



Unveiling Ecological Feminism in Manga Series *Buddha* by Osamu Tezuka

Pragati¹, Devendra Kumar Sharma²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English & MELs, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan, India

pragatiswm@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Department of English & MELs, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan, India

devendra999iitr@gmail.com

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Abstract

*Due to constant exploitation of environment, the theory of ecocriticism has emerged; this intersection of literature and ecology provides a greater scope to interpret current environmental crisis, and one of the lenses that has emerged through it, is 'Ecofeminism'. Ecofeminism is a social and political movement that examines the interconnectedness between the oppression of women and the degradation of the environment. Osamu Tezuka's manga series *Buddha*, while focuses on Siddhartha's spiritual journey, it also incorporates diverse female characters playing significant roles in the series. The paper probes into the various aspects of eco-feminist ideals through these female characters, such as the rejection of oppressive gender roles, the pursuit of personal agency and spiritual growth, and the recognition of the interconnectedness between human beings and the natural world. It further delves into the challenges of traditional patriarchal structures and offer alternative narratives that emphasize empathy and a harmonious relationship with nature.*

Ecofeminism is a value system, a social movement, and a practice, but it also offers political analysis that explores the links between androcentricism and environmental destruction.

(Birkland 18)

The spontaneous growth in the popularity of the study of literature exploring the relationship between the human and natural world, known as 'Ecocriticism' within the discourse of literary studies led to emergence of the theory of Ecofeminism. 'Ecofeminism' or ecological feminism was originally coined by renowned French Feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne in her *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974). Ecofeminism

officially became a mainstream movement in 1980, transcending its initial academic origins. As ecology relates to nature, and feminism relates to women, Ecofeminism represents the intersection of these two areas. Since it encompasses both a movement and a philosophy, there is no single definition that fully encapsulates it. Ecofeminism posits that the sustenance of life in nature relies on cooperation, mutual care, and love. Within the framework of ecofeminism, it is acknowledged that humans have an inseparable connection to nature, with women being particularly intertwined with it compared to men. This perspective highlights the association of patriarchal society with culture and women with nature. Sherry Ortner, in his

work “Is female to male as nature is to Culture?” (1972), argues that nature and women are inseparable, while culture and men are mutually dependent. Women are often categorized within the context of nature, as per their physical and physiological characteristics. It is believed that societal restrictions imposed on women; particularly regarding their bodies and biological functions, shape their social roles and psychological makeup, thereby excluding them from certain cultural functions. Sherry Ortner (1972) explores the notion that women are deemed inferior due to their perceived biological resemblance to nature. Ortner draws on Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949), and examines how women’s societal roles are seen as an extension of their physiological conditions. In this perspective, women’s physiological states influence their assigned roles in society. In women, many of the body’s key organs and functions are primarily designed for human reproduction rather than solely for their own well-being. Society tends to value men for their intellect, considering them as objective and rational beings, while women are often stereotyped as subjective, weak and mostly focuses on their bodies. This association between women and nature is influenced by the perception of nature as a mother figure, and patriarchy devalues nature because it devalues women. The intertwined relationship between women and nature creates a melancholic image as both identities erode under the oppressive control of patriarchal power structures. Women and nature are intrinsically linked through the processes of creation and procreation, as women, like nature, nurture their children, families, and surroundings. However, this nurturing role often leads to neglect and malnutrition for women. The imbalance caused by underfeeding those who nurture disrupts equilibrium and leads to devastation.

Ecofeminism can be understood as a critique from both feminist and environmentalist perspectives, recognising the shared suffering of women and the environment due to patriarchal domination. The persistent ‘androcentric premise’ present in contemporary schools of thought, assumes a masculine model of man and its corresponding values as universal. This premise includes elevating masculine traits and

values while polarizing masculine and feminine archetypes. Traits labelled as masculine, such as being hard-working, dominant, or calculating, are encouraged, whereas feminine traits like nurturing, caring, or accommodating are considered weaknesses. To be masculine is to distance oneself from ‘feminine’ characteristics. As Virginia Woolf in her *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) enunciates, “The history of men’s opposition to women’s emancipation is more interesting perhaps than the story of that emancipation itself” (Woolf 38). Throughout human civilization, women have often been expected to prioritize pleasing and serving men. Ecofeminism is influenced by feminist critiques of both science and religion, which are seen as responsible for restricting women’s entry into professional fields. Without the inclusion of women’s perspectives, science and religion exhibit biases in their methods, language, and models that are centred on male experiences. Patriarchal societies have not only oppressed women but also exerted dominance over nature, leading to its destruction. Customs and religious practices often became oppressive and restrictive for women, resulting in the abrupt denouement of their lives. These heinous acts were justified as a means of sanctifying society. As Gerda Lerner in *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986) mentions:

The system of patriarchy can function only with the cooperation of women. This cooperation is secured by a variety of means: gender indoctrination; educational deprivation; the denial of women of knowledge of their history; the dividing of women, on from another, by defining “respectability” and “deviance” according to women’s sexual activities; by restraints and outright coercion; by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power; and by awarding class privileges to conforming women (43).

