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## **Patriarchal Ecocide: An Ecofeminist Reading of Rahul Varma's *Bhopal* and Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People***

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### **Abstract**

*Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation of the natural world and the subordination of women. This concept of ecology and feminism conceptualized by Simone de Beauvoir (1952) and later refined by Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 has greened artistic values across disciplines, it is however perceived to be found only sparsely in drama. Una Chaudhuri (1994) and Theresa J. May (2005) argue that theatre is both "immediate and communal" (May 85) with a wealth of productions that "awaken ecological sensibilities" (85) and contest "industrialisation's animus against nature" (24). Within this context, Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (1882) and Rahul Varma's play *Bhopal* (2001) will be examined through an ecofeminist theoretical framework. This paper, drawing on textual evidence, analyzes the parallelisms between the analogous forms of oppression and domination which result in the degradation of the lives of women and the damaging of nature in two different contexts. The two plays, written over a century apart, depict the minimal progress made in protecting our environs and our failure in lifting the binary polarities that suppress women and enforce male dominance. The analysis of the dramatic texts forces us to reflect on the modern forms of patriarchy which have assumed a much greater public form that is restrictive and takes the shape of a number of oppressive relationships from oppressive systems. The paper also highlights the point that despite the accusation that theatre has made a lesser contribution to ecocriticism and its diverse theories, of which ecofeminism is one, theatre is a medium that creates a forum where audiences can re-interpret and negotiate their relationship to the environment.*

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, *Bhopal*, Canadian Theatre, Rahul Varma, Teesri Duniya, Henrik Ibsen, Problem plays, *An Enemy of the People*.

## **Introduction – Theory**

In general, ecocriticism is a critical theory applied to literary works “in which the landscape itself is a dominant character” (Scheese 11) or when “a significant interaction occurs between author and place, character(s) and place” (11). Ecocritical literary work, according to Stephanie Sarver (1994) “is united not by a theory, but by a focus: the environment” (10). Barry Commoner (1972), like Sarver, believes that “everything is connected to everything else” (16). As a result, there are derivatives of this term which draw “on a variety of theories, such as feminist, Marxist, post-structuralist, psychoanalytic and historicist. Using these different theories, the ecocritic considers how nature is reflected and perceived in literary texts” (Sarver 10).

Ecofeminism more specifically, is an academic and activist movement that identifies important connections between the exploitation of nature and the subordination of women by patriarchal structures. Patriarchy is defined by Karen Warren (1984) as “the systematic, ... unjustified domination of women by men” (181) within a “sexist conceptual framework” (181) that sustains and legitimises it. As a theory, ecofeminism challenges the patriarchal paradigm of male supremacy. It also challenges the belief that women and nature are objects for abuse. French feminist theory is said to have conceptualised the beginning of ecofeminism. Simone de Beauvoir in 1952 classified women and nature as the “other” (114). Moreover, women’s alterity, according to Luce Irigaray (1974), is what subjected women to male domination. Françoise d’Eaubonne in the same year, created the term “l’ecofeminisme” to argue that male dominance has exploited the female power of reproduction just as it has used industrial productions to exploit natural resources. Later, American philosopher Karen Warren, in 1987, persuaded readers in an article titled “Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections” to recognise the connection

between environmental dilapidation and the countless forms of social domination. Furthermore, in the introduction to her book *Ecological Feminism* (1994), originally published in 1991, Warren points out that ecofeminism “is an umbrella term which captures a variety of multicultural perspectives on the nature of the connections within social systems of domination between those humans in subdominant or subordinate positions, particularly women, and the domination of nonhuman nature” (1). Therefore, ecofeminism strives to highlight the analogous forms of oppression and domination which result in the degradation of the lives of women and the damaging of nature. Mary Mellor in the introduction to her book *Feminism and Ecology* (1997) defines the movement as one that “takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women” (1). This understanding has been central to the convictions of critics such as Terry Gifford (2008) and ecofeminists such as Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (1993, 2014); Val Plumwood (1993), Karen Warren (1990); Ariel Salleh (1984); Ynestra King (1981); Carolyn Merchant (1980); Mary Daly (1978); and Susan Griffin (1976) among others.

Greta Gaard (1993) in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* points out that the female/nature connection and exploitation ideology “which sanctions the oppression of nature” (1) is the same “ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class gender, sexuality, physical abilities and species” (1). Equally significant, is that Greta Gaard and Patrick Murphy (1998) in *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism* highlight these two “forms of domination [as] bound up with class exploitation, racism, colonialism and Neocolonialism” (3). Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (2014) in their book *Ecofeminism* trace the parallels between manipulative dominance between humans and nature and the manipulative and repressive

relationship between men and women which prevails in most patriarchal communities. This notion is further emphasised by Ynestra King, an American ecofeminist who in the first ecofeminist international conference in 1980 in Amherst, Massachusetts, USA “Women and Life on Earth” wrote: “We see the devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors, and the threat of nuclear annihilation by the military warriors, as feminist concerns” (“Women and Life on Earth Internet Project”).

Ecofeminism further draws attention to the existence of dualism which is characterised by a hierarchy that elevates men and devalues women (Bianchi 8). Dualism forms the key basis for what ecofeminists see as the connection where a certain element is regarded with higher importance over another and attempts to reverse the hierarchy. Val Plumwood in her book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) links dualism to a mode of thinking that makes impartiality in relationships impossible. This logic tends to bring men to the forefront and thrusts women to the back. Within such a framework both nature and women are victimised. Mary Daly and Jane Caputi (1988) in *Webster’s First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language* share a similar view of the connection between the destruction of nature and the oppression of women:

As....the snoolish destruction and poisoning of the Earth and its inhabitants and surroundings escalates....Particularly loud and pleading are the voices of animals, whose victimisation and suffering at the hands of the rakes and rippers of patriarchy are similar in many ways to the rape, battering, torture, and massacre of women. (49)

Like, Daly and Caputi (1988), Susan Buckingham-Hatfield (2000) stresses the importance of women-nature links” (35) and further explains that “it is the social role ascribed to women which identifies them more closely with nature” (36).

