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**The Prefigurations of Cultural Ecofeminism in the Book of Ruth**

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**Abstract:** The Book of Ruth is the eighth book of the Holy Bible. It is often recited at Shavuot (harvest festival) in Jewish Tradition. Cultural Ecofeminism is the sub branch of Ecofeminism. The theory explores the intrinsic connection that nature and women share due to similarity in (gender) roles and (bodily) traits. This connection is explored in the cultural context of the Book of Ruth. The mode of approach taken is contextual approach which considers the relationship between individuals and their physical, cognitive and social worlds. The major theorists of Cultural Ecofeminism include Sherry B. Ortner, Lori Gruen, Eric C. Otto, Vetriselvi, Carolyn Merchant, Ynestra King and Elizabeth Carlassare.. The research examines the ways in which female characters, especially Ruth, are represented in relation to the nature to which they are embedded. Recurrent cultural ecofeminist patterns and themes in the character interactions and story structure are analysed. Synergy of women and nature are drawn to trace the intrinsic connection of women and nature. Various Bible Commentaries (International, Catholic and Jerome) are used in validating the argument. There has been immense study in the realm of Cultural Ecofeminism. Roy's *God of Small Things* and Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green* were examined through Cultural Ecofeminism. Feminism and Ecocriticism were used to analyse the Book of Ruth. *The Biblical Book of Ruth: A Feminist Literary Reading* by Kaija Helena Ranta and *Ruth: An Earth Bible Commentary* by Alice M. Sinnott are examples. Cultural Ecofeminism in Ruth not much explored.

**Keywords:** *Nature, Women, Culture, Ecofeminism, Bible Studies*

Nature and women have been a major concern of literature from time immemorial. Ecofeminism theorised this concern connecting it with culture. The age-old connection between women and nature are explored by analysing an age-old work like The Holy Bible but from a novel perspective shaped by the perception of Cultural Ecofeminism.

The nature-women relationship has been existing since ages. Many rituals that connect women's fertility to changes in nature and natural elements exist across the world regardless of geography and age. Ancient Egypt tested pregnancy by making use of wheat and barley grain by checking the germination of the grains from exposure to the suspected woman's urine. "Egyptian researcher Kim Ryholt at the University of Copenhagen discovered a papyrus from ancient times with instructions on how to recognize a pregnant person. When a woman wants to know if she has children, she will urinate into a mixture of barley and emmer (an ancient Egyptian variety of wheat)". Customs and rituals similar to this still exist. *Kocharethi* written by Narayanan becomes vocal about the pregnancy customs of the *Malayaraya* tribal community (36). These customs make use of rice to check healthy pregnancy. "The pregnant woman should unwrap the rice...A crack in the rice meant danger" (36). The absence of crack in the rice gave consolation to the pregnant woman as well as her close community. Absence of crack indicated healthy pregnancy. Then, identical wrappings of stone and iron, et cetera were used to determine the sex of the fetus. "Kunjipennu was asked to touch one of the two identical packets. She did accordingly. They opened the wrapping--it contained the piece of iron. That meant the child was a boy" (36). The above showcase the manifestation of nature-women relationship and are pieces of evidence to substantiate how women's fertility can be connected to nature.

The concern of Cultural Ecofeminism is the assertion of femininity and the resultant dissolution of patriarchal structures. Patriarchy has hegemonically succeeded in creating a sensibility that suggests feminine features as weak and inferior. The very features which are prejudiced and stigmatised as weak are taken as the weapons against patriarchal superiority. The double exploitation (patriarchy as well as anthropocentrism) faced is addressed by the theory. Women are closer to nature while men are to culture. Nature is inherent while culture is constructed. This suggestion showcases the cultural construction of patriarchy and its resultant exploitation. In addition to these, Cultural Ecofeminism explores aspects of care, empathy and human connection. Cultural Ecofeminism thereby becomes a holistic approach that comprehends the connection between women and nature as well as among women. The concept of sorority and human connection, with a special emphasis among women thereby becomes an important part of the theory of Cultural Ecofeminism.

“Cultural Ecofeminism projects the relationship between nature and women” (Vetriselvi 76). The existence of terminology like “Mother Earth”, “Motherland” as well as attributing words like “barren”, “fertile”, et cetera to earth and land are examples of how this special relationship is manifested through diction. Additionally, there are expressions like “virgin land” which refer to land that is untouched by people and virginity is a word that is often associated with women. Here exists a comparison between cultivating land and having sex with a woman. The comparison can even connote the act of plundering land to raping and exploiting women.

Sherry Beth Ortner, an American Cultural Anthropologist, argued that cross-culturally and historically, women, as opposed to men, have been seen as closer to nature because of their physiology, social roles and psychology (73). Cultural Ecofeminists believe that women are in synchrony with nature and work in union with it while men have an opposing relationship with nature. Ortner says that women are closer to nature than men and men are closer to the high ground of culture (83-84). Lori Greun talks about the elevation of "women's virtues caring, nurturing, interdependence and rejects the individualist, rationalist... with men (qtd. in Otto 77). Cultural Ecofeminists believe that women have a special relationship with nature at first because of their reproductive role. But this does not mean that women are related to nature only because of their physical features. Instead, they are holistically connected to nature. This multi stranded relationship between nature and women becomes similar in different realms that make women and nature connected as well as closer to each other.