Similarly, environmentalists questioned why nature was deemed inferior to men. The gendering of nature as female has granted men the privilege of dominating and exploiting it. Carolyn Merchant, in *The Death of Nature* (1980) explores how the concept of ‘Mother Nature’ is intertwined with cultural gender. Throughout history, nature has been feared and degraded as

an unpredictable force, revered as a nurturing mother, and cultivated like virgin soil.

Literature plays a significant role in illustrating the relationships existing in society. It acts as a reflection, projection and compilation of what is happening in society. One such form of literature is Manga. Manga, originally derived from the term 'humorous picture', has evolved over time to become a form of storytelling with complex plots and deeper themes. It covers a wide range of subjects, including politics, social issues, religion, history, and culture, among others. In *Techniques for a New Manga* (1942), it emphasizes that manga is an art form that aims to critique and challenge injustices, irrationality, unnaturalness, and anything incongruous with the nation's values (Etsuro). Japanese society has shown a remarkable ability to blend traditional elements with contemporary popular culture. Traditional artistic and cultural forms, such as the tea ceremony (*chanyoyu*), flower arrangement (*ikebana*), and kabuki drama, continue to be popular in contemporary Japan, showcasing the preservation of tradition alongside its transformation (Ng Ming 243). While manga has its roots in Japanese culture, Erika Fujiwara in "An Analysis of Contemporary Manga Culture in Japan and Sweden" (2010), states that the manga scholar Fusanosuke Natsume rejects the facet of nationalism in manga in its expanding cultural history. Natsume agrees with the special characteristics in manga, which painted Japanese culture to a certain magnitude. It is true that Japan has provided specific surroundings and conditions for the growth of the manga market. But manga itself is highly universal and mixed as a result of intermingling of other cultures, especially American culture, after the Second World War; a surge in the blend of indigenous and global elements can be seen. The diversity of genres and themes in manga allows it to cater to a wide range of readers and contributes to its global appeal.

Osamu Tezuka, often referred to as the 'God of Japanese comics,' has indeed made significant contributions to the development of postwar manga. He introduced innovative techniques and storytelling methods that have had a lasting impact on the medium. Tezuka emphasized the expressive power of manga.

Tezuka's manga works are known for their extensive research and attention to detail. Tezuka is credited with pioneering the genre of 'story manga' (*sutorii* manga), which focuses on complex narratives and character development. *Buddha* (2003-07) by Osamu Tezuka, offers a unique and captivating depiction of the life of Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism. Tezuka's interpretation of Buddha's life is visually distinctive, blending historical elements with imaginative storytelling. *Buddha* stands out for its ability to entertain readers while also shedding light on the profound philosophical and spiritual concepts associated with Buddhism. It is considered one of his significant works and has contributed to the popularity and understanding of Buddhism in a unique and engaging way. *Buddha* is considered by many to be Tezuka's pivotal work, reflecting not only the culmination of his style, but also best expressing Tezuka's worldview, model concerns and humanistic ideals. Other characters in *Buddha* play equivalent roles in the storyline to give its readers an engaging plot. The female characters of Migaila, Yashodhara, Visakha, have short roles in the plotline but they still manage to imprint a thought evoking after effect on the audience. These women, who challenge boundaries and simultaneously ascend their individuality, also manage to stay in tune with their femininity. One such character is Migaila, a bandit woman and the love interest of Siddhartha in the series. Through an ecofeminist perspective, the character development of Migaila in *Buddha* can be analyzed in terms of her relationship with nature, her struggles and her resilience. Migaila is introduced in the third chapter of vol. 2: *The Four Encounters* (2003), of *Buddha* series. She meets Siddhartha when another character Tatta takes him to show the real world outside the palace premises. They are attacked by a gang of bandits led by Migaila. The bandit gang is eventually destroyed by crocodile attack but Siddhartha manages to save Migaila in the end. Initially sceptical of Siddhartha and Tatta, Migaila eventually befriends them. As they continue their journey, Migaila and Siddhartha grow closer. When Siddhartha ask to go back to the palace, Migaila also escorts him. From there, she realizes that she is in love with Siddhartha. In fourth chapter of vol.2: *The Four Encounters*

(2003), when she sees Siddhartha sitting in a boat and sulking, surrounded by attendants and slaves, Migaila says to Tatta, “I guess anyone’d get sick from all that eating and partying. If I were looking after him, it’d be different.” (Tezuka157). This incident shows that even though she was a leader of a bandit group she still was in touch with femininity as she desired to take care of the person she loved. This

combination of leadership skills and nurturing aspect of women is often disregarded in patriarchal societies. Migaila who is a slave by caste, falls in love with a person who belonged to royalty. This aspect of challenging hierarchical setup of caste system in ancient India was outrageous and atrocious, but Migaila desired a union with the love of her life.



