



**Sacred Stones and Silent Struggles: Women, Ecology, and Survival in Namita  
Gokhale's *Gods, Graves and Grandmother***

**V. Dhivya**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Chikkaiah Government Arts and Science College

Erode, Tamil Nadu, India

**ORCID: 0009-0002-7752-4382**

**Abstract**

This article presents an ecofeminist analysis of Namita Gokhale's *Gods, Graves and Grandmother*, drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Françoise d'Eaubonne and Vandana Shiva. The paper examines how Ammi builds a shrine from discarded stone in Delhi and turns waste into a sacred space for the community. It demonstrates how women create small ecological and spiritual spaces in the city, even when these spaces face patriarchal and commercial pressures. By revealing women's resourcefulness and exposing the structural limits they face, the study highlights the central idea of ecofeminism that ecological sustenance and women's liberation are interconnected and inseparable.

**Keywords:** *Ecofeminism, urban ecology, women's survival, subsistence perspective, patriarchal appropriation*



© This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 (CC BY-NC 4.0) International License. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>



## **Introduction**

Since the 1980s, ecofeminism has deepened the examination of the relationship between nature and women. Ecofeminism demonstrates that the systems which oppress women maintain a direct connection to the systems which control and exploit nature. Françoise d'Eaubonne introduced ecofeminism in her 1974 *manifesto Le féminisme ou la mort*, which asserted that feminism and ecological survival form an inseparable connection. Ecofeminism has developed into multiple philosophical perspectives through international contributions from activists and literary critics since its inception.

Vandana Shiva stands as the leading Indian scholar who has shaped ecofeminist discussions. Through her works *Staying Alive* (1989) and *Monocultures of the Mind* (1993) she has established rural and marginalised traditional practices of women as examples of sustainable ecological systems. According to Shiva, women maintain biodiversity and cultural heritage through their daily activities, which fight against global standardisation.

Namita Gokhale's *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* (1994) offers a powerful fictional representation of the ecofeminist ideas explored in this study. The story follows Gudiya and her grandmother Ammi as they construct a shrine from discarded stone in the crowded and socially unequal city of Delhi. The shrine develops into a sacred location which unites community members with their source of sustenance and their sense of meaning. The novel examines how women who exist outside both urban society and patriarchal rule develop survival systems that combine ecological and spiritual practices. The alternatives she presents become vulnerable when systems of appropriation and commodification come into contact with them.

This article presents a complete ecofeminist analysis of Gokhale's novel. The analysis draws from d'Eaubonne's foundational ideas and Shiva's Indian ecofeminism to understand how the shrine, the city, and Gudiya's body serve as sites where survival and exploitation occur. The analysis shows how Gokhale both honours the strength of women while revealing their weakness against patriarchal control.

## **Ecofeminism: A Theoretical Framework**

### **Françoise d'Eaubonne: Feminism or Death**



**The Text**  
**An International Peer Reviewed Online Journal of Language, Literature and**  
**Critical Theory**  
**ISSN:2581-9526**

Françoise d'Eaubonne first used the term ecofeminism in *Le féminisme ou la mort*. According to d'Eaubonne, feminism called not only for gender equality but also offered a vital solution to prevent ecological collapse. She argued that patriarchy treats both women and the earth as inexhaustible resources by forcing women into reproductive roles and the earth into productive roles. For her, the survival of humanity required a complete feminist transformation of social and ecological systems. The subjugation of women and the degradation of nature were both outcomes of a worldview that prioritised domination, accumulation, and control. Unless radically transformed, this system would lead not only to social inequality but to the destruction of the environment itself, and ultimately to human extinction.

