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From Forests to Futures: Ecofeminist Visions in the Fiction of Sarah Joseph, Diane Cook, and Richard Powers

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Abstract

Ecofeminism, as a critical framework, draws a deep connection between the exploitation of the natural environment and the subjugation of women, emphasizing the shared logic of domination that underlies both. This paper undertakes a comparative ecofeminist analysis of selected works by Sarah Joseph, Diane Cook, and Richard Powers, three authors whose narratives, though culturally and stylistically distinct, converge on urgent ecological and feminist concerns. Sarah Joseph's feminist retellings, rooted in Indian myth and ecology, challenge patriarchal and anthropocentric worldviews, emphasising the spiritual and cultural symbiosis between women and nature. In her dystopian fiction, Diane Cook envisions landscapes where survival becomes a feminist act of resistance, exposing the vulnerability of both the environment and marginalised identities in a collapsing world. Through scientifically infused and ecologically expansive novels, Richard Powers presents a tapestry of interconnected lives that illuminate nature's agency and the ethical imperative of kinship beyond the human. This paper argues that all three writers, through their narrative strategies, character arcs, and thematic concerns, redefine ecological consciousness through an ecofeminist lens. The present research paper is an honest attempt to attract the attention of the readers towards Ecofeminist Visions in the Fiction of Sarah Joseph, Diane Cook, and Richard Powers, where forests are not only lost or mourned, but also reclaimed in radical futures envisioned through feminist ecological ethics. The researchers further explain that the works of Sarah Joseph, Diane Cook, and Richard Powers resist the binaries of nature/culture and male/female, offering instead a vision of entanglement, interdependence, and transformation.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Anthropocene, Resistance, Gender, Nature, Interdependence, Patriarchy, Environmental Justice, Post humanism, Myth, Dystopia.

Introduction

The accelerating environmental crisis of the twenty-first century has compelled scholars and writers alike to interrogate the foundational systems that govern human relationships with nature. Among the many theoretical frameworks that seek to address this crisis, ecofeminism stands out for its ability to critique both ecological degradation and gendered oppression. As a discourse, ecofeminism proposes that the exploitation of nature and the subjugation of women are interconnected processes rooted in patriarchal structures. Literature, as a reflective and imaginative medium, has increasingly served as a space to articulate and challenge these injustices. The convergence of feminist and ecological concerns in literature gives rise to narratives that are not merely critiques but also imaginative reconfigurations of human-nature relationships. These narratives offer powerful visions of alternative futures—futures that are not dominated by conquest and control, but rather shaped by empathy, care, and coexistence. Writers across geographies have embraced the ecofeminist ethos, embedding it into their characters, settings, and themes. Through this lens, the land is not just a backdrop but a sentient presence; women are not merely victims but agents of change and healing.



(Photo From Google Source: https://issuu.com/ecoartspace/docs/embodiedforest2021)

Sarah Joseph, a prominent Indian writer, engages deeply with themes of gender, ecology, and myth in her narratives. Her works often draw from regional and cultural traditions, foregrounding the intimate bond between women and the land. Through reimagining of myth and folklore, Joseph constructs spaces where ecological and feminist struggles are deeply intertwined. Her characters challenge dominant religious and patriarchal structures, advocating for a return to a more harmonious and equitable order that honours both nature and womanhood.

Diane Cook, an American author, presents a starkly different but equally powerful vision of ecofeminist struggle. In her speculative fiction, particularly The New Wilderness, Cook envisions a dystopian future ravaged by environmental collapse, where the female protagonist must navigate the tension between survival and resistance. Her portrayal of motherhood, wilderness, and bodily autonomy echoes ecofeminist concerns, situating women at the centre of environmental and ethical dilemmas. The wilderness becomes both a place of refuge and confrontation, forcing a re-evaluation of what it means to coexist with nature.