It is not unfitting within this study to assume that women are subordinated to men in every known society. Susan Buckingham-Hatfield (2000) however emphasizes in her book *Gender and the Environment* the necessity of reversing this hierarchy by “demonstrating the positive side of those characteristics previously held to be inferior” (35). In opposition to the convictions of other ecofeminists, Mary Daly, an American radical activist, through her work *Gyn/Ecology* (1978), attacks the view that masculine connection with culture is superior to that of women’s connection with nature. She upholds the view that the feminine /nature connection is a sign of strength not weakness. She further contrasts “female and male qualities, with women being defined as having life giving power, fostering a dynamic connection between animal and earth, whereas men have a death-dealing power, which translates as an incapacity of bonding with nature, and the destructive control over women and the environment” (Sharnappa 3). To further understand the foundation of this perspective, Karen Warren (1990) breaks down the philosophy to two parts: “[p]roponents of the ‘body-based argument’ claim that women, through their unique bodily experiences - ovulation, menstruation, pregnancy, child birth, and breast feeding - are closer to and can more readily connect with nature” (141). On the other hand, “[t]he ‘oppression argument’ is based on the belief that women's separate social reality, resulting from a sexual division of labour and associated oppression, has led women to develop a special insight and connection with nature” (141).

Similar to Mary Daly, Sherry B. Ortner (1974) also rejects the woman-nature connection and argues against the “universality of female subordination” (69). She explains in “Is female to male as nature is to culture?” that in some cultures, “women have certain powers and rights, ... that place them in fairly high positions” (70). She further explains that it is according to certain ideological cultural elements that women in some cultures are subordinated based on their roles or tasks; moreover, it is the implicit “social-structural arrangements” within our societies that are used to exclude women from “the highest powers of society” (69). Anne Archambault (1993) and Catherine Roach (1991) in agreement with Daly (1978) and Ortner (1974), warn against adopting the “body based-argument” (19) by raising the question: “if child-bearing or breast-feeding is what attunes women to nature, are women who do not experience these biological processes any less connected to nature?” (66). Roach (1991) further scrutinizes this notion by pointing out that “although men do not menstruate, bear children, or breast feed, ... in their ejaculation of semen they have experience of a tangible stuff of the reproduction of life” (52). Accordingly, “there is no reason why either should be socially elevated as superior to the other” (Eckersley 66).

At the same time, Heather G. Eaton and Lois Ann Lorentzen (2003) conceptualize the connection of women and nature to three main assertions which have ironed the path for ecofeminism:

First, the empirical claim shows that the firsthand victim of the impact of environmental deterioration is woman in the name of the development of science and technology because of her close association and dependency on nature. ... The second conceptual claim focuses on the construction of society on the basis of a hierarchy and dualism which reveals patriarchal ideologies as the root causes of domination of women and the exploitation of nature... The third claim is epistemological, ... In this perspective, women are heralded as saviors of nature, invested with the mission to protect, preserve, and nurture the environment”(2)

In summary, these assertions govern the relationship between women and the environment and are at the foundation of discussions on the manipulation of women and nature.

This concept of ecology and feminism has greened artistic values across disciplines, it is perceived however to be found only sparsely in theatre and drama. The scarcity in theatre productions on the environmental movement is substantiated by Una Chaudhuri (1994) in her article “There Must Be a Lot of Fish in that Lake: Toward an Eco-logical Theater,” that “theater’s humanist origins make it ‘anti-ecological’” (24) it is an engagement between and about human beings. Theresa J. May (2005) in her article “Greening the Theater: Taking Ecocriticism from Page to Stage” also substantiates for this delay highlighting that “Theater is both immediate and communal and this may in part account for its absence from the genre of ‘nature writing.’ ... Theater functions as a field of exchange where myths take flight, moving between the permeable spheres of self and community and then out into the terrain of our lives. ... To discover the ecology of theater and its potential to awaken

ecological sensibilities in us, eco-critics must come into the theater and partake” (85). Despite the accusation that theatre has made a lesser contribution to ecocriticism and its diverse theories, of which ecofeminism is one, theatre is a medium that creates a forum where audiences can re-interpret and negotiate their relationship to the environment. Downing Cless (2002) argues that Western theatre history is prevalent with works in which nature plays a key part “from the earthly goings-on in Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night's Dream*, to Anton Chekov's endangered *Cherry Orchard*, to Samuel Beckett's barren post-apocalyptic landscape in *Waiting for Godot*” (10). To further support Cless’s argument, nature has been prevalent in dramatic works as a key element, but what is required is a re-reading of the texts.

Henrik Ibsen’s four plays *Pillars of Society* (1877), *An Enemy of the People* (1882), *The Wild Duck* (1884) and *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896) all point to environmental crisis. More recent works include Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) which deals with mass spraying of insecticide and eco-racism. Lanford Wilson's *Angels Fall* (1983) references the “1979 radioactive tailings spill at Ric Puerco” (Gottlieb 251-53); Robert Schenkkan’s 1992 Pulitzer Prize winner *The Kentucky Cycle* (1991) dramatises the connection of man and land where “strip mining erases the ecological identity of the land and its former human inhabitants... a landmark ecodrama” (May 93); eight years later, Anne Galjour's *Alligator Tales* (1997) brought to the stage a vision of the “natural world” (May 96) the bayou. Additionally, playwrights who have managed to bring their eco-drama into mainstream theatre include: David Edgar with his play *Continental Divide* (2004), Graham Smith’s *Shadow of Giants* (2004), and Robert Koon's *Odin’s Horse* (2004) which won the Ecodrama Playwright’s Festival in 2004 and was nominated Finalist in 2010 for the Smith Prize, National New Plays Network (May 98).