Her central idea that the oppression of women and ecological destruction are two sides of the same coin was revolutionary at the time. She insisted that feminism must extend beyond questions of equality with men and take on the larger task of redefining humanity's relationship with nature. Her vision of ecofeminism was far-reaching. Feminism, she insisted, should not be confined to demands for equality with men but must redefine humanity's relationship with the environment. D'Eaubonne's bold warning captures this sense of urgency:

Patriarchy, by binding women to reproduction and by binding the earth to production, establishes a system of appropriation that threatens life itself. Feminism must break both chains if it is to prevent the death of humanity (*Le féminisme ou la mort* 63).

This uncompromising warning has remained a cornerstone of ecofeminist theory. It offers an interpretive lens for reading Namita Gokhale's *Gods, Graves and Grandmother*, where the city of Delhi, Ammi's improvised shrine, and the body of the protagonist Gudiya all emerge as spaces simultaneously exploited and creatively reimagined for survival. D'Eaubonne's radical theory shows that women's survival strategies in the novel illustrate the ecofeminist view that ecological health and women's freedom are linked.

### **Vandana Shiva and Indian Ecofeminism**

While d'Eaubonne gave ecofeminism its name, Vandana Shiva provided the framework with a distinctive Indian articulation that linked women's struggles directly to ecological practices. In *Staying Alive*, Shiva critiques the dominant model of development, which she terms "maldevelopment." According to her, so-called progress often destroys ecological diversity,



**The Text**  
**An International Peer Reviewed Online Journal of Language, Literature and  
Critical Theory**  
**ISSN:2581-9526**

erases traditional knowledge systems, and marginalises women. She highlights that women, especially those in rural or marginalised communities, maintain what she calls a “subsistence perspective.” This perspective, rooted in practices of care, recycling, seed preservation, and community sharing, is not a sign of backwardness but an alternative, more sustainable model of living. As she observes, “The marginalisation of women and the destruction of biodiversity go hand in hand. Both are consequences of a system that values uniformity, monoculture, and profit over life and diversity” (*Staying Alive* 42).

In *Monocultures of the Mind*, Shiva further argues that industrial and patriarchal systems enforce uniformity not only in agriculture but in thought, erasing plural ways of knowing. Such monocultures, she claims, diminish resilience and create ecological and social vulnerability. By contrast, women’s ecological labour, whether in farming, household economies, or urban survival, embodies plural, diverse, and life-affirming practices.

Namita Gokhale’s *Gods, Graves and Grandmother*, though set in an urban environment far removed from Shiva’s agrarian examples, resonates strongly with these arguments. Ammi’s shrine, pieced together from discarded marble and pebbles, exemplifies how women transform waste into life-sustaining commons. Through her ritual care and song, debris becomes sanctity and survival. However, as the shrine gains attention, men begin to commercialise and regulate it, echoing Shiva’s observation of monocultures, systems that appropriate the creativity of women and reduce plurality into profit-driven uniformity. Thus, the novel becomes an urban expression of Shiva’s ecofeminist insights, dramatising both the resilience of women’s ecological labour and its vulnerability under patriarchal appropriation.

### **Ecofeminist Dimensions of the Novel**

#### **Ammi and the Birth of the Shrine**

The central element of *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* revolves around Ammi’s remarkable achievement of building a shrine using discarded stone pieces. This moment is described in the novel with striking simplicity: “She collected a slab of marble left outside the mason’s shop. On it, she placed five rounded pebbles. Then she began to sing. Slowly, people gathered. Slowly, they began to bow. Slowly, the pebbles turned into gods. Slowly, our lives began to change” (*Gods, Graves and Grandmother* 78). What appears at first to be an ordinary act of arranging stones becomes a transformative event. Ammi’s gesture demonstrates a form of



**The Text**  
**An International Peer Reviewed Online Journal of Language, Literature and  
Critical Theory**  
**ISSN:2581-9526**

ecofeminist resilience where objects that society considers waste acquire sacred significance through the ingenuity of women and devotion. Her voice, fragile yet powerful, turns debris into symbols of faith, just as women in marginalised communities often turn meagre resources into sustenance for survival.