Drawings from *Buddha*, by Osamu Tezuka. Copyright by Tezuka Productions. First published in English by Vertical Inc.

Siddhartha’s father orders to burn Migaila eyes so that she won’t lay her eyes on Siddhartha in future and is later thrown on the outskirts. Uma Chakravarti in her work *Gendering Caste: Through A Feminist Lens* (2018) enunciates, “This intricate web of social, material and cultural factors, which require the specific marriage structures that operate particularly in the caste-based societies in India to perpetuate the hierarchical systems in place, are deeply threatened by ‘love’ between partners as the basis of marriage” (144). Migaila’s ability to ‘see’ the world despite being blind represents a deeper understanding and connection with nature beyond the physical senses. This connection emphasizes the ecofeminist belief that women and nature are intrinsically linked. The act of Siddhartha and Tatta saving Migaila’s life by sucking out the poison when she suffered from body rash, can be seen as a metaphor for healing and transformation. This represents the restorative power of nature and the potential for

women to reclaim their agency and overcome the harm inflicted upon them. Migaila’s experiences of both a stillbirth and having triplets highlight the themes of motherhood and nurturing. A woman and nature are intrinsically entangled as a result of the creation and procreation processes. The nurturers suffer as a result from malnutrition. Underfeeding nurturers disrupts equilibrium and causes devastation. Ecofeminism, essentially is a mutual critique between feminism and environmentalism; it acknowledges the crucial role that women play in nurturing life, and their close ties to natural cycles. Ecofeminist Charlene Spretnak in *States of Grace: The Recovery of Meaning in the Postmodern Age* (1991) highlights various women’s bodily experiences as “body-parables,” suggesting alternative ways of being and knowing. For instance, she discusses the “soft boundaries” experienced during the first day of a woman’s menstrual cycle; women’s peaceful and expansive post-orgasmic state (in contrast to the

commonly reported male vulnerability); and the way in which pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing blur the boundaries of me/not (138).

Yashodhara, a significant character in *Buddha* series, can be analysed from an ecofeminist perspective, focusing on her portrayal, her relationship with nature. She is introduced in chapter four, *vol.2 The Four Encounters, Buddha* (2003). She meets Siddhartha on a boat and one the attendant introduces her as, “Handcrafts, piano-playing, flower arrangements, and of course cooking... A perfect young lady” (Tezuka161); in other words, a suitable wife material for Siddhartha. Yashodhara and Siddhartha eventually get married in chapter six. Yashodhara said to Siddhartha, “I know how you feel about things. Castes shouldn’t matter when it comes to love, right? But there’s nothing to be done. It’s our custom. I know very well that you don’t love me.

But I’m your wife now. I love you with all my heart.” She further explicates, “We are royalty and relatives, my lord. Mother told me that we must carry on our royal blood-line. I will bear your children” (Tezuka 229). Initially, Yashodhara is portrayed as a stereotypical woman, who loves her husband irrespective of anything and wants to bear his children. In *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* (1993), Gerda Lerner expounds:

Men develop ideas and systems of explanation by absorbing past knowledge and critiquing and superseding it. Women, ignorant of their own history [do] not know what women before them had thought and taught. So generation after generation, they [struggle] for insights others had already had before them, [resulting in] the constant inventing of the wheel (119).



Drawings from *Buddha*, by Osamu Tezuka. Copyright by Tezuka Productions. First published in English by Vertical Inc.

As Siddhartha leaves his kingdom, which is later shadowed by prospect of ‘greater good’ leaving a vulnerable and pregnant Yashodhara behind. As a man, his absence as a father figure is jeopardised temporarily because there is a

history of men leaving everything behind in search of the truth and hence it’s not something new. But Yashodhara cannot take the step of abandoning the child behind, because women who are naturally nurturers, also don’t have a

history (or are unaware) of leaving everything behind to find ‘themselves’ or the ‘truth’. When she meets her husband again, now known as Buddha, she decides to follow his guided path of enlightenment and encourages her son to do the same. Yashodhara’s actions and decisions, such as seeking enlightenment and ultimately becoming a nun, challenge the traditional roles assigned to women, highlighting their capacity for self-determination. Yashodhara’s journey towards enlightenment aligns with ecofeminist ideals of recognizing nature as a source of wisdom. Her connection with nature and her surroundings is integral to her spiritual growth.