Economic domination of global capitalism is generally based on the unequal power between Western countries and Third World nations. The inequality of power leads to the exploitation of subjugated people in developing countries in the name of development and scientific progress. This in turn raises a red flag around the connection between environmentalism and post-colonialism, they are seen by critics to share common concerns; both “contest western ideologies of development” (Huggan & Tiffin 27). Furthermore, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2010) argue that environmental exploitation exposes the neocolonial economic interests of global corporate development projects. Heather Eaton and Lois Ann Lorentzen (2003) point out that globalisation has become “an extension of patriarchal capitalism” (5) serving the agendas of “linear progress” (Chae 520). Vandana Shiva (1989) writes that the subjugation and marginalisation of women as well as “ecological destruction” are the “inevitable results of most development projects” (xvii). Further to this, Carolyn Merchant (1980), Ruth Bleier (1984), Vandana Shiva (1988), and Lynda Birke (1994) highlight in their arguments the intersecting and overlapping views of eco-feminist thinking that hold science accountable for sanctioning the oppression of women and nature. Karen Warren (1990) equally agrees that “mechanistic science” (127) is part of the Western cultural and historical conceptual frameworks which have instructed the construction of the domination of women and the domination of nature. In congruency with previous thought on ecofeminism, Patil Sangita Sharnappa (2016) highlights in her work on ecofeminism the ideology that governs the beliefs of ecofeminists from Western nations by pointing out that ecological degradation is often directly linked to “advancements in science and technology, emphasizing in particular the harmful impact on women of the dumping of toxic waste into natural resources” (7). Val Plumwood (1991) however, argues against “a social ecological approach” (Cudworth 38) to discussing the oppression

of women and nature; she rejects the “the deep ecological theory of the expanded self, arguing the obliteration of all distinctions between humans and nature is not a solution, but that recognition and respect of difference is what is important (13).

To further elaborate on the notions of ecofeminism and to recognize the extent to which patriarchal hegemony infiltrates out modern societies, this paper examines two markedly different plays through an ecofeminist approach: Rahul Varma’s *Bhopal* (2001) and Henrik Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* (1882). At the heart of these two plays is Simone de Beauvoir’s notion that ‘woman is other to man’ (Humm 61). The period between these two works is over a century and to our astonishment, as an audience, we realize that within that span of time, environmental exploitation has continued and so have the various practices of subjugating women. There is currently no research that examines these two works in relation to the similarities between the exploitation of women and the natural environment through what Rob Nixon (2011) calls “slow violence” or “long dying” (2). Given their distinct backgrounds and very different settings, the two plays, by focusing on patriarchal ecocide add a new dimension to ecofeminist discourse in theatre. With today’s growing attention to environmentalism and ecocriticism, the two plays are fit to remind audiences of their duty towards the environment and the obligation that holds them to reexamine the patriarchal structures that continue to subjugate women in our modern societies. Both works are problem plays which leave audiences with more questions than structured answers to global problems. The plays are very much relevant to us today as they were when they were first published and performed.

*Bhopal* (2001) by Indo-Canadian playwright and theatre director Rahul Varma, is about the green revolution which led to the rise in demand for pesticide production and the 1984 gas leak from the Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal,

India. The play captures one of the largest environmental disasters in recent history. The dramatic text warns us of the environmental threats and the anthropocentric problems emanating from industrial, governmental and commercial powers. The environmental catastrophe in India has left many, particularly women, with untold pain and trauma to this day as a result of postcolonial mal-development. The play critiques the ecological exploitation of rural areas in India and exposes the interrelatedness of environmental degradation and the domination of women as well as the “hierarchy of dualisms that legitimizes the exploitation of nature by the human, of women by men and the oppressed by the powerful” (Chae 519). *Bhopal* (2001) was first produced by Teersi Duniya Theatre Company, then in 2003 by Cahoots Theatre and in 2006 by the Espace Libre in Montreal. The play foregrounds the interrelatedness between non-human nature and subordinated human beings and delineates scientific progress as a “new project of western patriarchy” (Shiva 1). As a play, it has not been previously examined from a postcolonial ecofeminist stance for its environmental issues and the impact of neocolonial patriarchal development projects on the natural environment and the exploitation of women. The play is written in twenty short scenes and has a cast of nine characters among which are the storyteller and the Chorus. Each scene is no longer than a few lines carrying on a debate through which the audience can inspect the industrial environmental disaster as well as understand the forces of power in the West and their relationship with the local people. Union Carbide, initially heralded as a mark of growth in India, through negligence becomes what Rahul Varma calls the “largest peacetime gas chamber in history” (Varma iii). In the introduction to the play, Varma captures the size of the disaster in the following words:

On the night of December 3rd 1984, Union Carbide’s pesticide plant in Bhopal, India, exploded, engulfing the city in a billow of deadly poisonous fumes. Small children fell like flies, and men and women vainly scurried for

safety only to collapse, breathless and blinded by the gas. By sunset, the death toll was 2,500. By the following day, numbers had no meaning. (2)

Varma continues to explain in the introduction to the play that multinational companies in the West around that time had begun to relocate to Third World nations because of the virtually non-existent environmental regulations and the rise in environmental awareness in the developed countries. Large quantities of Methyl Isocyanate (MIC) found in the water in the slum village in Bhopal, had serious consequences on the locals and the non-human nature: animals were found dead, women gave birth to babies with no limbs; residents suffered respiratory diseases; women had menstrual disorders; and infant mortality rose to uncontrollable levels. Chemical wastes in the groundwater and the soil continued to poison the inhabitants of the slums near the abandoned Union Carbide factory for twenty years. Ironically, Union Carbide's advertisement had featured vibrant green harvests swaying in the wind, birds chirping, and women and children beaming with happiness followed by a line that said: "Union Carbide will touch every life in India" (Varma 2) and indeed it did.