From an ecofeminist perspective, this shrine illustrates Vandana Shiva's idea of the "subsistence perspective." Ammi gives new purpose to industrial waste materials while demonstrating that life exists in things which industrial systems discard. Through her actions, she demonstrates both spiritual and ecological value by showing the importance of recycling and community care, which form the core principles of ecofeminist ethics. However, this episode also reflects Françoise d'Eaubonne's warning that women's creative energy and ecological knowledge are vulnerable to exploitation. As the shrine attracts attention, devotees and entrepreneurs begin to commercialise it. What began as a survival strategy risks becoming a commodity, exposing the fragile boundary between empowerment and appropriation.

### **Gudiya's Growth and Female Identity**

Gudiya, the central protagonist of *Gods, Graves and Grandmother*, grows up in the fragile world created around Ammi's shrine. Her childhood and youth unfold in a space where survival depends on her grandmother's ability to transform discarded objects into sacred symbols. In this way, Gudiya's life is closely tied to ecological practices and spiritual resilience. Nevertheless, her journey also reveals the burdens passed down to women. While she inherits Ammi's creativity and strength, she also inherits a condition of vulnerability: "I grew up in the warmth of Ammi's songs and the glow of the small lamps she lit each evening. But outside that circle of light, the world seemed eager to claim me, to mould me, to use me" (*Gods, Graves and Grandmother* 91). Her journey shows how women inherit not only resilience but also fragility. Gudiya's body and choices are often treated as commodities, echoing d'Eaubonne's idea that liberation requires dismantling the very systems that dominate both women and nature. As Kanimozhi Singh observes in her feminist reading of Gokhale: "The women in Gokhale's fiction, whether Paro, Priya, or Gudiya, negotiate survival in spaces that exploit their vulnerability even as they reveal their strength" (Singh 115).

Throughout the novel, Gudiya's body and her choices are often shaped and limited by patriarchal structures. Men view her not as an autonomous individual but as an object of desire



or transaction, which mirrors the way nature is commodified and exploited. From an ecofeminist standpoint, Gudiya becomes a symbol of both resilience and risk. Her struggles illustrate d'Eaubonne's idea that women's true liberation is impossible without dismantling the very systems that dominate both women and the environment.

### **The Shrine as a Fragile Commons**

As the shrine created by Ammi gradually gains recognition, it develops into more than a place of worship. It becomes a shared space where women and the community find both material and emotional support. Women like Phoolwati assist in maintaining the shrine, offering food, kindness, and solidarity to those who come. This transformation highlights the idea of the shrine as a commons, a space not owned by any one individual but sustained collectively. In such spaces, ecological and social life are closely connected, reflecting the ecofeminist emphasis on cooperation, sharing, and mutual care. This transformation of debris into sanctity illustrates what Vandana Shiva calls the "subsistence perspective." Women, she argues, create value out of what dominant systems neglect: "Women's work in sustaining life is largely invisible, but it is precisely this invisible work that maintains diversity and resilience in ecosystems and communities" (*Staying Alive* 55).

The shrine becomes an example of how women create systems of survival by pooling resources, reusing materials, and nurturing social bonds. However, Gokhale also makes clear the fragility of these commons. As the shrine attracts greater attention, it draws the interest of male religious entrepreneurs who seek to control and commercialise it. The efforts of women, which had created diversity and plurality, are slowly absorbed into profit-driven systems. This shift mirrors Shiva's concept of "monocultures of the mind," in which plurality is replaced by uniformity and control. Thus, the shrine embodies both the potential and the vulnerability of women's ecological labour.