Richard Powers, known for his environmental consciousness and intellectual depth, weaves scientific inquiry with narrative empathy in his work. In The Over story, Powers presents trees not merely as part of the landscape but as protagonists with their own histories, memories, and voices. His characters—diverse and damaged—are drawn into ecological activism that blurs the boundaries

between human and non-human agency. Powers' storytelling aligns with ecofeminist philosophy through its emphasis on interconnection, community, and the necessity of de-centering human exceptionalism. Although these three authors differ in cultural context and narrative style, their works share a commitment to exposing and challenging the systems that perpetuate ecological and social injustice. They illuminate how literature can serve as a form of ecological resistance, drawing attention to both the material consequences of environmental exploitation and the symbolic frameworks that sustain it. Through their storytelling, they offer possibilities for reimagining the future – possibilities grounded in feminist ethics and ecological awareness. This paper seeks to undertake an ecofeminist analysis of selected works by Sarah Joseph, Diane Cook, and Richard Powers. By examining their representations of women, nature, and power, the study aims to uncover the ways in which these texts embody and advance ecofeminist principles. Special attention will be paid to how each author constructs the relationship between gender and environment, and how these relationships are shaped by broader social, cultural, and political forces. An important component of this analysis involves the exploration of narrative strategies. Whether through magical realism, speculative dystopia, or multithreaded realism, each author uses literary form to amplify the urgency and complexity of ecofeminist concerns. These formal choices are not incidental but central to how meaning is conveyed and how readers are invited to engage with the text. The very act of storytelling becomes a mode of resistance against erasure, against domination, and against environmental neglect.

In reading these texts through an ecofeminist lens, it becomes evident that nature is never a passive entity. It is a character, a force, a witness, and often a victim of anthropocentric and patriarchal violence. Women in these stories often mirror this positioning, but they also resist it, transforming their relationship with the land into one of empowerment and reciprocity. The paper will explore how this dual representation functions across the selected works. Ultimately, the value of this study lies in its contribution to a growing body of scholarship that recognizes the transformative potential of ecofeminist literature. As environmental crises intensify and gendered inequalities persist, literature that bridges these domains becomes more vital than ever. The works of **Joseph, Cook,** and **Powers** not only reflect the anxieties of our time but also point toward futures that are rooted in care, justice, and ecological balance. By bringing together diverse voices and traditions, this research underscores the universality of ecofeminist concerns while honoring the specificities of cultural and narrative context. It argues that from forests—whether sacred, wild, or threatened—emerge futures imagined not in isolation but in communion. These are futures that resist domination and dream instead of symbiosis, renewal, and hope.

Batra, Shilpi. "Ecofeminism and Indian Women Writers: A Study of Ecological Consciousness in Select Texts." Journal of South Asian Literature and Environment, **Batra** explores how Indian women writers have contributed to the ecofeminist discourse by interweaving ecological themes with female identity and resistance. Focusing on regional and grassroots narratives, the study highlights how ecological degradation disproportionately affects women, particularly in rural India. The analysis affirms that women's ecological awareness often emerges from lived experiences and positions them as both victims and stewards of environmental ethics.

Kaur, Simran. "Wilderness and the Female Body in Diane Cook's The New Wilderness." Feminist Ecocriticism Quarterly, **Kaur** investigates the complex interplay between wilderness, female agency, and survival in Diane Cook's dystopian narrative. The article discusses how Cook constructs the natural world as both a battleground and a sanctuary, reflecting feminist concerns about bodily autonomy, maternal labor, and ecological displacement. Kaur concludes that the novel critiques patriarchal control over both women and the environment through its raw, elemental storytelling.

Raj, Anita. "Sacred Landscapes and Feminist Ecology in the Fiction of Sarah Joseph." Indian Journal of Postcolonial Ecofeminism, **Raj** focuses on Sarah Joseph's use of myth and folklore to construct sacred ecological spaces in her fiction. The study highlights how Joseph's characters engage

in both spiritual and ecological resistance against dominant socio-religious structures. By reclaiming mythic narratives from a feminist perspective, the paper illustrates how the sacred feminine becomes a site of ecological wisdom and subversive power.