Out of the nine characters in *Bhopal*, the three female characters are pushed to the back of the play while the male characters Devraj and the Indian Minister are brought to the forefront to take charge. Male dominance is enforced on both the Indian and the Canadian female characters; however, beneath the paternal language of the play "lurks a feminine unsaid" (Humm 63). The play privileges the "male as active and the female as inactive, as Other, ...a social not biological distinction" (63). In India, conservation of the environment has often been paralleled to females because the rural economy is generally governed by women. However, both nature and women in India have been mercilessly exploited (Devine 52). This is briefly referenced in the scene depicting the local Indian village woman Izzat sitting on the ground

mourning her dead baby girl next to her. The connection of the female body and mother Earth is further complicated by the intricate interconnectedness of the women and nature in the structure of the play.

*Bhopal* opens with a song called Zahreeli Hawa (poisoned gas). Mr. Devraj Sarthi the American Indian Union Carbide representative is standing in front of a hut amidst dead animals, sickly infants and contaminated polluted water from the Carbide plant. Izzat, a local slum woman signifies the degraded living conditions of the slum as a result of scientific progress. In the same scene, Dr. Sonya Labonté the Canadian research activist is being taken away from the slum site. The scene is complex as it subtly brings together modern science, female passivity, Western technology, patriarchal hegemony and neocolonialism. Devraj bribes Izzat with money to silence her about her dead goat, the progressing deformation of her baby Zarina, and the other dead infants in the slum village: “Let’s go inside. ...What’s that? (*Looks inside*) Oh God! What has happened to her?” (Varma, *Bhopal* 16-17). The toxic gas destroyed “flora, fauna and human life” (Mannur 384). Zarina, Izzat’s deformed child, functions as a device “that relentlessly refuses to let viewers or audiences to be passive observers” (Mannur 382). Izzat’s body is also infected with disease and her health is deteriorating: “My stomach burns, feels hot inside.... I bleed a lot... A lot of mucky blood” (Varma, *Bhopal*, 22). There are many like Izzat in the village or what Bhatia (2013) calls “bodies that don’t matter” (133). Dr. Sonya in order to collect evidence for her research on the contaminated water supply and its effect on the locals takes the local women as her research subjects and in return, the women are financially compensated. The play does not mention however, the impact of the gas leak in the water source on any of the male characters; it is only the female body that is subjected in the play to inhuman exploitation and contamination. Rahul Varma (2009) in his article “Teersi Duniya Theatre:

Diversifying diversity with relevant works of theatre” explains that the play is about environmental problems, but is also about the exploitation of women. In the play, Madiha, Devraj’s secretary, is pregnant with a deformed baby resulting from her affair with him, Izzat has a fever accompanied with heavy bleeding and Zarina is a deformed female infant who is no longer recognized as part of the human species. Moreover, these Indian female characters are also depicted as intellectually invisible; while the white female character, Dr. Sonya, is aligned more to the male characteristic of active researcher. Although ethnically different, and different in gender, both Devraj and the Canadian researcher Dr. Sonya, are depicted in the play to behave similarly; both manipulate the local women by paying them for their illnesses to serve their personal interests. This dual exploitation of local women’s bodies, takes place under an air of enthusiasm and a frame of economic prosperity and scientific progress. Ironically, these successes are overshadowed by death, deformity and degradation. The environmental exploitation in the play is juxtaposed against the born and the unborn bodies of babies.

DEVRAJ: ... Someone told me there are other babies sick like Zarina. And they go to see this lady doctor, Dr. Sonya?

IZZAT: Yes, yes. I know them. I bring her patients.

DEVRAJ: Are they getting better?

IZZAT: Well... Veena, her baby...no! Budhiya...no, no, they don’t get better.

(Varma, *Bhopal*, 18)

Examples of dualisms surface throughout the play in the form of domination of men over women and the developed over the underdeveloped. This dualism has “legitimized the oppression of women and the destruction of nature” (Plumwood 4). Dr Sonya, as a Canadian researcher and activist, in the play, is in a constant state of

revolt against the oppressive governmental structures projected on her work by the Minister. She routinely examines Izzat physically to collect data and follow up on the deteriorating condition of the baby Zarina: "... There are any numbers of factors involved, many reasons. But given your condition, the discharge, the cervical erosion – and its consistent with what I'm seeing in a lot of the other women – I think there's a contaminant, poisons, in your body that got into Zarina's body" (Varma, *Bhopal*, 23). Devraj and the Minister refuse to accept that it is the chemicals from the factory plant and industrial waste that are the cause of the human catastrophe. In his capacity to influence, Devraj exercises his masculine power which stems from being a male and an affiliate to the Western headquarters of the Union Carbide plant in the United States to influence public opinion: "...we always think of safety first. But environmental safeguards are irrelevant if we don't attack poverty first, for it is the poverty that is our greatest environmental hazard" (24). Fear of losing foreign investment leads Devraj and the Minister to overlook the dangers posed to the environment and to the health of the population. To blame the Western investor for the environmental disaster in Bhopal would have created an atmosphere of hostility with investors from the West; a consequence which India as a developing country, would not be able to afford to deal with. Madiha, the dutiful assistant, loyally supports Devraj and helps him and the Indian Chief Minister of State Jaganlal Bhandari to mask the environmental disaster in front of the wealthy Indian investors.

Creating an investment climate in postcolonial India, has exploited nature and has polluted local water sources in Bhopal and nearby villages. By foregrounding the deteriorating natural environment and the appalling illnesses borne by the local people which are unknown to science, Varma exposes what Graham Huggan (2004) calls in his article "Greening Postcolonialism: Ecocritical Perspectives" the

“tyrannies of the modern Indian State” (705). Devraj’s tools of oppression are language and bribery. His words, with the approval of the Minister, facilitate “a willful collusion” (Kulkarni 62) to overlook safety procedures in the name of linear progress; the exploitation of nature is warranted as an unavoidable sacrifice in the growth process of postcolonial India. He further maintains his power by bribing Izzat and sexually exploiting Madiha. His dominance protrudes in many forms including discourse. Devraj speaks in full accurate grammatical sentences while Izzat’s repression is reflected in her ruptured speech and deviations from grammar. As a well-educated upper class Indian, Devraj plays a key role in propelling the environmental and human disaster in the play. Symbolically he stands as the prevailing authority structure that supports the dominant order of society.

