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**New Paradigms of Hope: A Study of Two Environmental Life Narratives**

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**Abstract:** This research paper seeks to study some new ways of hope and optimism through the grounded and the culture specific experiences of Mayilamma and Daya Bai, the two environmental activists from Kerala, the southernmost state of India. The attempt is to deconstruct the conventional anthropocentric paradigms vis-à-vis hope and optimism detaching these notions from the Occidental and Christian implications. It has been hypothesized that both Mayilamma and Daya Bai, known for their environmental activism on behalf of the tribal community, stand for a planetary solidarity which tries to encompass all living and non-living entities. The study foregrounds the resilience of these women shown against the giant multinational companies like Coca-Cola in their fight for ecological refurbishment. It also tries to highlight how their struggles and endurance bring to the fore a metaphysical stance of hope. Emerging concepts such as hydro democracy, arboreal abode, trans-spatiotemporal hope are introduced to theorize the established ideas in the study. The analysis projects the reconstitutive potential of affirmative optimism as well as the hope embedded in the rustic wisdom throwing light on newer dimensions of postcolonial studies and environmental ethics.

**Keywords:** *Trans-spatiotemporal hope, Hydro democracy, Arboreal abode, Planetary solidarity*

Much contemporary deliberations on hope take human-centred pathways where hope is visualised in terms of human security, stability, and progress. However, this anthropocentric approach gets undermined with the rallying cry for environmental justice and its praxis. The life narratives of Mayilamma and Daya Bai hold out adequate instances of how hope can be reconceptualised and reconfigured to integrate a more holistic and comprehensive ecological perspective. The argument hinges on the philosophy of hope posited by Richard Snyder and Bernard Schumacher, and also on the precepts of ‘land ethic’ set forth by Aldo Leopold. Schumacher discerns that “a hope that does not have an object or an intentional movement toward a future, possible, difficult-to-obtain good, would not in fact be hope” (67). Leopold’s concept of ‘land ethic’ which presupposes land as an ‘energy circuit’ and ‘biotic mechanism’ can well be connected to the convictions of both Mayilamma and Daya Bai whose activism stems out of their committed ecological conscience unravelling a unique vision of planetary solidarity.

The life narratives, *The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior* of Mayilamma and *Pachaviral* (The Green Finger) of Daya Bai, act as the proffered testimony to their ecological wisdom and deep insight into sustainability. Mayilamma’s enthusiastic engagements with water and Daya Bai’s diligent care for the forest, protects the rights and potentials of natural entities and places them equal to humans. The prevailing customary Western approaches to environmentalism which seek technological remedies and formulae to attain the pro-human goals, have been challenged through the sheer rustic wisdom displayed by these activists. The inherent values of the indigenous perceptions bring forth a regenerative prospect for attaining ecological symmetry and congruity. The transcribed life narrative of Mayilamma, *The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior*, is a good case in point. The deep-seated convictions and the spirit of fearlessness, knowingly or unknowingly, lead this illiterate tribal woman to make a strong plea for hydro democracy. The expression hydro democracy refers to a promising approach that would ensure a democratic and unbiased governance of water resources. It prioritizes the relevance of a collective as well as a reciprocative process in promoting a sustained approach adhering to hydro-democratic values. The way in which an illiterate Adivasi woman’s experience is entangled with the vibrant legacy of folk traditions on one side, and the politics of water on the other, brings home an expansive ecological concept of environmental justice. As a unifying force of the ethnicity and the global green consciousness, she remains an unyielding force in resisting the Cocacolanisation of the village Plachimada.

Mayilamma’s vision of hope is not confined to human prosperity but extends to the well-being of water bodies, land, and the entire ecosystem. She recalls in the life narrative, “Back in those days when they first came, there was a huge lake where the company building stands today. *Neeluri* shrubs grew abundantly on the shore of the lake and the expanse of these indigo thickets spread far and wide

into the area beyond” (15). The ethnic songs, drums, jigs, and rites as celebrated in the narrative can be viewed as the natural composite elements that get integrated into an autochthonous way of life. The very organic relationship with nature and an unrestricted access to land and its natural resources form the basic experience of the narration:

When we dug up the soil, we would find a variety of tuber; we called it noolankizhangu. The forest had plenty of medicinal herbs. Pappammayi was familiar with all of them. Whenever we caught a fever or cold, she would light a fire using stones and drop *thumba* leaves and castor leaves in water and make us inhale the steam. The fever would flee in no time. (16)

A deeper layer of ecological thought is laid bare when the web of organic environmental relations is juxtaposed with environmental toxicity imposed upon the tribals of Plachimada:

Perched on the top of a mango tree,  
A Plachimada bird chirped:  
“My throat is parched, dear people!  
Your Coca-Cola surely cannot wet my parched throat!  
O man from the alien shore,  
I am not used to it.  
My nest is here, so is my family, my land and its people.  
After devouring the rice that quells our hunger,  
After sucking dry the water from the Earth’s womb  
O man from the alien shore!  
You and your lackies will leave with your bottles!” (25)

