



Ecofeminism and the Land: Nature as Feminine Space in the Poetry of Mary Oliver and Kamala Das

Rose Mary Philip

Assistant Professor, Marian College Kuttikkanam Autonomous, Peermade, Idukki, Kerala, India.

Article information

Received: 15th September 2025

Received in revised form: 18th October 2025

Accepted: 21st October 2025

Available online: 20th December 2025

Volume: 2

Issue: 4

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18082459>

Abstract

This article examines the intersection of ecological consciousness and feminist sensibility in the poetry of Mary Oliver and Kamala Das, arguing that both poets construct nature as a feminine space that offers alternatives to patriarchal structures of domination. Drawing on ecofeminist theory and ecocritical methodology, this study analyses selected poems from Oliver's American nature poetry and Das's Indian confessional verse to investigate how these culturally distinct poets articulate parallel connections between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women. The research employs a qualitative textual analysis methodology, examining published poetry collections alongside secondary critical sources from ecocriticism and feminist literary theory. The findings reveal that both poets employ nature imagery to critique patriarchal control over female bodies and desires, to imagine spaces of feminine autonomy and spiritual renewal, and to articulate embodied relationships between women and the natural world that resist Cartesian dualisms separating culture from nature. Despite significant differences in cultural context, poetic tradition, and thematic emphasis, Oliver and Das demonstrate convergent ecofeminist visions that challenge the hierarchical binaries (male/female, culture/nature, mind/body) underlying both environmental destruction and gender oppression. This comparative study contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations about global ecofeminism and the role of poetry in articulating alternative relationships between humanity and the more-than-human world.

Keywords:- Ecofeminism, Ecocriticism, Mary Oliver, Kamala Das, Nature Poetry, Feminist Literary Theory, Environmental Humanities, Women's Writing, Embodiment, Patriarchy

Introduction

The relationship between women and nature has been a site of both oppression and liberation throughout human history. Patriarchal ideologies have long associated women with nature, the body, and the irrational, constructing these categories as inferior to the masculine domains of culture, mind, and reason. This association has served to justify both the domination of women and the exploitation of the natural world, positioning both as resources to be controlled and consumed by rational (male) subjects. Yet the same symbolic connection between women and nature that has functioned oppressively can be reclaimed and revalued, as ecofeminist thinkers and writers have demonstrated. When women poets write about nature,

they engage a complex cultural inheritance that they may reinforce, resist, or transform.

Ecofeminism, emerging in the 1970s and developing through subsequent decades, identifies structural and symbolic connections between the oppression of women and the degradation of nature. Ecofeminist theorists argue that patriarchal thought operates through hierarchical dualisms (culture/nature, male/female, mind/body, reason/emotion) in which the first term dominates and devalues the second. These dualisms are mutually reinforcing: the association of women with nature justifies women's subordination, while the feminization of nature facilitates its exploitation. Challenging environmental destruction therefore requires challenging gender oppression, and vice versa. This theoretical framework provides productive tools for reading women's nature poetry as a site where ecological and feminist concerns intersect.

This article examines the poetry of Mary Oliver (1935-2019), the celebrated American nature poet, and Kamala Das (1934-2009), the pioneering Indian confessional poet, through an ecofeminist lens. These poets emerge from vastly different cultural contexts: Oliver from the American tradition of nature writing descending from Thoreau and Whitman; Das from the Indian literary landscape shaped by both Sanskrit poetic traditions and colonial English education. Yet both poets construct nature as a space of feminine significance, employing natural imagery to critique patriarchal constraints and imagine alternative modes of being. This comparative analysis investigates the following research questions: How do Oliver and Das represent the relationship between women and nature in their poetry? What ecofeminist themes and strategies emerge from their work? And what does a cross-cultural comparison reveal about the possibilities and limitations of ecofeminist poetics?

Literature Review

Ecofeminist Theory: Foundations and Debates

Ecofeminism emerged as a distinct theoretical and activist movement in the 1970s, with Françoise d'Eaubonne coining the term "écoféminisme" in 1974. Early ecofeminist thought, represented by writers such as Susan Griffin whose *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* poetically traced the parallel domination of women and nature in Western thought, emphasized the symbolic and material connections between patriarchy and environmental destruction (Griffin). Griffin's text interweaves scientific discourse, philosophical treatises, and lyrical passages to expose how Western rationalism has constructed both women and nature as objects of mastery.

Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* provided crucial historical grounding for ecofeminist analysis (Merchant). Merchant argued that the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries transformed Western conceptions of nature from an organic, living entity (often figured as female) to a mechanical system subject to human manipulation and control. This conceptual shift, Merchant demonstrated, legitimated both the exploitation of natural resources and the persecution of women (particularly through witch trials) as part of a broader project of masculine rational mastery.

Subsequent ecofeminist theory has diversified considerably. Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* offers a sophisticated philosophical analysis of the "logic of domination" underlying both sexism and environmental destruction (Plumwood). Plumwood identifies the network of hierarchical dualisms structuring Western thought and argues for a reconceptualization that acknowledges difference without hierarchy, continuity between humans and nature without erasure of distinction. Her work provides rigorous philosophical foundations for ecofeminist analysis while avoiding the essentialism that critics have identified in some earlier ecofeminist thought.