Maria Mies (1986) explains that patriarchy is “the system which maintains women’s exploitation and oppression” (37). In *Bhopal* the Chief Minister of State inhibits Dr. Sonya’s research results from being shared at a global conference in Montreal. Although her research results are by the end of the play eventually shared at the conference; ironically, they are shared by the Minister and not her. Bhopal is considered a national affair, and from a colonial social scenario, the male power that dominates the Indian social structure, subjugates the Canadian researcher by subverting the supremacy and power of the white woman. By having the Minister share the results of the research, the male dominance is emphasized and the colonial power is reversed. Devraj is a businessman and the Minister, a politician; both view themselves as superior to the local people of Bhopal and believe that they are working for the common good. Neocolonialism manifests itself in the attitude of wealthy Indians towards the suffering of the poor in their immediate surroundings. Despite being aware that the women are poisoned and the children are deformed because of the diseased water source and the gas leak, they continue to focus on the

prospects of creating more employment opportunities and promise the locals with better housing and facilities. *Bhopal* exposes the complicity of Indians in the creation of a dangerous investment climate, where the health and wellbeing of the masses is overlooked for fear of losing foreign investment.

*Bhopal* as a play, serves as a troubling reminder that the process of commercial integration is inherently neocolonial, and is shaped by inequalities and dualisms that oppress underprivileged people in the Third World. Varma depicts the damaging effects of global investment on postcolonial India and portrays how the continuing destructiveness of the development projects ruin the environment and further impoverish the already disempowered. At the same time, Bhopal as a landscape environment is also “a critical site of activism that addresses issues pertaining to social justices ... in which the home of origin has a significant role to play” (Bhatia 125). India in this play, is the motherland examined from a distance. As an Indo-Canadian dramatist, Rahul Varma is able to uniquely engage in critical global cross-cultural dialogue allowing the English and French majorities in Canada to understand the complex social and environmental issues portrayed in *Bhopal* from the minorities’ perspective (Varma, *Teesri Duniya*). Varma’s dramatisation of the Bhopal environmental disaster offers the Canadian community a social forum about postcolonial India, the hierarchal dualisms which uphold a patriarchal society and an opportunity to engage in ecological discourse about nature and women on the theatre stage. The play closes with a sense of solidarity between the “subjugated

others who are treated as lesser beings in society” (Chae 526) mainly women and the natural environment. Both nature and women in the play have experienced systematic exploitation and degradation within a “capitalist patriarchy” (Merchant 103). Carolyn Merchant (1980) further argues that the “male dominated power structure” (103) is the root cause of the oppression of women and the destruction of non-human nature. *Bhopal* poignantly shows the interrelatedness of humans and the natural environment and foregrounds the duality that legitimises the exploitation of nature and the subordination of the local people and more particularly, women in postcolonial India. The play ends with the two local Indian women uniting to stand up to the structures which have exploited and dominated them: “Madiha looks at Izzat, who is at a distance. Izzat looks at Madiha. Both women start walking toward each other and meet centre stage. Madiha takes Izzat’s hand in hers. The women have resolute expressions of defiance” (Varma, *Bhopal*, 75-76). Perhaps this scene could be interpreted according to Val Plumwood’s (1988) view on environmental principles where she believes that “the masculine model of the human character [is replaced] by a new feminine model. That is, if the masculinizing strategy rejected the feminine character ideal and affirmed a masculine one for both sexes, this feminizing strategy rejects the masculine character ideal and affirms a feminine one for both sexes” (20). According to Janet Biehl (1991) the implications of subverting this hierarchy could be devastating and may prove to be far from emancipating as

they take “charge of cleaning up the global mess- fulfilling their traditional role as nurturing mothers” (21).

The play *Bhopal* has been successful in staging for a global audience the complex issues of the oppression of women, patriarchy, global neocolonialism, the destruction of nature and the exploitation of subordinated people.

Despite the different settings and the contrast of Third World nation to Western society, both *Bhopal* by Rahul Varma and *An Enemy of the People* (1882) by Henrik Ibsen are structured around a contaminated water source, the impact of the contamination on the local inhabitants and the subjugation of the female characters in parallel to the exploitation of nature. Many of Henrik Ibsen’s plays can be easily examined through an ecofeminist approach. The Green Ibsen International Symposium, held in China in 2009 had focused on interpreting his plays through an ecocritical reading. Since the publication of the proceedings of the symposium, only a few articles have focused on the representation of nature in Ibsen’s plays such as: “Discord and Harmony Between Human and Nature: An Ecological Interpretation of *The Lady from the Sea*” (2010) by Danni Dai, “Ibsen and Chekov” in *Ecology and Environment in European Drama* (2010) by Downing Cless, in addition to one other publication on the ecological elements in Ibsen’s work *An Eco-Feminist Reading of Four Plays of Henrik Ibsen* by Xujia Zhou in 2012. To this day, Ibsen’s plays continue to raise important questions about gender roles in society and the parallelisms between nature and women. The continuous deterioration of our ecological environment prompts us to trace and identify the reasons behind the exploitation of our environs and natural resources as represented one hundred years ago in one of Europe’s most acknowledged plays. The similarity in the conditions and motives which lie behind the polluting of the main water sources in the rural

area of Bhopal and Ibsen's fictional small coastal town in Norway, heighten our awareness of the continued need to seek to protect our environment and lift the oppression imposed on women through patriarchal structures driven by dualism and binary oppositions. Despite it being the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it would be an illusion to assume that nature is protected and women are not oppressed or marginalised in many parts of our world today.