Otto talks about how the theory dismantles patriarchy by prioritising feminine values (77). R. S. Vetriselvi, Assistant Professor of Arignar Anna Government Arts College, Musiri talks about the “intimate relationship between women and nature both psychologically and physiologically” (76). The celebration of feminine values involves the indifference towards biological differences as means of discrimination (Vetriselvi 76). Carolyn Merchant writes about the way the theory celebrates women's biology and nature as female power and talks about ancient rituals of goddess worship (7). Ynestra King says that the theory "analyses environmental problems within its critique of patriarchy" (qtd. in Vetriselvi 76). Carlassare opines that Cultural Ecofeminism has its roots in Radical Ecofeminism and rebels against patriarchy's devaluing traits and values associated with the gender construct of womanhood (Carlassare 89).

Vetriselvi talks about how Cultural Ecofeminists compare elements of nature with woman: “They compare earth, water, fire and moon with woman” (76). There had been a belief that women’s menstrual cycle is influenced by the lunar cycle. “Several studies have linked lunar phases with biological processes such as sleep, mood disorders, and the menstrual cycle” (Jones). Menstrual cycles immensely affect the mood patterns and the mental well being of women. The lunar cycle thereby also

affects women both physically as well as psychologically. Using separate words for physical and psychological realms does not mean that they are separate. Rather they can be understood as two different aspects that are closely connected and can even be overlapping. Hence, nature affects both the realms simultaneously.

The closeness of women to nature makes them liable to share the similarities in the exploitation that nature suffers from. This is a major concern of the Ecofeminists. Sherry Ortner writes about how men's relationship with nature is often opposite as that of women's with nature (73). Ortner writes that "...women are seen as closer to nature than men, men being seen as more unequivocally occupying the high ground of culture" (83,84). Men often try to claim authority over nature by securing ownership or claiming the same. Ownership of land is part of culture and civilisation. It symbolises dominance. Along with fixing supremacy over nature, men try to assert dominance over women. As land is often seen as property and named for ownership, women are often considered as men's property getting 'surnamed' by and after them. This nature of men makes them build a hierarchical relationship with both nature and women. While women are closer to nature and are in synchrony with it showing parallelism, men maintain a graded and stratified relationship with nature by constantly trying to create and belong to the upper strata of the hierarchy. This often results in exploitation. Authority and supremacy can lead to misuse and destruction.

Women get exploited by patriarchy as nature gets exploited by anthropocentrism. Women are also materialised as nature is plundered by the materialist human beings. The reproductive capabilities of nature and women are oozed out for materialistic pleasure and purpose leaving behind the bitter experience of exploitation. Commercial cutting down of trees and materialising women in pornography can be equated since both acts treat their victims as commodities. This similarity in exploitation is often explored by Cultural Ecofeminists.

Though exploitation is explored, the theory primarily focuses on the relationship between nature and women due to their gender roles as well as other aspects. Assertion of feminine features is a major concern of the theory. The theory focuses on this assertion and aims at the dismantling of patriarchy through this assertion. Exploring the power associated with these gender roles can lead to the destruction of stereotypical attributions to femininity entitled by patriarchy. "Cultural ecofeminism dismantled patriarchy by prioritizing 'feminine' values" (Otto 77). There is a contemporary growing misconception that in order to dismantle patriarchy, one has to negate one's femininity. The assertion of feminine values and traits can fight against patriarchy.

Carolyn Merchant, American philosopher and historian of science says that in Cultural Ecofeminism, women's biology and nature are celebrated as sources of female power (7). Patriarchy has hegemonically associated feminine features with weakness. These prejudices penetrate into the daily lives as well as into the career opportunities of women. The existence of enquiries regarding pregnancy plans to a job seeker in the corporate world validate the argument. Patriarchal prejudices regarding femininity still pervade the world. Cultural Ecofeminism puts feminine values upon a high pedestal thereby attempting to dissociate the association of the concept of femininity with weakness. When feminine values are prioritised, the evident showcasing of importance for feminine values eventually dismantles patriarchy.

Lori Gruen, an American philosopher and scholar in Ecofeminism says that Cultural Ecofeminists "elevate what they consider to be women's virtue- caring, nurturing, interdependence- and reject the individualist, rationalist and destructive values typically associated with men" (qtd. in Otto 77). The theory explores the values that are often associated with and carried by women. Additionally, the theory treats men with a stereotypical eye thereby treating patriarchy with its own medicine. Here, women are placed on a higher pedestal through a focus on feminine values.

There are other theorists who share the same argument of how prioritising interdependence over caring gifts women a seminal role in family and society. Judith Plant, the acting publisher of New Society Publishers and the co-editor of *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism and Home* (1989), talks about the importance of typical value associated with women:

Women's values, centred around life-giving, must be revalued, elevated from their once subordinate role. What women know from experience needs recognition and respect. We have had generations of experience in conciliation, dealing with interpersonal conflicts in daily domestic life. We know how to feel for others because we have practiced it (qtd. in Otto 78).

