

RECLAIMING AGENCY: AN ECO-FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF FEMALE EMPOWERMENT IN '36 VAYATHINILEY'

Sridevi. T¹

Balaraman.S²

^{1&2} Faculty of Science and Humanities, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Ramapuram, Chennai, Tamilnadu,

India.sridevit1@srmist.edu.in.

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.63001/tbs.2024.v19.i02.S.I\(1\).pp803-806](https://doi.org/10.63001/tbs.2024.v19.i02.S.I(1).pp803-806)

KEYWORDS

Eco-feminism,
Female Empowerment,
Patriarchal Oppression,
Environmental
Degradation,
Tamil Cinema,
Intersectionality,
Social Justice,
Environmental Justice.

Received on:

19-09-2024

Accepted on:

26-12-2024

ABSTRACT

This article presents an eco-feminist analysis of the Tamil film '36 Vayathiniley' (2015), exploring the intersections of female empowerment, environmental degradation, and patriarchal oppression. Through critically examining the film's narrative, characters, and themes, this study demonstrates how the protagonist's journey toward self-discovery and agency is inextricably linked to her relationship with the natural world. By reclaiming her agency, the protagonist challenges the dominant patriarchal structures that perpetuate environmental degradation and oppression. This research contributes to the growing body of eco-feminist scholarship, highlighting the importance of intersectional approaches to understanding the interconnectedness of social and environmental justice.

INTRODUCTION

The intersection of feminism and environmentalism coined as eco-feminism, has garnered significant attention in recent years. Eco-feminist theory posits that the domination of women and the natural world are interconnected and that the liberation of one is inextricably linked to the liberation of the other. Tamil cinema, with its vast reach and influence, offers a unique platform to explore these intersections. This study seeks to contribute to the growing body of eco-feminist scholarship by examining the Tamil film '36 Vayathiniley' (2015) through an eco-feminist lens.

DISCUSSION

After marriage, one can be divided into two. On one side, the characteristics of the past and the warrior spirit are depicted in a deteriorated state, while on the other side, the warrior spirit of the present is portrayed in a faded state. In the domestic life of the present, she becomes a Vasanthi, who has lost her dreams. In an environment where her self-respect is questioned and ridiculed, she believes she is losing herself. The disregard of a selfish husband, the disdain of a daughter living solely for the sake of external societal values, the tension at the workplace, the mental strain of aging, the fainting before the President of India, whom her daughter (Mithila) wished to see, and being the subject of ridicule on social media are some of the bitter circumstances through which Vasanthi navigates. Her thoughts, speech, actions, and pursuits require immediate attention from her husband, Tamilchelvan (Raghuman). Considering his wife, who

has become a mere shadow of herself, as someone insignificant, the 'mind' of Vasanthi becomes intensely troubled when he speaks or acts. He faces this peculiar situation with extreme intensity. The places reflecting the self-interest of an average man in domestic life shine throughout the screenplay.

The guidance from her office colleague (Vedavarshini), who shares joy and grief amidst various crises, a friend from college during the time of the 'Women's Clothing Rights Struggle' (Abirami), and a bus friend (Paati) acquired through lively conversation provides comfort to Vasanthi. In disrupting Vasanthi's mental peace, the husband, Tamilchelvan, plays a primary role. It is undeniable that the reality presented in this depiction is profound."

The truth cannot be denied. Vasanthi (Jyothika), who is without parents, feels pity for her elderly uncle and aunt. The place where she confronts her husband's urging to go to Ireland as a housemaid without pay is tense. The encounter at her elderly grandmother's house, where she works as a seamstress, touches the heart. The twist in the narrative unfolds through their meeting. Vasanthi rewrites her chapter anew by participating in a video on social media and in the marathon.

'36 Vayathinile' subtly portrays the domestic environment of the emerging middle class and the status of women; one cannot easily overlook this. From the beginning of the story, Vasanthi's terrace garden and the vegetables it yields are depicted as another medium. The narrative constructs Vasanthi, oppressed by her husband, as identifying herself through the production of vegetables in the 'terrace garden' using 'organic cultivation.' This

structure is noteworthy as it links the uprising and reclamation of a woman subjected to oppression with 'natural' production. Vegetables produced through artificial methods possess toxic characteristics. Consuming them causes significant harm to one's health and longevity. Vasanthi's 'resolve' to revive the production of toxin-free, naturally sourced food beckons a return to nature. Vasanthi spoke about toxin-free food and organic production at a forum, which was attended by many notable personalities, businessmen, a Member of the Legislative Assembly, and international private groups. The scope of this address transforms into a topic of discussion. Its outcome leads to a resolution being passed in the Tamil Nadu Assembly session with all members on behalf of 'organic farming.' Vasanthi, instead of succumbing to compromise in her domestic life, evolves into a figure who brings about significant change in Indian society in terms of nature conservation and women's advancement. 'At 36,' Vasanthi rediscovers her identity and realizes her dream.