*An Enemy of the People* (1882) is a play of five acts set in a small coastal town in Norway with an industrial background. The town's economy is heavily dependent on the revenue generated from the municipal healing Baths and a cluster of tanneries. The illusion of healing in the town is based on the exploitation of the water source which is contaminated from the tannery factories up in Mølledal and which have been owned by Morten Kiil over the span of three generations; Morten Kiil is Dr. Thomas Stockmann's father-in-law. Dr. Thomas Stockmann is a man of science and the Mayor's brother. In the early scenes of the play, Dr. Stockmann makes the discovery that the Baths are contaminated and have no medicinal benefits. The town's Mayor Peter Stockmann, controls the opinion of the working class masses and the press through his authority and manipulation of facts to ensure that the Baths continue to generate profits at the expense of the health of the local town inhabitants as well as tourists that flood in from Europe.

In Act V of the play, we learn that the leather tannery has been running for three generations. Leather making requires using animal skins, chemicals, killing animals, disposing of their carcasses and tanning in order to manufacture the leather. The waste from the factories is released into the natural environment and seeps into the water supply pipes feeding into the town baths and the coastal beach area. Hovstad, the editor of the "People's Messenger" and the Mayor in Act I, highlight

the centrality of the Baths in relation to the economic prosperity of the town and its citizens:

PETER STOCKMANN: Exactly, our fine, new handsome Baths. Mark my words. Mr. Hovstad the Baths will become the focus of our municipal life! Not a doubt of it! ... Think how extraordinarily the place has developed within the last year or two! Money has been flowing in, and there is some life and some business doing in the town. Houses and landed property are rising in value every day.

HOVSTAD: And unemployment diminishing. (Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People*, 7)

This prosperity is threatened by the results of the laboratory report which Dr. Thomas Stockmann intends to publish in the local newspaper announcing that “The whole Bath establishment is a whited, poisoned sepulchre, ...--the gravest possible danger to the public health! All the nastiness up at Mølledal, all that stinking filth, is infecting the water in the conduit-pipes leading to the reservoir; and the same cursed, filthy poison oozes out on the shore too--” (Ibsen *An Enemy of the People* 34).

The closing of the Baths as an enterprise threatens the town’s employability rates and puts it at risk of going into recession again. Similar to Dr. Sonya in *Bhopal*, Dr. Stockmann has had his suspicions about the water being the source of the locals’ illnesses: “I have investigated the matter most conscientiously. For a long time past I have suspected something of the kind. Last year we had some very strange cases of illness among the visitors--typhoid cases, and cases of gastric fever--” (Ibsen *An Enemy of the People* 34). A lab examination of the drinking water and the sea-water proved “the presence of decomposing organic matter in the water--it is full of infusoria. The water is absolutely dangerous to use, either internally or externally” (Ibsen *An Enemy of the People* 35). Dr. Stockmann’s suspicions are confirmed and like Dr. Sonya, he feels a strong moral obligation to publish his findings. Scientific

progress is addressed in both *Bhopal* and *An Enemy of the People* showing the responsibility that befalls scientists yet it is juxtaposed against economic growth and industrial progress.

Shiva (1993) in her book *Ecofeminism* explains that what is “self-generative” (25) in nature is controlled by humans and subjected to colonisation. The economic value of complex ecosystems is reduced in *An Enemy of the People* to leather production and medicinal Baths, and in *Bhopal*, a promise of abundant crops. The natural power of the environment to regenerate is depleted, the water source in *Bhopal* is contaminated with pesticide and gas leaks from the Union Carbide factory and in *An Enemy of the People*, the water source is contaminated by the tannery. Dr. Sonya and Dr. Stockmann are the first to acknowledge the correlation between industrialisation and the destruction of a whole ecosystem. Neither the Minister in *Bhopal* nor the Mayor in *An Enemy of the People* show readiness to acknowledge that the natural environment is being exploited for the sake of continued economic gain. Both dismiss the scientists’ reports and threaten to suspend their work. Both as symbolic figures of authority relinquish the rights of the local inhabitants by imposing their authority and enforcing suppressive measures. The Minister in *Bhopal* uses Devraj to address the high end guests at a party to remind everyone that “environmental safeguards are irrelevant if we don’t attack poverty first, for it is the poverty that is our greatest environmental hazard” (Varma *Bhopal* 24). Ibsen’s Mayor Peter Stockmann adopts a similar approach as he addresses his brother Dr. Thomas Stockmann: “And all this at this juncture, just as the Baths are beginning to be known. ... and then where should we be? We should probably have to abandon the whole thing, which has cost us so much money-and then you would have ruined your native town ... Your report has not convinced me that the condition of the water

at the Baths is as bad as you represent it to be... not a single word of it must come to the ears of the public” (Ibsen *An Enemy of the People* 67-8).

Dr. Stockmann in *An Enemy of the People* is seemingly allowed by the Mayor to make an attempt to revamp the poisoned water system in the town and share his solution to the environmental problem. As a scientist, his freedom is restricted. His character in the play exemplifies the “different ways in which men themselves have suffered from ‘masculine’ stereotypes” (Archambault 20). The significance of this scene where he is given permission to clean up the environmental mess, but is immediately halted is an embodiment of ecofeminist belief that “[m]en cannot be expected to participate in this restoration project since they presumably lack the sensitivity to nature that women have” (21). Dr. Sonya on the other hand, in *Bhopal* is denied the freedom as a scientist to take any action to either elevate the oppression on the women in the village or disseminate the horrendous findings of her environmental research about the contaminated water source near the chemical plant. The comparison here highlights the subjugation of Dr Sonya as a female character and her subjugation as a female scientist by the Indian patriarchal structures. Doubly oppressed, she is further removed from any possibility of empowerment because significantly, she represents the supremacy of the white race on Indian soil. The investigation of the oppressive systems in this instance is complex and is far from straight forward highlighting the intricacies of relations

between patriarchy, gender and nature. At the same time, Dr. Stockmann's suggestion for sanitizing the local water source is ridiculed and abandoned for its high costs and duration of execution, setting yet another example of an oppressive system within normalized social structures. Dr. Stockmann accuses his brother the Mayor of hiding the truth about the contaminated Baths as "a trick, a fraud, a lie, a downright crime towards the public, towards the whole community!... It was owing to your action that both the Baths and the water conduits were built where they are; and that is what you won't acknowledge, that damnable blunder of yours. Pooh! Do you suppose I don't see through you?" (Ibsen *An Enemy of the People* 68)