Women's pregnancy is understood in patriarchal terms as a time of weakness. The immense power associated with accommodating and carrying another human inside is often neglected. In addition to providing life, women play a major role in sustaining life. The milk provided for the child becomes similar to the nourishment that nature provides for humans. They both provide and sustain life. The experience and expertise of women in providing life, recognising it and associating this ability with the fertility, nurturing and nourishment that nature upholds is the focus of the theory. The part played by women in the domestic realm is not just physical but psychological as well. They deal with duels daily. This gives them practice to be relative to each family member and makes them experts in empathising.

Women could listen to and comprehend the problems of the individuals in a better manner, provide them with solutions and protect them socially.

As the relationship between women and nature is multidimensionally interconnected, the problems are similar so are the corresponding solutions. Ynestra King, founder of Women and Life on Earth, writes about the theory of Cultural Ecofeminism: “cultural ecofeminism analyses environmental problems within its critique of patriarchy and offers alternatives that could liberate both women and nature” (qtd. in Vetriselvi 76). The purpose established upon this theory is concrete. It is dual liberation, of nature as well as women. By excavating the connection exuberantly and critically, the theory proposes a relief from the exploitative patriarchal culture that misuses women and nature selfishly and destructively. Hence, Cultural Ecofeminism brings into focus the hazards created by patriarchy, both environmentally as well as anthropologically.

The theory tries to explore an inherent and evident connection between women and nature hence the inherent and evident problems due to exploitation. Additionally, this connection is used to tackle the dual exploitation “... cultural ecofeminism posits an innate woman- nonhuman nature link and argues that this link should be embraced as a way of dealing with the social and environmental problems inherent and evident in patriarchal culture” (Otto 77). As we comprehend Otto’s argument, we could understand that Cultural Ecofeminism is not something that makes the hazards evident, instead the theory just points its finger on the hazards that are already existing. Cultural Ecofeminism suggests that the problems are not latent but evident and visible. In addition, the problems are not created by patriarchy but are there within the very yarn of the fabric of patriarchy. This means that exploitation and destruction is the very nature of patriarchy. Problems are not the construction of patriarchy instead patriarchy is the problem.

In *Terra Femina* (1992), Carolyn Merchant talks about how Cultural Ecofeminists “celebrate an era in prehistory when nature was symbolised by pregnant female figures, trees, butterflies, and snakes in which women were held in high esteem as bringers forth of life” (6). In *Radical Ecology* (1992), Carolyn Merchant refers to spiritual ecofeminism as “cultural ecofeminism”. According to her, Cultural Ecofeminism celebrates the relationship between women and nature by reviving ancient rituals on goddess worship, the female reproductive system, et cetera. The entities that are often materialised or made inferior are elevated to the height of subjects of worship. This step can be considered as a subversion of what patriarchy has been constructing for centuries. The bodies that are often diminished to the level of fodders to feed the “male gaze” in films, pornography, et cetera are raised up to divinity and worshipped. There are numerous communities who follow the tradition of Goddess worship. The bleeding goddess of Kerala at the Chengannur Mahadeva Temple in Alleppey

district is an example. “Yoni” or the womb worship is a ritual practised by many and the body part is considered as a source of “shakti” or power.

Cultural ecofeminism considers companionship and connection as dominant values over individualism and materialism. “...cultural ecofeminists, like some radical feminists, celebrate and revalue qualities, such as intuition, care, nurture, emotions, and the body, for example, that have been associated culturally and historically with women” (Carlassare). Eric C. Otto, Assistant Professor of Environmental Humanities at Florida Gulf Coast University, writes about an important tenet of the theory, that is, “Cultural ecofeminism argues that privileging care and empathy for all human and nonhuman life, instead of privileging self-interest and the production of marketable goods, are reversals necessary for an eco-centric, life-affirming culture to emerge” (78). The theory prioritises human unity and fraternity over separation and selfishness. The connection among women and interconnectivity among the entities in nature are treated alike here. Vetriselvi talks about creating an alternative women’s culture.

This culture is based on the feminine characteristics inter-connected to nature which is so long devalued by the patriarchal society. The bond between nature and women has created an ecological ethics, which is based on care and correlation and woman’s spirituality movement. Both the ethics of care and spirituality of women pave way to a solution of ecological crisis which the world is facing (Vetriselvi 76).

By combining the virtues of female connectedness as well as the interconnectedness of elements in nature, the theory demonstrates the necessity of leading a life that leads to unification of minds and thereby paying attention to relating with others sorrow and loneliness and empathising with them. The empathy generated in the mind can eventually get transformed into care and consideration for fellow beings. This is one of the concerns of Cultural Ecofeminism. The theory views women as a bridge towards environmental protection. The associations and attributions that connect women and nature allow them to empathise with nature and eventually stand up against its exploitation. This can eventually result in the formation of a strong man-nature bond hence can finally result in a human-nature bond.

Not all feminists welcomed the theory wholeheartedly. Some criticised it for its preservation of conventional stereotypes and argued that the theory invites nothing but further exploitation. Cultural Ecofeminism is one variant of Ecofeminism.