Eco-Feminism

The English word 'Feminism' is derived from the Latin word 'Femina.' In Tamil, it is referred to as 'பெண்ணியம்' (Peṇṇiyam), which means 'a person possessing qualities about womanhood.' According to Charlotte Bunch, feminism is not merely about obtaining rights for women; it is an endeavor to transform society itself. Feminism is not against men. It opposes only patriarchy. Feminists view feminism as a broad spectrum. They categorize several feminist concepts that help understand the socio-economic status of women, grounded in their bodily and mental realities. These include cultural structures, matriarchal societies, patriarchal societies, sexual discrimination, gender, politics, power, and liberation. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that there are numerous concepts highlighted by feminists.

Feminism encompasses various categories such as Psychological Feminism, Marxist Feminism, Dalit Feminism, Traditional Feminism, Radical Feminism, Post-Feminism, Post-Dalit Feminism, Eco-Feminism, Social-Ecological Feminism, Feminism of the Emerging Era, Moderate Feminism, Extremist Feminism, and Black Feminism. Among these, let us develop an understanding of Eco-Feminism.

Francoise d'Eaubonne, a French feminist, was the first to propose the concept of Eco-Feminism in 1974. Eco-feminism is a theory that integrates feminism and ecological protection. Numerous conferences and workshops conducted by educational and professional feminists continuously enriched the discourse of Eco-Feminism. Eco-Feminism is also referred to as 'Environmental Feminism.'

This theory examines the relationships between women and nature, acting with the initiative to raise awareness about the connection between the two. It identifies the ways in which both nature and women are treated by a patriarchal society. Additionally, it presents a perspective that values the Earth as sacred, recognizes humanity's role in the natural world, and embraces all living beings with respect.

Narayani Subramanian, a marine biologist, states that Eco-Feminism is a political ideology linked to a primary feminist theory that seeks to understand and analyze the relationship between gender and the environment. She adds that "all concepts associated with Eco-Feminism are based on two fundamental aspects," which can be observed as follows.

1. Environmental degradation disproportionately affects women:

When environmental degradation occurs, women are compelled to spend more time on basic needs such as food and water. In communities where gender-based wage disparity already exists, the deterioration of the environment leads to reduced wages in forest and agricultural sectors. Women's income, nutrition, and health decline, causing significant deprivation. Their social relationships are disrupted. Traditional ecological knowledge is eroded. During environmental disasters, the safety of women and children becomes questionable.

2. The connection between women and nature:

Environmental feminist Vandana Shiva argues that women naturally have a stronger connection to nature than men. This connection is seen as both traditional and mystical. Some feminists criticize the sanctification of this bond between women

and nature. They caution against excessive sanctification that could lead to detachment from realities. At the same time, even when rejecting sacredness, the responsibility for fulfilling basic family needs such as food and water remains heavily placed on women, thus reinforcing their connection to the natural environment. Another aspect of the bond between women and nature is the ecological gender gap. Most environmental protection products are marketed with a focus on women. "Just as women take care of families, the responsibility for taking care of the Earth is also placed on women," notes marine biologist Narayani Subramanian.

"Motherhood is the first victim of environmental degradation. In natural disasters, women are often the most affected. The male dominates the Earth. He not only exercises power over nature but is also a consumer and destroyer of it. Women cannot talk about liberation without talking about nature, as they have a closer connection to it than men. Therefore, ecological criticism has been viewed from a male perspective. Ecofeminists advocate that women should prioritize the ecological feminist perspective. The liberation of the Earth and women must begin with men; to achieve Earth Liberation from the men who have seized it, all aspects—forests, rivers, mountains, birds, and animals—must be freed from their grasp. This is being made possible by utilizing ecological feminism as a political tool," says analyst N. Radhinikumar.

"The clan was led by the mother. All authority rested with her. When the father is unknown, only the mother reliably identifies the lineage. This mother is referred to as 'the true mother.' Only she can lead the group. This era is called the time of collective awareness. The woman identifies her production as another aspect of her motherhood. Tools such as baskets, ropes, and methods useful for production are primarily utilized by women. They have long managed essential productions related to livelihoods, such as food preparation, garment making, distribution, and shelter construction. Decision-making authority has resided with women. After the advent of private property, men transformed the matrilineal community into a patrilineal one. To retrieve this, the power of 'mother' must be reclaimed. Only then will she begin to attain primacy, as ecofeminists believe," states analyst Radhinikumar.