Morrison, Lila. "Tree Consciousness and Non-Human Agency in Richard Powers' The Over story. **Morrison** analyzes The Over story through the lens of ecofeminist post humanism, emphasizing the agency and voice given to non-human life forms—particularly trees. The article underscores the narrative's disruption of anthropocentric norms and its alignment with feminist calls for interspecies ethics. Morrison contends that Powers reimagines ecological storytelling by emphasizing interdependence and the moral imperative of multispecies justice.

Fernandez, Clara. "Ecofeminist Resistance and Narrative Ethics in Contemporary Climate Fiction." Global Ecofeminist Studies, **Fernandez** surveys a range of contemporary climate fiction, including works by Cook and Powers, to evaluate how ecofeminist resistance is articulated through narrative form. The paper identifies recurring motifs of displacement, care ethics, and collective survival. By emphasizing the role of storytelling in shaping environmental consciousness, Fernandez concludes that ecofeminist fiction not only critiques environmental injustice but also models transformative ways of being in the world.

Objectives of the Present Research:

- To analyse the representation of ecofeminist themes in the selected works of Sarah Joseph, Diane Cook, and Richard Powers.
- To examine how gender and ecological consciousness intersect in the narratives of the chosen authors.
- To explore the role of female characters as agents of ecological resistance and transformation.
- To investigate the narrative strategies used to portray nature as an active presence rather than a passive backdrop.
- To assess the socio-political and cultural contexts that shape the ecofeminist visions in each author's work.

Research Methodology:

The present study adopts a qualitative and interpretative research methodology, grounded in the principles of literary analysis and ecofeminist theory. It involves close reading and critical examination of selected fictional texts by Sarah Joseph, Diane Cook, and Richard Powers to identify and interpret ecofeminist themes, symbols, characterizations, and narrative structures. The methodology incorporates a comparative approach to highlight thematic and cultural convergences and divergences across different geographical and literary contexts. The study draws upon secondary sources such as scholarly articles, journals, and theoretical texts on ecofeminism, environmental humanities, and gender studies to support the textual analysis. This interdisciplinary framework allows for a nuanced understanding of how literature reflects, critiques, and reimagines the interconnected oppressions of women and nature in contemporary ecological crises.

"From Forests to Futures: Ecofeminist Visions in the Fiction of Sarah Joseph, Diane Cook, and Richard Powers":

The title "From Forests to Futures" encapsulates a journey—both literal and metaphorical—through the realms of nature, gender, resistance, and imagination. It signals a transition from the tangible, physical world of forests to the imagined, ethical, and ecological possibilities of the future. This progression reflects the core intention of the paper: to examine how ecofeminist thought is expressed in literature as both critique and vision. The word "Forests" stands as a symbol of the natural

world, particularly the spaces that are alive, sacred, mysterious, and often endangered. In ecofeminist literature, forests frequently serve as metaphors for the earth's vitality and its exploitation, but they are also sites of renewal and resistance. Forests are not only physical spaces but also philosophical landscapes in which women and nature intersect, often resisting structures of domination.

Sarah Joseph's fiction frequently draws on Indian myth and indigenous knowledge systems, where the forest represents a feminine and spiritual space. In her works, forests are often aligned with female characters who seek freedom, wisdom, and refuge. These spaces resist patriarchal incursions and become powerful backdrops for ecological and feminist awakenings. Her storytelling uses the forest not merely as setting but as a living presence—a place where memory, myth, and resistance converge.

Diane Cook's The New Wilderness offers a more dystopian take, where the forest is one of the last surviving natural spaces amidst environmental collapse. For Cook, the wilderness is both a test and a teacher. It challenges the constructs of civilization, especially in how they shape motherhood, survival, and autonomy. The forest in Cook's vision becomes a crucible — one that exposes the fragility of human systems and the strength of those who live in harmony with the wild.