The Book of Ruth belongs to the Holy Bible. It tells the story of a Moabite woman, Ruth, who chooses to be with her mother-in-law rather than leave her in pursuit of a new life. Ruth reaches Bethlehem along with her mother-in-law from Moab. She gleanes in the fields to make a livelihood and finally marries Boaz and gives birth to Obed who becomes the ancestor of King David. Ruth is a Moabite woman married to a Jewish family. Naomi, her mother-in-law and Elimelech, Naomi's husband, migrated to Moab from Bethlehem long ago. Mahlon and Chilion married Orpah and Ruth respectively. All male members of the family die and the women are forced to return to Bethlehem for better living conditions. Orpah later leaves Naomi upon Naomi's insistence to join back the parental family but Ruth stays. As the narrative progresses, one could find that the transposition of the environment to which Ruth is embedded shares similarity with the transformation of Ruth herself. This parallelism of Ruth and the nature around her suggests a closeness and connection of Ruth to the nature around her.

The etymological meaning of Moab is the "seed of the father". It is named upon the story of Lot and his daughters who conceived from him. From the "seed", Ruth moves to the "house of bread", Bethlehem. Bethlehem is situated in Ephrata which means "the Fruitful" (Leonard 306). Ruth was barren at Moab. "And they took them wives of the women of Moab; the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth: and they dwelled there about ten years" (Ruth 1:4). The reference to ten years can be suggestive of how Ruth had the chance to conceive but did not. Philip F. Esler, the Portland chair in New Testament, writes; "Unstated but implied in the text is that neither Ruth nor Orpah had produced any children, even after ten years of marriage" (652). The death of her husband Chilion has taken away the possibility of conceiving. "Ruth's infertility is indicated by the biblical text" (Tamar Meir). This infertility is turned into pregnancy and childbirth when she is posited to the premise of Bethlehem. The transformation of "seed" to "bread" parallels Ruth's transformation.

Moab has been a place of barrenness in both the aspects of nature as well as femininity. The etymology of the name "Mahlon suggests weakness and Chilion destruction or consumption" (Adutwum 620). *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1968) tells that Mahlon can mean "sterility" or "sickness" and Chilion a "tiny vessel" or "consumption" (Wood 605). *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* says that their names can suggest other things beside the meanings mentioned above (Leonard 304). It appears as if the author has taken the literary freedom to name both the sons connecting them to their respective destinies. The names are evidently real and not symbolic" (Leonard 306).

The name of Orpah's husband resonates the relationship between the acts of consumption and destruction from an Ecocritical perspective. The thin line between consumption and destruction has been a major concern of the ecological critics. Orpah might have been 'consumed' by Chilion but did not conceive. Nature gets consumed or destroyed by anthropocentric attitudes and thus is prevented from prosperity and productivity. The sonorous similarity between the words "consumption" and "consummation" cannot be ignored. Whether it be the impotency of Chilion or the barrenness of Orpah, the result affects Orpah's body. The death of Chilion underlines this aspect and Orpah becomes the sole receiver of childlessness. The same happens to Ruth. Mahlon is inherently sterile. The patriarchal "consumption" happens but is unproductive. Mahlon's act of consumption is sterile and this sterility pervades Ruth's body and life. This aspect can be paralleled with the lack of productivity, prosperity and the poverty that prevailed in Ruth's family when they were in Moab. Moab was a place of sorrow and loss for the family in all aspects. Bible critics opine that Moab was not a barren place from the beginning. "The family chooses to go to Moab, which is a better place than Judah in terms of natural resources" (Adutwum 621). The women later become bereft of livelihood.

Naomi decides to go back to the place of abundance, Bethlehem. "Then she arose with her daughters in law, that she might return from the country of Moab; for she had heard in the country of Moab how that the Lord had visited his people in giving them bread" (Ruth 1:6). Bethlehem, as in the case of Moab, was not a place of abundance from the very beginning. The famine of Judah forced Elimelech and Naomi to flee. The poverty and prosperity of Moab and Bethlehem might not be permanent as the "seed" can become bread and "bread" can turn stale. The concern is that Moab and Ruth were barren and alike as Ruth and Bethlehem are fertile and alike. The change of environment from Moab to Bethlehem parallels the change in Ruth. The transposition of Ruth from Moab to Bethlehem is connected to the transformation of Ruth. Ruth becomes closer to nature than of any of the male characters in the Book.

Ruth is presented as a woman who finds her livelihood by gleaning in the field. Ruth fed her as well as her mother-in-law from the prosperity of nature. Gleaning is feasible if there are extra grains available to be gleaned. Ruth, by gleaning, showcases her closeness to nature as well its prosperity and capability to feed all. Nature's prosperity later gets paralleled with Ruth's fertility. Ruth's willingness to be closer to nature introduces her to Boaz from whom Ruth later gets pregnant.