In the context of environmental feminist theory, a dialogue about cinema can be presented at the age of 36. The protagonist of the screenplay, Vasanthi, aims to illuminate artificial production methods to pave the way for natural ones, reclaiming her identity. The narrative is structured around the character of Vasanthi. The story unfolds in a way that seeks to rejuvenate natural farming practices. The saying, "the sprout of the pod seed germinates before the seedling," is a voice of the elders. "Advancing natural agriculture reduces input costs and simultaneously paves the way for self-sufficient farming. Furthermore, by ensuring the availability of organic food, environmental protection is guaranteed," states K. Nammazhvar. The internal and external pressures faced by Vasanthi propel her towards a return to nature. She is portrayed as a figure who expresses the relationship between women and nature. In Indian societal structures, Vasanthi navigates the challenges that women face after marriage. The screenplay does not fail to showcase these aspects. She lived with dreams before marriage but loses them post-marriage. During her college years, she engages in the struggle against the restrictions on women's clothing, boldly opposing the college administration and the principal. It is evident that her peers look up to Vasanthi as a role model who acts out of conviction.

However, the shame and disgrace that come post-marriage become crowns for Vasanthi. Her husband, Tamilchelvan, plays a primary role in placing this crown upon her. He embodies the average patriarchal husband who undermines her self-identity and self-respect. Such portrayals are prevalent throughout the film. In moments of despair, the only desire that arises is to seek herself. The understanding that "if you lose yourself, your dreams vanish" reflects her quest for self-respect. In this context, for Vasanthi, who struggles with losing her identity and faces challenges in life, "the terrace garden" becomes a turning point. The "terrace garden" serves as a foundation; a friend in the agricultural office is present. One of Vasanthi's friends converses with her mother-in-

law, saying, "Should we not talk about it?" As the school year comes to an end, the narrative reveals that her daughter will water the plants in the terrace garden. It cannot be simply stated that this action is transmitted to the next generation. This is because the portrayal also attempts to depict the inherent connection that women possessing maternal qualities have with both nature and nature-based production.

Even as vegetables are produced in the terrace garden, Vasanthi appreciates the friendship with the vegetable vendor who sells by the roadside. When she approaches him for change, he says, "I need tomatoes and brinjals." Vasanthi responds, "We have all that available on our terrace." The vendor replies, "Beans and carrots can only be found in cool places like Kodaikanal." Scenes related to the terrace garden emerge in such contexts. For Vasanthi, who produces solely for herself and her dependents, it is not just a turning point for her but for the entire narrative. Outside the struggle, "the terrace garden" stands as an investment. In an urbanized environment, it showcases a modern way of production for personal needs and natural farming.

The concept of "ecological feminism" not only emphasizes the connection between women and nature but also highlights the need to protect against the exploitation of nature by patriarchal ideologies. This theory proposes a continuous dialogue aimed at reclaiming the artificial modes of production and facilitating a return to natural production. Furthermore, it seeks to interrogate patriarchy by reclaiming production for oneself. It centers discussions around returning to nature. Vasanthi's personality serves as the representative that brings these notions into action. In a male-centric world, women continue to fight to assert their existence. The manifestation of that struggle takes on various forms. Vasanthi starts with the struggle to reclaim herself and progresses to the movement to restore nature-based production. Here, she reflects the ecological feminist concept that to reclaim oneself, one must also reclaim the essence of production, that is, nature.

Vasanthi goes to visit her grandmother, a friend on the bus. She lovingly provides her grandmother with organically grown vegetables from her home's terrace garden. The grandmother acts as a generous figure to the owner of a clothing shop. The grandmother uses the vegetables given by Vasanthi to cook and offer them to the shop owner. The food's recipient experiences an overwhelming taste. Additionally, he gains awareness from the cook regarding the distinction between natural and artificial vegetables for an upcoming family wedding. The owner promotes organically produced vegetables for their flavor and health benefits, to which the cook agrees. Consequently, based on the grandmother's information and recommendations, Vasanthi is invited. She is made to agree to supply all the vegetables needed for the cooking at the shop owner's family wedding.