Both Dr. Stockmann and Dr. Sonya are subjugated by superior patriarchal authoritarian structures. Dr. Stockmann is dismissed from his position as medical officer to the Baths. Additionally, his brother, the town's Mayor, uses his government authority to restrict his freedom of speech as a scientist: "... as a subordinate member of the staff of the Baths, you have no right to express any opinion which runs contrary to that of your superiors" (Ibsen *An Enemy of the People* 75). Similarly, Dr. Sonya in *Bhopal* is temporarily detained by the Minister; after all, this is a local affair: "I want to let this lady know something. (To Sonya) Sit down. (She does) Maybe your research is accurate, maybe our housing project is a bad idea. Maybe the People's Progress Zone is a big mistake. Maybe the children of Bhopal are really unlike any human beings you have ever seen before. But I don't need a foreigner to exhibit a sick child of my country in a foreign land" (Varma, *Bhopal*, 41). Both playwrights, subject the character of *research scientist* to public ridicule and governmental oppression. Varma and Ibsen's characters are pushed to the peripherals of society under social pressures and are further marginalized by

being pinned against public opinion and the hierarchical structures of their community in order for those in authority to protect economic interests.

Such intuitionally rooted social practices which govern our social relations ultimately point to Foucault's (1976) "relations of domination" (31-34) and their relation to the discourse of power which was previously exemplified through the male characters in *Bhopal* and the Mayor in *An Enemy of the People*. Foucault (1976) emphasizes the importance of scrutinizing power relations:

analysis (of power) should be concerned...with those points at which it becomes capillary,...invests itself in institutions, becomes embodied in techniques... in what ways punishment and the power of punishment are effectively embodied in a certain number of local, regional, material institutions, which are concerned with torture or imprisonment, and to place these in the climate. (34-5)

In context of Foucault's notion, the plays show through a number of instances specific discourses of power and their effects annexed by broader classifications of supremacy which are ultimately guided by economic interests. The complexity of the overlapping and enmeshed social structures emphasized in both plays additionally indicate the need to equally examine the intersections of the different repressive systems masked within societies or what Mary Daly (1978) calls "stolen female energy" (230) where patriarchy thrives on the reversal of reality as truth. This is evident in the reductionist mentality which runs throughout both plays and is extended to comparing the human characters to animals. Andrea Dworkin (1983) in *Right Wing Women*, refers to women as animals in order to emphasise the extent of women's oppression. Madiha and Devraj in *Bhopal* mistake Izzat's deformed baby for a dead animal. The human worth is justified by how much value that particular

human can yield. The same idea is shared in *An Enemy of the People*; Dr. Stockmann reduces animals to their mere functionality depending on how much they yield in goods or products. Human beings, similarly, are reduced to the binary division of male and female. This “natural” gender difference as Barbara Rogers (1980) points out in her book *The Domestication of Women: Discrimination in Developing Societies* is used to support the male ideology “which seeks to exclude women from many important areas of modern life” (11). Rahul Varma presents in his play a subverted version of the Western female character- the Canadian researcher is suppressed on Indian soil both as a researcher and as a female.

Unlike the subjugation of women in *Bhopal*, the discrimination against women in *An Enemy of the People* is more subtle. Katherine and Petra, the only two female characters in the play, are governed by the dramatic work’s social patriarchal framework. Katherine, a mother to many children, is a dutiful wife to Dr. Stockmann who pays little regard to their welfare as a family. In a heated discussion regarding the findings of the research, Dr. Stockmann dismisses his wife’s concerns and sends her back to her rightful place: “Rubbish, Katherine!--Go home and look after your house and leave me to look after the community. How can you be so afraid, when I am so confident and happy? (Ibsen *An Enemy of the People* 121). Dr. Stockmann would rather expose the truth about the contamination of the water in the municipal Baths than care about sustaining his family financially. He accuses the masses of his local community of cowardice for their inability to accept the truth about the source of the town’s revenue. Katharine not only has to deal with her idealistic husband, but also her manipulative father who uses her inheritance to buy shares in the municipal Baths. Moreover, her father attempts to manipulate her husband in order to persuade him to denounce his claims that the Baths’ water is contaminated. Katherine is never shown by Ibsen as a “complete whole” (Ullah 73), she is

dominated by the masculine figures in her life and has no control over her inheritance. Like Varma's local village women and deformed babies, Katherine's worth is reduced to the status of animals based on the value of her contribution. Dr. Stockmann boasts of his wife's duties: "my wife Katherine maintains that the floor ought to be scrubbed" (Ibsen *An Enemy of the People* 154). He additionally, distinguishes between himself as a man of integrity to differentiate between himself and his wife who just might, if persuaded, accept the idea of her husband receiving a financial reward as recognition for his scientific findings: "No, my good friends, don't let us have any of that, nonsense. I won't hear anything of the kind. And if the Baths Committee should think of voting me an increase of salary, I will not accept it. Do you hear, Katherine?--I won't accept it" (Ibsen *An Enemy of the People* 40). Katherine may not be one of Ibsen's strong female characters, but she does towards the end of the play demonstrate that she has a clear understanding of the consequences of revealing the scientific results. This side of her as a character is detected by the Mayor in Act II: "(To MRS. STOCKMANN.) Katherine, I imagine you are the most sensible person in this house. Use any influence you may have over your husband, and make him see what this will entail for his family as well as--" (Ibsen *An Enemy of the People* 78). According to Joan Templeton (1999), Dr. Thomas Stockmann is finally "forced to moderate his poor opinion of his spouse's extra-mural capacities" (165). In her defense, it can be said that Katherine's individualism and emancipation as a woman is secondary to her loyalty to her husband as she fulfills the role prescribed to her by the patriarchal structures of society. She reflects an interdependence that stems from her economic dependence on both her husband and her father. At the same time, Ibsen juxtaposes Katherine against her daughter Petra; he contrasts the figure of the *old woman* against the *new woman* within the same social structure. Katherine's loyal devotion to her husband confines her to a "domestic and dependent role" (Zhou 5). Petra on the other hand,

is unmarried, works as a school teacher, is able to earn her own living and is unafraid to be an independent woman. When her father is humiliated by the Mayor, she tries to interfere:

PETRA: Uncle, that is a shameful way to treat a man like father!