An equalisation is evident between Ruth and nature on grounds of their fertility through divine intervention. The conception of Ruth is presented as the blessing of the Almighty. "So Boaz took Ruth, and she was his wife: and when he went in unto her, the Lord gave her conception, and she bare a son" (Ruth 4:13). Tamar Meir, a scholar in Hebrew literature, talks about how Ruth Rabbah writes in 7:14 as

“God shaped a womb for her”. Further Meir quotes Ruth Rabbah 6:4 mentioning Boaz's sterility. “According to Ruth Rabbah, Boaz was sterile, a condition that Naomi’s prayer and blessing changed...”. The abundance in nature is also shown as a result of God’s blessing. “...for she had heard in the country of Moab how that the Lord had visited his people in giving them bread” (Ruth 1:6). *The Jerome Biblical commentary* comments: “Judah’s renewed prosperity meant Yahweh was powerfully present there again” (Wood 605). The fertility of Ruth and prosperity in nature are seen as having the same source and alike.

Loss of food is equalised with loss of children. At Moab, all three women were without food as well as children. “... nature becomes in Hebrew prophecy the weapon of the wrath of God” (McNamara 181). Barrenness was also considered as the result of the displeasure of the Almighty. *Jerome Biblical Commentary* talks about how clan continuity and integrity are affected by loss of field as well as by childlessness (Wood 605).

Considering the land, which can be a synecdoche to nature, as well as Ruth as property or possession is evident in the Book of Ruth and is accorded by the various commentaries of the Holy Bible. Boaz tells the kinsman “Then said Boaz, What day thou buyest the field of the hand of Naomi thou must buy it also of Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of the dead upon his inheritance” (Ruth 4:5). The verse is suggestive of how land or nature is equalised with Ruth the woman. *The International Bible Commentary* has comments on the verse;

Here, as in v 5, the verb ‘buy’ is used in relation to acquiring Ruth. It is obvious that it is the commercial nature of the transaction that accounts for the use of this verb in connection with Ruth being taken by Boaz as wife. The use of the verb in the Mishnah, collection of the oral traditions of the Jewish law, in marriage contexts may be said to strengthen the observation (624).

The commentary goes through the mind of the nearer kinsman. It talks about how he accepts the obligation to redeem the property but later declines to act as the nearer kinsman on learning that with the responsibility of redeeming the property comes the responsibility of “buying” or “acquiring” Ruth.

*The Jerome Biblical commentary* talks about the “right” that the nearest kin of Naomi have on Ruth. “Boaz must delicately maneuver the kinsman into yielding his prior rights over Ruth” (Wood 608). The kinsman’s rights over Ruth are explicitly referred to in the text and well as in its interpretation. The closest kin is referred to as *goel* which means “redeemer”. *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* talks about Jewish law that tells the purpose of the “Redeemer” as is to redeem or repurchase a slave or a person and the redeemer would be the closest relative (Nelson). A Redeemer

can avenge for blood as well. Ruth's redeemer is also hence entitled with the privilege of repurchasing Ruth. Here happens the commodification of women. *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* further writes: "Elimelech's closest kinsman, had to buy the land from Naomi before she let it pass to some nonrelative" (Wood 608). The kinsman's right over the land is connoted here.

There is an utterance by Boaz; "When buying the field, you are likewise obliged to accept the hand of the woman Ruth..." (Ruth 4:5). The closest kinsman refuses to accept Ruth along with the land. "He answered, 'I yield my right of kinship, for I am obliged not to cut off the posterity of my own family. You may make use of my privilege, which I freely declare I will forego' (Ruth 4:5). He could accept the land alone but not along with Ruth since the land would get inherited to Ruth's son. Here happens the refusal of both the land as well as Ruth. When the Kinsman's refusal of land as well as Ruth is considered from the perspective of the kinsman, the burden of an additional wife, her sons, the inheritance that should be given for the children, et cetera might have perplexed him. The kinsman might have thought about possessing Ruth as well as the land solely on the perspective of profit and loss. *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* elucidates on the above; "...he will emerge with nothing to show his expenditure but an additional wife, Ruth, and the possibility of more mouths to feed, ... his responsibility" (Wood 608). The interpretation uses the term "expenditure" and thereby showcases the evident denotation of materialism and commodification of both women and land, that is, nature. *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* comments that the *goel* declined "because the transaction would involve loss of purchase money" (Leonard 303). Though Ruth is vividly portrayed as a hardworking woman who earns for her as well as for her mother in law's livelihood through gleaning, the expenditure for Ruth becomes the focus point of the kinsman. This is stereotypical and ironic. This thought might be the product of a kind of conventional patriarchal prejudice. Ruth's children, rather than considering them as humans, are diminished to mere mouths to be fed. The land is understood singularly in terms of possession and profit. The land is diminished to property. "Property" is often identified as an economical term. Ruth and nature thereby become intrinsically linked through the means of patriarchal possession and economical belittlement.

The act of buying the land should be done in witness to the elders. "I wanted you to hear this, and to tell you in front of everyone sitting here, including the eldest of my people. If you will take possession of it by the right of kinship, buy it and possess it (Ruth 4:4). Marriage is also conducted inside the society making the members of the community, the witnesses of the event. This can be considered as another instance of equalising land or nature to women. Both women and land are to be transacted to the other person in public.

Ruth becomes a foil to the kinsman. Ruth's exhibition of care and empathy for Naomi for nothing profitable reflects the concerns of Cultural Ecofeminism. Rather than weighing against each other the pros and cons of staying with and leaving Naomi, Ruth spontaneously chooses to be with Naomi caring for the old woman. Ruth had immense opportunities to get married again and commence a new life. Instead of thinking about a new life, Ruth chooses to be with Naomi thereby becoming the embodiment respiring the very spirit of cultural ecofeminism.