Vasanthi does not wish to decline the opportunity she has been seeking. She perceives this opportunity as particularly challenging. In that context, she sees artificially produced vegetables on the market, contrasting with natural ones. At that moment, her anger manifests as a reflection of public concern. She realizes that if they are produced naturally, not only flavor but also health can be ensured for future generations, including women. Vasanthi shifts from a short-term goal of earning by supplying kilograms of organically produced vegetables for the wedding feast, to a broader aim that promotes a "revolution of pesticide-free food" for the entire human race. Vasanthi inherently carries the qualities of motherhood (woman/nature) in her actions of producing, protecting, and providing.

"Globalization, liberalization, privatization, and urbanization have begun to mask nature while artificial prosperity thrives. The screenplay showcases the use of various synthetic chemicals in production to prevent vegetables from spoiling over time, enhance visual appeal, grow larger, market quickly within months of planting, boost flavor quality, and increase productivity with minimal sowing. This means that we are still consuming these products. The film illustrates that natural farming is an alternative to consuming unhealthy, contaminated food. This approach aims to preserve nature and humanity.

Genetic modification has only been adopted for two characteristics in crops: to prevent pest attacks and to enhance resistance against herbicides. The creation of BT seeds and

Roundup Ready seeds was done as early as 1986. The gene from the bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis* was incorporated into cotton, soybean, and potato seeds," documents K. Nammazhvar in the book on natural farming.

Vasanthi inherently acts with a sense of responsibility. She guides the household, purchases the essentials for daily meals, thoughtfully acquires them with economic consideration, and takes care of family members, contributing actively in various ways. With a maternal instinct for women, Vasanthi takes the lead. In contrast, she responsibly highlights the consequences of artificially produced vegetables. In such circumstances, the connection between nature and women in production naturally radiates from her. At one stage, this transforms into a wrathful resolve. She advocates for chemically untainted natural production. Vasanthi discusses the necessity of consuming non-toxic food for a healthy life. Her actions concerning natural welfare and human welfare are becoming subjects of public discourse in India. Vasanthi is portrayed as a representative of eco-feminist thought."

36 Vayadhinile (2015) depicts a Tamil film where ecofeminism philosophy and social movement; correlate the environmental issues with feminism. The film is based on the Arab Indian. A Canadian woman named Vasanthi, who is 36 years old struggles against the dictatorship of society and discovers herself. The movie establishes the biology of women and their affines with nature; exemplified in Vasanthi's love for crop cultivation and the disappearance of the use of chemicals among others. The film breaks the structure that erases the identity of Vasanthi, as similar protests exclude women and the environment. The ecological concern is linked with the enabling process of the character of Vasanthi bringing into the limelight her abilities to enable sustainable practices.. Her fight as the champion of organic farming alongside championing for the wellbeing of the community is in line with what Ecofeminist holds that environmental conservation is a key to changing society. The movie symbolizes new regeneration coming into Vasanthi's life as she reignites her life through positive enhancement of the self through positive action that supports the healing of both nature and self. watching 36 Vayadhinile calls viewers to accept one's responsibility of supporting the environment and spiritual health to let women transform society. It remains a sad testimony to the fact that ecological and gender issues have to be fought in unison hence the realized need to fight for them.

CONCLUSION

36 Vayadhinile works as a thematic narrative representing the basis of ecofeminism where the female protagonist is strongly linked to the idea of environmental protection and female emancipation. On a very crucial level, it is also symbolic of women and nature where both are exploited by patriarchal structures. Conversation with Balu demonstrated how Vasanthi's advancement and advocacy for organic production reflect the ecofeminist crusade that an individual change can propel systemic change in ecological and social change. Ultimately, 36 Vayadhinile conveys a hopeful and inspiring message: the empowering of women to take up their roles and drive sustainable changes, social justice as well as environmentalism is enhanced not only among the women who realize their potential but also among the larger society. This connection between the protection of the environment and the emancipation of women is the core principle of ecofeminism, which makes the film a perfect example of what that concept is all about.

REFERENCES

- 36 Vayathinile. Directed by Andrrrews, 2D Entertainment, 2015.
- N. Irathinakkumar, Theories of Analysis and Multiple Readings, 2016, Kayalkavin Publishers, Chennai.
- Dr. K. Panchangam, Literature and Theories of Analysis, 2011, Annam, Thanjavur.
- The Art of Analysis, T. S. Nadarajan, 2011, N.C.P.H Chennai.
- Why Organic Farming is Necessary, K. Nammazhvar, 2023, Iyalkavai, Oothukuli.

- Ecology and Feminism: An Indivisible Relationship: Narayani Subramanian, <https://www.hindutamil.in/news/supplements/uyir-moochi/673588-ecology-and-feminism.html>, 2021, Hindu Tamil Daily website.
- Ecofeminism, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecofeminism>, Wikipedia website.