Another interesting character that also needs to be analysed is of Visakha. Visakha is seen in chapter four of *vol.3 Devdatta, Buddha* (2004). She is leader of a town that is hit by plague and has seen number of deaths. When she sees

Siddhartha, she falls in love with him. Eventually, she kidnaps him and tries to seduce him even though she is already engaged to Sukunda. When Sukunda confronts her about this, she accepts her mistake and says, “You are a splendid knight. But...your forthright heart has so little room for love...when love is all that I want” (Tezuka 269). She knows what she wants. When Buddha meets her again, in chapter four *vol. 7 Prince Ajatasattu, Buddha* (2007), by that time she has gone insane by overconsumption of hallucinatory potions. Though burdened with town’s responsibility, she thrived for what she wanted. Trauma from dead parents and other town’s people left her shattered but eventually attained enlightenment with the help of Buddha. Her journey from strong independent woman to an enlightened one shows her strength as a character.



Drawings from *Buddha*, by Osamu Tezuka. Copyright by Tezuka Productions. First published in English by Vertical Inc.

The ecofeminist project also includes reclaiming the body because it is similarly devalued, just like women and nature. By recovering the body, it can be liberated from its marginalized position in relation to the mind, and no longer be excluded from other concepts associated with the mind, in its individual, conceptual, and universal sense. Ecofeminists Terri Field in “Caring relationships with natural and artificial environments” (1995), Val Plumwood in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), Karen Warren in “Feminism and ecology: Making connections” (1987), Elizabeth Grosz in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994) and

Charlene Spretnak in *States Of Grace: The Recovery Of Meaning In The Postmodern Age* (1991), provide a deconstructive approach to the body, but solely attempting to recover the abstract body, as part of the ecofeminist project, falls short. Instead of solely emphasizing the restoration of the body in conjunction with other devalued concepts derived from dualistic thinking, the body itself has the potential to reveal the illusory yet influential divisions between these dualistic terms. Migaila, Yashodhara, Visakha etc. can be seen naked/semi-naked in many instances. For Japanese Manga critics like Otsuka Eiji, and

Yoshihiro Yonezawa, Tezuka's graphic illustrations carry subtle eroticism. In *Buddha* (2003-07), female characters are shown naked. During Yashodhara's pregnancy, Bandaka sexualises her, picturing her big pregnant belly. Though it is also argued that, as these female characters are not portrayed in an explicitly sexual manner and hence serves the aesthetic aspect of *shoujo* manga. The *gekiga* (Japanese editorial genre), along with *ero gekiga* (Japanese sexual comic books) genre delves into the sensuality of female body, a dimension that Tezuka consciously chose to exclude from his creations (Esquivel 55). Their bodies go through many changes throughout the plot and eventual healing of mind and body is what these characters stand for. Whether it is bodily disease, blindness, pregnancy, abortion, or mental illness; their characters have successfully walk on the path of healing and transformation. Migaila, Yashodhara and Visakha, have their own journeys and tragedies. These three women come from different backgrounds and have different stories but what's common is their connection with nature and their unapologetic femininity that they carry with themselves. They are close to nature and eventually attain enlightenment. Even Buddha also attains enlightenment when he spends his time in forests meditating and realising the interconnectedness of everything. Nature as wilderness is not romantically associated with women's embodiment but ambivalently symbolizes hope and risk. Migaila, Yashodhara, Visakha can be seen challenging the dualistic and hierarchical norms, urging non-dualistic and non-hierarchical forms of thought of ecofeminism. The connection between the female body and the earth is established based on shared natural attributes and characteristics; and hence putting forth the interconnectedness between the disturbance in the ecological balance and subjugation of women. Ecofeminism questions fundamental assumptions about dualisms of culture/nature, mind/body, reason/emotion, human/animal, subject/object, individuality/interconnection, and public-male/private-female.

The paper thus encapsulates the femininity and the environment projecting a contemporaneous concurrence. The female

characters in the *Buddha* series are not only in harmony with nature but also challenge orthodox societal structures; and at same time, present such narratives in which they emphasize compassion, empathy and holding onto their agencies simultaneously. Tezuka's female characters emphasise the resilience which runs parallel to the environment; another way of portraying his humanistic ideals in this fractured world, as these female characters embrace their womanhood and wilderness with unwavering spirit to embark their spiritual journey.

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