As nature influenced Ruth's life, Ruth's bareness also had negative impacts upon nature. "The failure of Ruth and Orpah to produce children negatively impacted the family's capacity to run a farm and support itself" (Esler 652). This conclusion made by Esler immediately connects woman and nature. It has glimpses that tell how the infertility of women can have adverse effects on nature. It is implied that the childlessness of Ruth and Orpah brought in poverty. Though they had land, they were unable to make it prosperous and productive. This shows the intrinsic connection between women's fertility and nature's productivity.

Though Ruth is not adored or worshipped as a goddess among the monotheistic Abrahamic religious sects, she is respected and remembered as an inevitable and indispensable bead in the thread of the salvation narrative. Ruth is not adored but admired for her contribution and closeness to nature. The acceptability and acknowledgement for Ruth as well as her space in the Scripture can be considered as elements of Goddess worship since a Goddess is acknowledged, accepted and admired. Worshipping other than Yahweh is an impossibility in Christianity. The respect given for Ruth is not that of adoration but that of the acknowledgement that she deserves.

The Book of Ruth carries the theme of sorority. In the *Oxford English Dictionary* the word sorority comes from a Medieval Latin word *sororitas*, which is an extension of the Latin term *soror* meaning sister. The word is suggestive of sisterhood and fraternity among women. The contemporary usage of the word involves a reference to women clubs in colleges and universities. The feminist concept of sorority got defined during the second wave of feminism. The definition goes like this; "as a bond of female brotherhood that would overcome the differences of class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and nationality, putting gender before any other existential condition". *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* states that "...Ruth's unselfish commitment to Naomi breaks the unmitigated gloom of the tale thus far and introduces a faint glimmer of hope" (Wood 606). Naomi and Ruth showcase fellowship and deep love. They transcend their possibilities and 'would have' achieved privileges to ensure companionship to each other. "Naomi sees the lives of the young widows ungrudgingly spent for her and the dead members of her family as a demonstration of what Hebrews termed *Hesed*" (Adutwum 621). *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* provides an interpretation for Naomi's mentioning

of the practical difficulties of having new children, waiting till they mature and making them marry Orpah and Ruth (Wood 606). Naomi highlights the least probability of getting married at senility, begetting twins; there should be twins in order to give for both the widows, the long wait for them to get matured. These utterances should be considered as deliberate strategies of convincing the daughters to leave her. Naomi, having been far away from the clan for a long time, might have lost the majority of her connections. "That Naomi had not been in touch with them during her sojourn in Moab is evident from the fact that she acquired her information about the famine's end by hearing about it in Moab (1:6), not from a report from Bethlehem" (Esler 657). In addition, she was aware that kinsmen other than brothers were not strictly bound to fulfil the levirate. Comprehending the severity of the situation as well as the opaque future before them, Naomi tries to convince her daughters to leave her in search of better fortunes. "Naomi's second longer speech, emphasizing her barrenness and inability to produce more sons for them to marry, convinces Orpah" (Clements 102). Naomi could have asked Ruth and Orpah to stay back due to her senility. Ruth could have returned to her native place for better circumstances but chose to stay with Naomi. These choices are *hesed*. "This word expresses the spirit that so values its object that it does for the object more than is normally required and does it with love, compassion, devotion, and at all cost" (Adutwum 621). The sorority of Ruth and Naomi is the perfect example of the concept of *hesed*. This *hesed* is extremely rare in contemporary society.

"Boaz lives only until he fulfils his role, and no longer. This creates a new situation: the reestablishment of the relationship between Ruth and Naomi" (Meir). Upon Boaz' death, Ruth again shares the widowhood of Naomi. In addition, when Boaz was alive, he came in between Ruth and Naomi. Upon his death, that separation is also dissolved. While Ruth became the mother of Obed, Naomi became the foster mother of Obed. Motherhood is also shared by both the women. Grief as well as happiness get shared between Ruth and Naomi.

The Book of Ruth is an exploration of the bond among the female trio as well. Naomi and her two daughters in law; Orpah and Ruth share an unfathomable bond among them. Ruth and Orpah are Moabite women and there is a high chance for their relatives to be present at Moab, the place where they had been living. Ruth and Orpah could have returned to their respective families at Moab itself. But they chose to accompany Naomi to Bethlehem. The inhibition of the women to leave Naomi dominates the farewell scene. "The close emotional bond between these women is evident when she kisses them goodbye; their tears and protestations that they did not wish to leave her (1:10) accentuate this bond" (Clements 653). Orpah cannot be prejudiced or concluded selfish or unloving or lacking a sense of sorority. Instead, she can be understood as a person who stayed with Naomi more than what is expected. Orpah, though had the opportunity to get back to her natal family, walked with Naomi through the way to Bethlehem. "The fact that she did so only after hearing Naomi's advice and not

earlier, for example, upon the death of her husband or before they had started out on the journey to Judah, hints at the depth of her devotion to her mother-in-law" (Esler 653). Orpah also carries the essence of sorority.