By viewing nature as a living entity with its own rights, Mayilamma tends to shift the focus from human-centric goals to a broader, more inclusive form of hope that encompasses all life forms. Her mode of activism bridges the past, present and the future generations. Mustering courage and determination from her ancestral past, she could actuate and mobilise the commons against the giant Coke, inspiring millions to confront the environmental imperialism in future. In addition to the temporal boundaries, the resilience and hope inherent in her environmental activism transcend spatial

boundaries too; instilling a shared vision among the global environmentalists. This kind of transpatiotemporal hope manifests a profound environmental thought which surpasses Plachimada, and Mayilamma's ecological confrontation ceases to be a mere local issue. Drawing on a Biblical analogy of David and Goliath, she proclaims: "Our fight with the Company was similar to this story! They told us that in the story it was the boy who won the fight. We thought that we, like him, would also win the battle even if it took a long time" (xxxv). Schumacher's distinction between ontological and psychological hope is particularly relevant here:

The act of hoping is a consequence of a response triggered by an object or a precise situation, a response that nevertheless can also lead to either ordinary or fundamental despair. For this reason, a hope that does not have an object or an intentional movement toward a future, possible, difficult-to-obtain good, would not in fact be hope. This "intentional" movement is not only the foundation for the concrete act of both ordinary or fundamental hope, but also is in the ontological structure of *not-yet-being*, accompanied by the categories of the possible, of the project, and of the realizable utopia. (67)

Snyder defines hope "as the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals, and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways" (249). Mayilamma's hope for Plachimada is not just about human survival but about restoring the natural order and ensuring that water, as a living entity, can thrive. This hope transcends mere psychological optimism; it is more of an ontological stance rooted in the belief that ecological entities have intrinsic value and rights.

Daya Bai's fight for forest rights redefines hope in non-anthropocentric terms. Her activism is driven by the belief that forests and trees have autotelic dignity and should be protected not just for human benefit, but for their own sake. This perspective goes hand in hand with Aldo Leopold's concept of 'land ethic,' where postcolonial trajectories are redirected towards ecological restoration and sustainability. According to Aldo Leopold "An ethic may be regarded as a mode of guidance for meeting ecological situations so new or intricate, or involving such deferred reactions, that the path of social expediency is not discernible to the average individual. Animal instincts are modes of guidance for the individual in meeting such situations. Ethics are possibly a kind of community instinct in-the-making" (173).

Daya Bai's vision of hope is rooted in the idea of 'arboreal citizenship', where trees are seen as citizens with their own rights and voices. Her tireless works among the marginalised Gondu tribes in Tinsai village of Chitwada, Madhya Pradesh enabled her to acclimatise with their ethnic culture and their indigenous way of life. Her activism challenges the conventional notion of development, which

often prioritizes economic growth over ecological health. In *Pachaviral* she passionately exhorts, “Save water, prevent soil erosion, and protect mother earth” (43). By advocating for the rights of trees and forests, Daya Bai emphasizes the need for a more inclusive form of hope that recognizes the interconnectedness of all life forms and the importance of maintaining ecological balance. She speaks with exceptional eloquence about the indigenous tribes and their way of living:

The tribals’ ancient societal structures were built and shaped around the prudent conservation of water resources. They had a unique way of water conservation. The survival and prosperity of the community relied much on their traditional acts of sustaining . . . The natural aquifers of water are honoured much. Since they practiced a slash and burn model of cultivation, they did not stick to a particular place. (40)

The narrative also throws light on the detrimental effects of the so-called development programmes on the aboriginals. The imperceptive administration of massive welfare initiatives places them at the receiving end. Both the tribal women and the tribal land are subjected to exploitation. While women face hideous sexual harassment, their abodes are plundered for minerals and other natural resources signalling a chain of subjugation and dispossession! Injustices like these are what steer an activist like Daya Bai to mobilise her advocacy work for regenerative outcomes. In her quest for environmental sovereignty, as explicated through her life narrative, Daya Bai launches a new wave of campaign which embraces a transformative vision and ‘a perceived capability’ to achieve ‘the desired goals’ (Snyder 249).

Through their telling experiences and striking campaigns, both Mayilamma and Daya Bai attempt to fashion neoteric ways of optimistic vision rooted in environmental and planetary justice taking into account all living and non-living entities. In contrast to the notions of political sovereignty and global citizenship, they put forth a valuable framework for rethinking and revisioning these notions in terms of environmental sovereignty and ecological citizenship, interrogating the established orders and power hierarchies and standing up for the rights of the natural planet. The life narratives, *The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior* and *Pachaviral* project the significance of trans-spatiotemporal positions that recognize and tend the synthesis of all beings in the quest for a planetary solidarity.

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