MRS. STOCKMANN: Do hold your tongue, Petra!

PETER STOCKMANN: (looking at PETRA). Oh, so we volunteer our opinions already, do we? (Ibsen *An Enemy of the People* 78)

When the editor of the ‘People’s Messenger’ asks Petra to translate a story, as a free-thinker she is appalled by the content and refuses to translate the piece of work for Hovstad “Because it conflicts with all your opinions. ... The burden of this story is that there is a supernatural power that looks after the so-called good people in this world and makes everything happen for the best in their case--while all the so-called bad people are punished” (Ibsen *An Enemy of the People* 100). Towards the end of the play, she declares that she will help her father in creating liberal minded young men. Ati Ullah (2012) substantiates this by highlighting that “... Petra is committed to truth, principle, and general welfare” (74). However, in spite of the modern woman image she projects, Petra is still a victim of her own idealism and her patriarchal family structure. The women in this play are deprived of recognition as “individuals ... as equally rational human beings” (Ullah 71). Both Katherine and her children are used as “bargaining chips” (Zhou 10) by Morten Kiil. An image that resonates with the fate of Varma’s female characters: Madiha, Izzat and Dr. Sonya. It cannot however be overlooked that in both plays the women characters exhibit in brief moments, enigmas of their possible strengths and what they are capable of achieving. This is an advantage no doubt, which the exploited natural environment, is denied.

## Conclusion

Pressures imposed on women in *Bhopal* and in *An Enemy of the People* disgracefully expose the impoverished ideals that fill our modern day media about women's equality and progress made with regards to women's rights. Written over a century apart, the two plays astonishingly reveal that the patriarchal structures in place today have not levied their oppression on women as we would be led to believe nor has by extension, the commercial Western ideology of industry based on scientific/medical progress ceased to unpollute the natural environment.

*Bhopal* and *An Enemy of the People*, present in many instances the binary relationship between the oppression of women and the exploitation of the natural environment. The eco-feminist approach through which both plays were examined, allowed room for a deeper examination of the dual exploitation of women and nature as well as the analysis of a number of other forms of exploitations such as the subjugation of the masses by the government and the reductionist method by which the worth of animals and women is evaluated. Polluted water and its effects as a contaminated source, is the central theme of both plays. Both playwrights emphasise the damage done to the human and the natural environment with no one to be held accountable for the recklessness. The action unfolds in both plays only to expose that it is not just the water sources that is polluted, but also the authoritarian figures and economic gain under the guise of industrial and scientific progress.

To conclude, the environmental exploitation of the water source by industrialists in both plays is masked behind the concern for elevating the masses above poverty, and the oppression of the women characters, is guised under the need to put things right; a simple justification that would "preserve the superiority of men" (Gaard 61). This masculine ideology can be traced distinctively across the two plays as the natural environment is gradually polluted, neglected, exploited and gradually

eroded. In both plays, the water source is depleted of its natural ability to regenerate and renew itself. On the other hand, in the final act in *Bhopal*, Madiha and Izzat break the social class glass barrier and unite against the dualisms of their society. The Canadian researcher Dr. Sonya is only partially recognized for her research by allowing it to be shared at the Conference in Montreal; ironically, the results are presented by the Minister and not her. At the same time, the patriarchal hegemony is further manifested upon the Canadian Researcher who is both a woman and a Westerner. The female figures in Ibsen's play on the other hand, fall into two types: the *old woman* figure who is the loyal wife who puts aside her individualism in spite of her intelligence and the *new woman* who is forced by the patriarchal structures of her community to retreat into the social formation. Featuring the exploitation of the weaker sex in parallel to the environmental destruction and the contamination of the water source, the plays highlight the eco-feminist ideology which runs throughout the dramatic works under study. Rahul Varma's play *Bhopal* written in 2001 is a distinct reminder to a global audience that eco-feminism as a movement and ideology has yet to reach a far more wider audience to raise consciousness about environmentalism and to further lift the invisible talons that continue to pin down women of science, third world nations and those pushed to the margins of society as a result of illiteracy or poverty. Varma confronts his audiences throughout the play with "narratives of oppression" (Kulkarni 5) that spur critical involvement about intense social truths that echo in many new world nations as well as between "the West and the rest" (5).

It is important to acknowledge that Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* although written in the nineteenth century, had indeed managed to touch upon significant environmental, scientific and industrial issues that are still fairly

significant today. It is a play with very contemporary resonances. *Bhopal* and *An Enemy of the People* are both problem plays that take a contemporary issue such as the collision of scientific fact and popular opinion and explore it throughout the plays. The playwrights avoid resolution by placing the moral scales of their plays in such a balance that they leave their audience with more questions rather than any fundamental structured answers. The plays call for “social, economic and environmental justice for oppressed women, marginalized human beings, and nature” (Chae 521). Ariel Salleh (1997) points out that “ecofeminism builds bridges with progressive elements in the men’s movement” (xii), but at the same time, takes a stand in opposition to “patriarchal capitalism” (Chae 524). Both *Bhopal* and *An Enemy of the People* are about toxic environments encompassing both human and non-human species; they take the environmental crisis and the subjugation of women beyond their domestic borders.

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## **Bio**

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