Sorority among the women of Bethlehem cannot be ignored. "Ruth is the only book of the Bible that gives us a hint of a women's community and social life existing alongside yet distinct from male society" (Ostriker qtd. in Esler 650). Esler, in the work, takes up an utterance told by Boaz; "All that you have done ... has been fully told to me" (Ruth 2:11). By considering this statement, Esler assumes that Boaz might have got the information regarding Ruth from the women of Bethlehem. "... Naomi later communicated to the women, either singly or in a group, the full story of her tragic experience in Moab and the reason for Ruth's arrival with her and that this knowledge then spread throughout Bethlehem" (Esler 658). The women had already identified Naomi. Esler illuminates this capacity of women to share information rapidly and brings in the usual term used for the ability "gossip". Gossip here is not connoted here in a negative aspect but is presented as an ability possessed by the women. This ability promotes sorority. "Another aspect of gossip relevant to the Book of Ruth is its function in promoting friendship or intimacy" (649). Further Esler talks about the importance of women in Ruth and how it "...necessitates considering a particular social pattern among ancient Israelite women" (Esler 650). Gossip is equated with networking and connotes agency. The agency of women made Boaz aware of the identity of Ruth and further helped her in her mission. The latent sorority of Ruth and the Israelite women hence can be pulled to the brim.

*The International Bible Commentary* refers to the sorority above mentioned. It goes like this: "The involvement of the women of the neighbourhood in the naming of the child (v. 17) may not be seen as unrealistic or unusual in the light of their role in both 4:4-17 and 1: 19" (624). "And the women of the near future were congratulating her and saying, "There was a son born to Naomi. They called his name Obed. Here is the father of Jesse, the father of David" (Ruth 4: 17). The above verse is suggestive of how the text inherently carries sorority and extends it to the future female generations as well. Women are an enduring presence throughout the text. The women are the ones who identified Naomi. If they were able to identify her even after all those years, it can be extrapolated that Naomi shared an extensive and deep-rooted friendship and connection with the women of Bethlehem when she once lived there. Sorority becomes a powerful weapon that can be taken against the division and hatred among women created by patriarchy.

The choice of Ruth to stay with Naomi is completely hers. Naomi asks three times to both Orpah and Ruth. Ruth replies as follows; "Do not be against me, as if I would abandon you and go away; for wherever you will go, I will go, and where you will stay, I also will stay with you. Your

people are my people, and your God is my God” (Ruth 1:16). The number “three” is often considered as the complete number. “In the Bible, the number “three” signifies completeness” (Rainey et al.). By refusing the third time to go back to her native place, Ruth completely refuses the suggestion. Ruth makes use of the agency to choose rather than conforming to patriarchal obedience. “Because of this matter, Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, “Be a widow in your father's house, until my son Shelah grows up. For he was afraid, lest he also might die, just as his brothers did. She went away, and she lived in her father's house. Ruth is expected to go back to her native place since her husband dies.” (Genesis 38:11). *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* also talks about the same tradition: “A widow ordinarily returned to her ‘father’s’ house” (Wood 606). Widow going back to the natives was the convention. Naomi also did the same. Though Ruth had possibilities as well as responsibilities of going back to her native people as well as native god, she chose the people of Bethlehem and Yahweh. The ideal thing to happen to Ruth is marriage. Though it happens later, Ruth was not provided with any foreshadowing of the event. Though society as well as her mother-in-law expects a remarriage, Ruth refuses to conform to it, instead chose to be with Naomi. “Nevertheless, we tend to miss their full force because we underestimate how unlikely Ruth’s response was in its ancient context...” (Esler 653). Ruth prioritised empathy and care over societal constructs and norms which are definitely patriarchal. In addition, patriarchal concepts like individualism and rationalism are blinded by the light of Ruth’s selflessness and commitment.

The Book of Ruth celebrates femininity. The fertility, conception, pregnancy and childbirth are celebrated. “And now you may have someone to comfort your soul and to care for you in old age, for he is born of your daughter-in-law, who loves you, and this is much better for you, than if you had seven sons” (Ruth 4:15). The fertility of Ruth has placed her above seven sons. One should remember that this Book is extremely old and definitely written in a patriarchal premise but outlaws it. “Boaz and Ruth meet and again he treats her with unusual favor. She is permitted to sit among the men and share their rations” (Brown et al. 607). The words used in the interpretation; “favour” and “permitted” showcase the patriarchy that persists. In addition, *The Dictionary of the Bible* writes that “Boaz accepted the implied proposal of marriage, but first had to redeem Ruth from a nearer kinsman, according to the levirate law. The kinsman renounced his claim...” (749). The word “claim” has immense implications towards considering women as men's property and something that can be claimed. In this particular patriarchal context, the potentials of femininity put the female on a pedestal and slaps patriarchy. According to Aggadah tradition, Boaz died on the very day of the wedding night after consummation. “However, Boaz dies on his wedding night, leaving Naomi and Ruth widowed together” (Meir). This substantiates that the sole purpose of the marriage was childbirth. “The sole

purpose of this matrimonial bond is to attain redemption for Naomi by the birth of a son" (Meir). This can be seen as another instance of dismantling patriarchy by restating the feminine roles of a woman.

