches and leaves her mutilated. When she is thrown in the forest, a wood picker tries to abuse her sexually. Despite being the daughter in law of a royal family, after being abandoned in a forest; she becomes a victim of sexual abuse. Here, the movie raises a question about the security of women in society.

#### 6.3.3. Bondages

The life of a woman is always full of responsibilities; her movement is always restricted by some kind of a bond. Cheluvi's extraordinary mystical ability gets used only to save the family at her paternal home and make the husband and the in laws happy after marriage. She never gets any chance to think of anything for herself and dream of something which will be her own.

#### 6.3.4. Vulnerability

Cheluvi gets tortured and exploited at her in laws house every moment but she never raises her voice. Her life almost collapses after she demonstrates her ability of turning into a tree to the children of the family, their rudeness and carelessness breaks her into parts but

she bears everything silently, never protests, as she believes, this is the fate of a woman, she has to give all the things she possesses for the sake of the happiness of the family but she has no right to expect anything in return.

#### *6.4. Construction of Gender*

##### 6.4.1. Gender Identity

As per the popular notions, a woman should be attractive, charming, smiling, supporting and submissive and on the other hand a man should be strong, macho, rough and tough and protecting. The movie makes no attempt to challenge these notions, Cheluvi is portrayed to be an ideal Indian woman and Kumar also seems to have all the qualities an ideal Indian man should have in a popular movie.

##### 6.4.2. Gender Role

Cheluvi remains submissive and subdued throughout the movie despite being extraordinarily talented. She bears everything silently with a smile as that is what is expected of a woman in society. They must be tolerant, sacrificing and above all, smiling in every situation.

##### 6.4.3. Gender Hierarchy System

The status of a woman is lower to that of a man society. She has to depend on a man, either father, brother, husband or son for every single thing. Cheluvi can take the responsibility to run the family on her shoulder in the absence of her father but at the time of crisis, she has to depend on her husband for protection and support.

#### *6.5. Portrayal of Relationships*

##### 6.5.1. Girlhood

###### 6.5.1.1. Daughter

Cheluvi is born in a poor family where even meeting both the ends of life calls for a struggle. She has a liability to her sister and widow mother and can go to any extent to make all kind of sacrifices to run her family. She can easily convert into a flowering tree to blossom amusing flowers with mesmerising fragrance bearing pains of the conversion so that her sister can earn some amount of money selling the flowers to run the family.

###### 6.5.1.2. Sister

The bond of two sisters is quite nicely portrayed in the movie; Cheluvi reveals her secret of mystic power to her sister. The sister too keeps it a secret even from the mother. She exhibits utter caution and immense care while handling the flowering tree and plucking flowers. They are compelled to sell the flowers for their poor economic condition but the younger sister shares the feelings of Cheluvi, she knows how much sacrifice she is bearing smilingly for the sake of the family and stands by her in support.

##### 6.5.2. Womanhood

###### 6.5.2.1. Daughter in Law

A poor woman's getting married to an aristocrat and affluent family is not very easily accepted by all the members of the family, especially the females. With this the movie brings to the light, the interesting fact of Indian society that in her in laws house, a woman gets tortured by the women more.

Plucking the flowers with excitement the sister in laws and brother in laws breaks all the branches of the flowering tree and hence leaves Cheluvi mutilated in a pathetic condition making her cripple and they have no guilt feeling about it. The sequence draws the viewer's attention to the thousands of family where the same story gets repeated every day, the daughter in law keeps sacrificing her everything just to make the in laws happy but gets nothing in return.

###### 6.5.2.2. Wife

Kumar is mesmerised by the fragrance of the flowers, it is only because of the magical ability of Cheluvi to get converted into a flowering tree that he marries her. Again and again he forces her to demonstrate the act just for the sake of pleasure. No husbandly care and sense of responsibility has been shown on his part throughout the movie except for the last sequence. A glimpse of aloofness has been noticed rather, he kept enjoying his life in his own way, travelling to different locations, leaving Cheluvi helpless in the family where her eligibility of being the daughter in law in the family of the village chief is questioned every moment. Cheluvi is compelled to cope with the situation silently as like every other woman; she considers it to be her destiny.

## 6.6. Personal Issues

### 6.6.1. Romanticism

The movie takes a turn towards romanticism at the last sequence. Kumar gets insane after returning from the tour not finding Cheluvi at home. He starts missing her a lot, it is only at this moment that he realised what she meant to him and he had actually taken her for granted which was not right on his part. Looking at the stem of the flowering tree, he can recognise it to be Cheluvi and madly rushes to the forest taking her along and promises he will get all her branches looking around the forest and will go to any extent to get her back her old happy life.

### 6.6.2. Man Woman Relationship

The movie points out that the ritual relating to her flowering symbolizes sexual activity and ritual. It becomes a display of her spectacular talent arouse his husband, so that they can sleep together on the flowers from her body. In a way, he began to treat her as a thing, asking her "to make a spectacle of herself" by displaying her secret gift. When the first time becomes a tree, it is out of a sense of responsibility, to sell her flowers, she makes of herself an object which can be useful for her family to earn a living. But, in the conjugal life, many a time she converts herself into the flowering tree just for the pleasure and satisfaction of her husband.

### 6.6.3. Aspiration

Kumar and Cheluvi nurture the hope that one day they will manage to find the lost branches of Cheluvi and they will regain their old happy days but there are indications in the last scene that it is next to impossible. But they keep living with the hope, the only strength in their life that keeps them going.

### 6.6.4. Humanism

Kumar accepts Cheluvi even in the condition where she is not able to do anything on her own. Somewhere in the back of mind he knows the fact that it is hardly possible to bring her back to normal condition, but he promises to be by her side. Though the movie ends at the point when he discovers that the forest is destroyed and there is no scope of getting the branches, it does not make it clear what does he do after that and leaves it completely on the audience to think of what happens to Cheluvi, the portrayal of the bond between Kumar and Cheluvi in the last sequence keeps lingering in the minds of the audience, forcing them to believe, he will always be by her side as her support of life.

## 7. Conclusion

Cheluvi is the only movie of its kind ever made in India focusing on the subject of eco feminism with an extra ordinarily creative approach with the use of unusually surprising symbolism. It keeps the audience stunned with its unique style of unfolding narrative which forces the audience to think about the environment deeply but at the same time gives them a pleasure of watching an entertaining audiovisual product which offers the same kind of amusement that one used to get while hearing fairytales from grandparents during childhood. The tension between the soothing and smooth flow of the narrative and the inner lying deep social and environmental concerns makes the film unique and a milestone in the history of Indian cinema.

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