### **Women, Nature, and Sacred Ecology**

An ecofeminist reading of *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* must also take into account the deep ambivalence in Gokhale's narrative. Ammi's creation of the shrine is a powerful act of resilience, but it is also born out of desperation. She transforms waste into sanctity, yet the very shrine that sustains her family becomes vulnerable to forces of control and commodification. This ambiguity reflects Françoise d'Eaubonne's warning that without dismantling patriarchy,



**The Text**  
**An International Peer Reviewed Online Journal of Language, Literature and  
Critical Theory**  
**ISSN:2581-9526**

women's strategies for survival may still be absorbed into systems of domination. Gokhale captures this paradox when she writes: "What had begun as an accident of survival became, before long, the focus of pilgrims, priests, and profiteers. The gods we had created seemed to slip from our hands into those of others" (*Gods, Graves and Grandmother* 102). It shows how women's creativity, once public, is easily appropriated by patriarchal figures who transform a sacred commons into a commercial enterprise. Vandana Shiva makes a similar observation in her analysis of development: "When women's productivity is made invisible and their resources appropriated, their creativity is not destroyed but colonised. The commons they sustain are the first to be enclosed by market forces" (*Staying Alive* 88).

Both Gokhale's narrative and Shiva's ecofeminism reveal that women's ecological labour is at once empowering and precarious. The shrine represents survival and distinctiveness, but it also demonstrates the limits of resilience under structural exploitation. Gokhale rejects the romanticisation of women's resourcefulness by emphasising the need for immediate structural changes to achieve both ecological and gender justice.

### **Ambivalence and Ethical Tensions**

An ecofeminist reading needs to address the fundamental uncertainty that exists in the novel. Ammi builds the shrine because she needs it as much as she wants it. The shrine demonstrates women's ability to create and survive, but it potentially maintains the same exploitative patterns of commodification. The patriarchal takeover of the shrine illustrates the boundaries which survival methods face when operating within unfair social structures.

D'Eaubonne emphasises that feminism needs to address ecological destruction because it represents a survival issue of life or death. Shiva demonstrates that women's survival practices hold value but remain at risk unless they confront both global and patriarchal systems of power. Through Gokhale's narrative, it is clear that women's resourcefulness is celebrated, yet they also face the risk of fragility.

### **Conclusion**

Through her novel *Gods, Graves and Grandmother*, Namita Gokhale creates a strong narrative that supports ecofeminist analysis. The novel presents a dramatic portrayal of women's survival and ecological resilience through Ammi's shrine and Gudiya's growth and the delicate commons that women establish. The theoretical framework of D'Eaubonne's work shows how



**The Text**  
**An International Peer Reviewed Online Journal of Language, Literature and  
Critical Theory**  
**ISSN:2581-9526**

patriarchy transforms women and nature into commodities, whereas Shiva's Indian ecofeminism reveals the survival practices and communal spaces women establish against exploitation. The novel of Gokhale avoids basic celebrations of ecofeminism throughout its entire narrative. Survival strategies demonstrate resistance against domination yet remain exposed to continuous appropriation. The shrine functions as both a symbol of women's creative power and a warning about the feeble position of ecological and feminist independence under patriarchal authority.

The Indian English literary canon gains depth through this narrative, which unites women with nature and survival. The novel demonstrates that fighting for gender equality requires defending the natural world because it upholds both d'Eaubonne's revolutionary vision and Shiva's advocacy for preserving diverse ecosystems against monotonous mental frameworks. Through this novel, Gokhale shows how literature can help people understand the vital political mission of ecofeminism, which seeks to create protective social and ecological connections between women and the Earth.

### Works Cited

- d'Eaubonne, Françoise. *Le féminisme ou la mort*. Pierre Horay, 1974.
- Gokhale, Namita. *Gods, Graves and Grandmother*. Penguin India, 1994.
- Moolakkattu, John S. "Vandana Shiva: South Asian Ecofeminist and Advocate of Just Sustainabilities." *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2016, pp. 457–70.
- Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development*. Zed Books, 1989.
- Shiva, Vandana. *Monocultures of the Mind: Perspectives on Biodiversity and Biotechnology*. Zed Books, 1993.
- Singh, Kanimozhi. "Paro, Priya, and Gudiya: A Feminist Reading of Namita Gokhale's Novels." *Language in India*, vol. 15, no. 11, 2015.