Ruth is one among the five women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus Christ. Ruth is the great grandmother of King David. The assertion of femininity has enabled Ruth even to get into a male construct like the Genealogy. This is a major step on the ladder of dissolving patriarchy. Though Ruth conceived to sustain the lineage of Elimelech and Mahlon, Boaz became the focus, making Ruth the focal point. *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* says:

The story made it clear that Obed was the legal heir of Elimelech and Mahlon... Whoever added this genealogy has ignored that and has connected David, Jesse and, Obed to Boaz' family tree to emphasize more David's connection to that elect, divinely sustained line of Peres, Judah, and Jacob" (Wood 609).

The side-lining of Mahlon and fore-fronting of Boaz implies how Ruth's intervention is prioritised. Boaz' death on the wedding night itself is highly symbolic of Ruth's dominance. Boaz becomes a mere seed which disappears into the plant; Obed. The fertile ground, Ruth, or the foster mother Naomi become more important than Boaz. Hence, wherever Boaz is mentioned in the Genealogy of Jesus Christ, Ruth is the name that should be comprehended. "In Matthew's version of the genealogy Obed is presented as the son of Ruth" (Adutwum 624). Hence, in conclusion, Ruth becomes part of Genealogy, pushing away her husband Mahlon, her father-in-law Elimelech and her second husband Boaz as well.

The concluding lines of *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* regarding the Book of Ruth goes like this: "Her total commitment to Yahweh revived the dead stem of Elimelech, which eventually blossomed forth with David and his elect dynasty" (Wood 609). The sentence is pregnant with the metaphor in which the fertility of woman becomes the tenor and the prosperity of nature becomes the vehicle. The fields of Bethlehem were excessively prosperous so that gleaning was feasible. In addition, Boaz giving Ruth additional grain is due to prosperity. Ruth's fertility is manifested in Bethlehem and she becomes the reason for revival, replenishment and rebirth.

The life of Naomi can also be analysed from the perspective of cultural ecofeminism. Naomi was left with no heir at Moab. Her children encountered death there. In addition, she was in utter poverty. When the premise of Naomi is changed from Moab to Bethlehem, she got food as well as a grandson. Both are acquired through Ruth. In addition, Naomi's sorority with Ruth and Orpah as well as with the women of Bethlehem cannot be neglected.

Hence, we have seen some of the instances that become pieces of evidence for the argument that women are closer to nature. The life of Ruth and her transformation can hence be paralleled with the changes in nature to which she is embedded.

Cultural ecofeminism values interdependence and caring above the contemporary concepts of individualism and rationality. The communal life and companionship are blurred in the presence of the hyper importance to self-sufficiency and individualism. Sharing, caring and sacrificing are words that are rarely used in contemporary society. In addition, the third and fourth waves of feminism began to discuss the autonomy of women's bodies to justify and legitimise acts like abortion and homosexuality. Through the lens of cultural ecofeminism and the values eternalised by the Book of Ruth, abortion is an act against life and contraception against fertility. The possibilities of the proliferation of new life are denied in both the cases. The contemporary society normalises both the acts thereby neglecting the negligence shown by them towards femininity itself. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble (1990)* discusses the performativity of gender. The femininity discussed here is highly biological in nature rather than social. The feminine discourse constructed by the society is not discussed here, rather the biological and bodily traits and features of the female and the power, potency and productivity possessed by those traits are highlighted. There is a growing misconception that in order to disintegrate patriarchy, one has to negate one's femininity. Dismantling patriarchy should not be read along with disintegrating femininity. The Book of Ruth inscribes that the very assertion of feminine features can be a slap on patriarchy.

The book has pieces of evidence regarding how Ruth and nature are treated alike. The book presents Ruth's pregnancy as well as nature's prosperity alike. Both are presented and referred to as blessings from the Almighty, thereby making the point that both the fertility of Ruth as well as nature have the same source. Ruth and nature are depicted as possessions or assets. The childlessness in Moab, of both Orpah and Ruth, negatively affected a lack in the capacity of the family to run a farm. Lack of progeny brought in a lack of prosperity in nature. The fertility of women and the productivity of nature are thus intertwined. The theory prioritises feminine values in order to slap patriarchy. Ruth's assertion of her feminine features by giving birth to Obed makes her one among the five women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus Christ. This process is a demonstration of how the biological peculiarities of the female body itself can be female power and are instrumental in dismantling patriarchy. Ruth takes space in the male dominated genealogy. The Book of Ruth is a celebration of sorority which is evident between Ruth and Naomi as well as among Naomi and the women of Bethlehem. Sorority is a powerful weapon that can be taken against the division and hatred among women created by patriarchy. Ruth chooses to stay with Naomi. This choice is *hesed*. The Hebrew concept of *hesed* becomes a prefiguration of cultural ecofeminism. Ruth as well as Naomi practices

*hesed*. In her senility, she asks her daughters in law to get back to their families for new fortunes. The Book of Ruth becomes one of the early echoes of cultural ecofeminism. Hence, the Book of Ruth besides and beyond being in the thread of salvation in Biblical Narrative also embodies parallelism of Ecology and Feminism.

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