Richard Powers, in The Overstory, gives trees and forests centre stage. His characters awaken to the consciousness of the forest and find themselves transformed by its silent wisdom and immense temporality. The forest in Powers' fiction is not just part of nature—it is a complex, interconnected system with agency, memory, and narrative power. It calls for a shift in perspective, inviting readers to view the world through a more-than-human lens.

The second part of the title, "to Futures," suggests that these ecofeminist texts are not just documenting loss or lamenting destruction. They are envisioning alternatives—futures shaped by ecological empathy, gender justice, and relational ethics. This forward-looking component of the title implies that the authors use fiction as a space to imagine worlds where coexistence, rather than domination, is possible.

In the works of **Joseph, Cook**, and **Powers**, the future is not a singular, utopian destination. It is plural, uncertain, and dependent on the choices we make today. Their stories advocate for futures where both women and nature are respected, their voices heard, and their roles reimagined. These futures emerge from the ruins of patriarchal and exploitative systems and are grounded in values of care, reciprocity, and ecological balance.

Ecofeminist Visions

The term "Ecofeminist Visions" emphasizes that these narratives are deeply rooted in ecofeminist ideology. Ecofeminism links the oppression of women and the degradation of nature, offering a critique of patriarchal, capitalist systems that exploit both. But beyond critique, ecofeminist visions are inherently constructive—they propose new ways of being, thinking, and relating. Literature becomes a vehicle for these visions, giving form to what often goes unspoken in dominant narratives. Each of the three authors contributes uniquely to the ecofeminist vision. Joseph blends cultural and spiritual dimensions with feminist resistance. Cook explores bodily and ecological vulnerability in extreme environments. Powers uses scientific and philosophical lenses to reframe the human-nature relationship. Together, they create a rich tapestry of ideas that extend the boundaries of ecofeminist thought.

The title also underscores a movement — a shift not only in narrative but in consciousness. From dense, rooted forests to uncertain, imagined futures, the stories trace the arc of transformation. They ask what kind of world we are creating, and more importantly, what kind of world we wish to leave behind. Through characters who resist, reconnect, and reimagine, these authors propose that the path to the future lies through a deeper, more ethical engagement with both nature and each other.

In essence, "From Forests to Futures: Ecofeminist Visions in the Fiction of Sarah Joseph, Diane Cook, and Richard Powers" encapsulates the thematic breadth and critical depth of the study. It reflects a journey from the ecological past and present to the visionary futures that literature can help us imagine – futures where forests are protected, gender is equal, and the Earth is not just survived, but cherished.

Cook, Diane. The New Wilderness. Harper, 2020

In The New Wilderness, Diane Cook presents a dystopian world where environmental decay has driven humans to seek survival in one of the last remaining wild zones. On page 67, Cook describes the protagonist Bea's evolving relationship with nature: "She felt the land responding to her, as if it recognized her tread." This moment reflects the ecofeminist theme of reciprocity between woman and environment, portraying the wilderness not as enemy but as a conscious presence. The narrative frames motherhood and survival as deeply ecological acts, reinforcing the interconnectedness of gender and ecological experience.

Joseph, Sarah. Gift in Green. Translated by Valson Thampu, Harper Perennial, 2011

Sarah Joseph's Gift in Green is set in the fictional village of Aathi, where ecological harmony and spiritual consciousness coexist. On page 112, the character Ponmani asserts, "We don't own the land; the land owns us," encapsulating the indigenous and feminist ethos of the novel. The story critiques modern, masculine development models and elevates traditional, women-centered ecological wisdom. Joseph blends myth, realism, and eco-spirituality to offer a powerful ecofeminist vision rooted in Indian cultural traditions.

Powers, Richard. The Over story. W. W. Norton, 2018

Richard Powers' Pulitzer Prize-winning novel presents interwoven stories of people who connect deeply with trees and forests. On page 142, Powers writes: "The tree is saying things, in words before words." This posthuman sentiment aligns with ecofeminist thought by challenging human superiority and recognizing the agency of non-human life forms. Through characters like Patricia Westerford—a scientist marginalized due to her beliefs in tree communication—the novel critiques patriarchal science and affirms an ecofeminist ethic of respect, intuition, and interdependence.

Gaard, Greta. "Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-Placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism." Feminist Formations, Gaard revisits ecofeminist debates and emphasizes a non-essentialist, materialist feminism that embraces species interconnection. On page 31, she writes, "Women's environmental activism is not due to biology, but experience shaped by gendered roles within ecological systems." This challenges essentialist readings of women as 'closer to nature' and instead grounds ecofeminism in lived realities and socio-political critique. Her analysis supports reading characters like Bea in Cook's novel not as archetypes, but as complex eco-political subjects.

Merchant, Carolyn. The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution. Harper One, 1980: Merchant's foundational ecofeminist text critiques how mechanistic science replaced organic, holistic worldviews during the Enlightenment. On page 193, she notes: "Nature, once a nurturing mother, was turned into a mindless machine to be controlled." This historical analysis is useful for interpreting Richard Powers' reversal of mechanistic thinking in The Over story, where trees regain mystery, vitality, and agency. Her work offers a theoretical backbone for understanding the gendered history of ecological domination reflected in literature.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the selected texts reveals strong and diverse ecofeminist concerns articulated through themes of ecological degradation, gendered suffering, spiritual ecology, and resistance to patriarchal and capitalist domination. Each author contributes uniquely to the ecofeminist discourse,

drawing from their cultural, geographic, and narrative contexts to reimagine the relationship between women and nature.

In Sarah Joseph's Gift in Green, the village of Aathi emerges as a symbolic space where traditional ecological wisdom is preserved through women's collective memory and resistance. The character of Ponmani embodies a spiritually grounded ecofeminism, where water bodies, trees, and the soil are seen not as resources but as kin. For example, Ponmani's declaration—"We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children" (Joseph 89)—emphasizes intergenerational ecological ethics. The narrative critiques development projects that disrupt ecological and social harmony, and women become the voice of resistance, blending spirituality with activism.

Diane Cook's The New Wilderness offers a stark contrast, presenting a dystopian future where environmental collapse forces a group of people to abandon urban life and reinhabit the wild. The central character, Bea, undergoes a transformation shaped by the harshness and intimacy of the wilderness. Her journey illustrates a form of embodied ecofeminism, where motherhood, survival, and environmental ethics intersect. On page 103, Cook writes: "She was not just keeping her daughter alive. The land was teaching her to live." This moment highlights how care, adaptability, and relational knowledge—often associated with the feminine—become vital in the face of ecological disaster.

In Richard Powers' The Overstory, the forest is not just a setting but a character, with trees portrayed as intelligent, social beings. Powers de-centers the human and introduces a post human ecofeminist vision, where the lives of trees and their interconnected networks redefine our understanding of agency. The character of Patricia Wester ford, a marginalized female scientist, echoes ecofeminist concerns with institutional power and the silencing of ecological wisdom. The academic world dismisses her work on tree communication, yet it becomes central to the narrative's ethical transformation. As she states, "The world is fantastically more complicated than we think" (Powers 198), reminding readers of the limitations of patriarchal rationalism and the value of intuitive, holistic knowing. A common result across the three texts is the interdependence of ecological health and social justice. Whether rooted in myth and cultural memory (Joseph), physical survival and maternal bonds (Cook), or scientific imagination and multispecies kinship (Powers), the novels emphasize the necessity of rethinking human-nature relationships. Women, in each of these works, are not passive victims but active participants in ecological restoration and resistance. Another significant finding is the critique of dominant systems-capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy-that commodify both women and nature. Joseph critiques the neoliberal state; Cook imagines the collapse of such a system; Powers exposes its unsustainability through ecological tragedy. These critiques align with ecofeminist theory, which sees environmental exploitation and gender oppression as structurally linked. Finally, the narratives do not only critique – they also envision futures where alternative ways of living and thinking are possible. These futures are not grand utopias but tender, local, often painful attempts to live differently. Ecofeminist hope is rooted not in technological salvation but in ethical realignment – through care, humility, and listening to the voices (human and non-human) long silenced.

Relevance of the Paper:

This paper holds significant relevance in the contemporary global context where ecological crises, climate change, and gender inequalities are increasingly interconnected. By examining the selected works of Sarah Joseph, Diane Cook, and Richard Powers through an ecofeminist lens, the research brings attention to how literature serves as both a reflection and a critique of socio-environmental injustices. The paper contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship by bridging literary studies, environmental humanities, and feminist theory, offering insights into how narrative art can reshape ecological consciousness and social responsibility. In a time when the world is grappling with the consequences of environmental exploitation, this study reaffirms the importance of alternative worldviews that promote coexistence, care, and ecological ethics.

Future Scope of the Present Study

There is ample scope for expanding this research into comparative studies that include more diverse voices, such as Indigenous authors, Dalit ecofeminist writers, or African ecological narratives. Future studies could also explore other genres such as poetry, drama, or graphic novels that portray ecofeminist themes. Additionally, the inclusion of climate fiction (cli-fi) and speculative fiction from non-Western regions would enrich the global ecofeminist discourse. The integration of digital humanities tools—such as ecological mapping or data visualization of narrative themes—could also offer new dimensions to literary analysis. This paper lays a strong foundation for further academic inquiry into how literature can intersect with activism, policy discourse, and community-led environmental practices.

Need and Importance

The need for ecofeminist literary studies has never been greater, as the climate crisis disproportionately affects marginalized communities, especially women. This research is important because it not only critiques the structures that perpetuate ecological and gender-based oppression but also highlights narrative possibilities for resistance and renewal. Through its analysis of powerful literary texts, the paper advocates for a shift in consciousness that aligns with the principles of justice, sustainability, and empathy. It emphasizes the necessity of rethinking anthropocentric and patriarchal worldviews, and foregrounds the role of literature as a site of ethical engagement, cultural critique, and imaginative transformation.

Findings of the Research Paper

The research reveals that Sarah Joseph, Diane Cook, and Richard Powers construct complex ecofeminist visions where women and nature are interlinked in their suffering, resilience, and agency. The study finds that all three authors challenge exploitative systems such as patriarchy, capitalism, and technological domination, offering instead narratives of healing, interconnection, and resistance. Characters like Ponmani, Bea, and Patricia Wester ford become symbolic figures of ecological consciousness and moral awakening. A key finding is that these works do not merely document environmental loss; they reimagine futures shaped by cooperation, care, and deep ecological awareness. The forest—literal and symbolic—emerges as a central site of both trauma and transformation.

Conclusions

To conclude, the researchers come to the point the present Research Paper journeys through ecofeminist terrains shaped by the storytelling of Sarah Joseph, Diane Cook, and Richard Powers. It illuminates how literature can critique ecological injustices while simultaneously imagining ethical futures rooted in care, reciprocity, and collective survival. By analysing these authors' unique yet interconnected visions, the study affirms the power of narrative to challenge dominant ideologies and inspire ecological empathy. The researchers further come to the point that the present paper ultimately argues that ecofeminism is not just a theoretical framework but a lived and literary practice of resistance, hope, and renewal—crucial for navigating our way through ecological and ethical crises toward more sustainable futures. In conclusion, the selected works offer multi-layered ecofeminist visions that move "from forests to futures," advocating for a more inclusive, ethical, and sustainable coexistence. These literary texts do not just reflect the anxieties of our time—they actively participate in shaping ecological consciousness, making literature a powerful tool for environmental and feminist resistance.

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