Debates within ecofeminism have centred on the question of essentialism. Critics both within and outside feminist movements have questioned whether ecofeminism reinforces the very associations between women and nature that patriarchal ideology has used to oppress women. If women are "naturally" closer to nature, does this not confirm rather than challenge patriarchal assumptions? Ecofeminist responses to this critique have varied. Some theorists, like Plumwood, reject essentialist claims while maintaining that the historical and symbolic association of women and nature provides strategic resources for both feminist and environmental politics. Others, drawing on standpoint epistemology, argue that women's social positions (particularly in care work and reproduction) provide distinctive perspectives on human-nature relationships without claiming biological determinism.

Ecocriticism and Poetry

Ecocriticism, the study of literature and environment, emerged as a recognized field in the 1990s with the formation of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) and the publication of foundational texts including Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader* (Glotfelty and Fromm). Early ecocriticism focused primarily on nature writing and American literature, examining how literary texts represent the natural world and human relationships with it. Subsequent waves of ecocriticism have expanded to encompass global literatures, urban environments, and questions of environmental justice.

Jonathan Bate's *The Song of the Earth* influentially argued for poetry's particular capacity to articulate ecological consciousness (Bate). Bate contends that poetic language, through its attention to sound, rhythm, and sensory particularity, can evoke embodied relationships with the natural world that philosophical or scientific discourse cannot capture. This argument for poetry's distinctive ecocritical significance informs the present study's focus on poetic texts as sites of ecofeminist articulation.

Feminist ecocriticism has examined how gender shapes both literary representations of nature and the material practices through which humans interact with environments. Gaard and Patrick Murphy's *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy* collected early feminist ecocritical work, while subsequent scholarship has examined specific authors, periods, and traditions. This body of scholarship provides methodological models and theoretical resources for the present analysis of Oliver and Das.

Critical Perspectives on Mary Oliver and Kamala Das

Mary Oliver achieved remarkable popular success while receiving mixed critical attention within academic circles. Her poetry's accessibility and spiritual affirmation led some critics to dismiss it as sentimental or insufficiently complex. However, recent scholarship has reassessed Oliver's achievement, recognizing her sophisticated engagement with American nature writing traditions and her distinctive poetic voice. (Bond) examines Oliver's use of the body as a site of knowledge, while Vicki Graham (1994) analyses her transformation of Romantic nature poetry conventions. Janet McNew's work situates Oliver within broader traditions of women's spiritual autobiography and nature mysticism.

Ecocritical readings of Oliver have examined her representations of attention, embodiment, and interspecies relationship. Critics including J. Scott Bryson have positioned Oliver within the tradition of American nature poetry while noting her distinctive emphasis on close observation and spiritual openness to nonhuman presences. Her poetry's invitation to readers to attend closely to the natural world aligns with ecocritical concerns about cultivating environmental awareness and ethical relationship with more-than-human beings.

Kamala Das (who also wrote in Malayalam as Madhavikutty) occupies a pioneering position in Indian English poetry, particularly for her frank treatment of female sexuality and

desire. Her confessional mode, influenced by American poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, scandalized conservative Indian society while inspiring subsequent generations of women writers. Critical attention to Das has focused primarily on her feminist themes: the critique of patriarchal marriage, the assertion of female desire, and the construction of an authentic female voice against social constraints.

Ecocritical readings of Das remain relatively underdeveloped compared to feminist analyses. However, scholars including Suresh Raval and Iqbal Kaur have noted Das's use of natural imagery to figure female experience and her evocation of the Kerala landscape as a space of memory and belonging. The present study contributes to this emerging body of work by examining Das's poetry through an explicitly ecofeminist framework, revealing dimensions of her work that purely feminist readings may overlook.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis methodology grounded in ecofeminist theory and ecocritical practice. The research design is comparative and interpretive, seeking to generate nuanced readings of selected poems by Oliver and Das through close attention to imagery, form, voice, and thematic development. The analytical framework synthesizes concepts from ecofeminist theory (particularly Plumwood's analysis of hierarchical dualisms), ecocritical methodology (particularly attention to representations of nature and human-nature relationships), and feminist literary criticism (particularly attention to constructions of gender and female experience).

The primary texts selected for analysis include poems from Mary Oliver's major collections, including *American Primitive*, *House of Light*, *New and Selected Poems*, and *Thirst*. From Kamala Das, the analysis draws on *Summer in Calcutta*, *The Descendants*, and *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, as well as selected later works. Poems were selected to represent each poet's engagement with nature imagery and feminist themes across their careers. The analysis proceeds through close reading of individual poems, examining:

- Representations of the natural world, including specific landscapes, creatures, and natural processes;
- Constructions of gender, including representations of female embodiment, desire, and social constraint;
- The relationship between nature imagery and feminist themes, including how natural spaces function as alternatives to patriarchal social structures; and
- Formal features, including how poetic form embodies or enacts ecofeminist themes. The comparative dimension examines convergences and divergences between the two poets, situating both within their respective cultural and literary contexts.

Secondary sources include published scholarship on both poets, theoretical texts from ecofeminism and ecocriticism, and contextual materials situating each poet within their respective literary traditions. The study acknowledges limitations inherent in comparing poets from vastly different cultural contexts; such comparison risks flattening cultural specificity in pursuit of superficial parallels. The analysis therefore attends carefully to contextual differences while identifying genuine convergences in ecofeminist vision.

Results

Mary Oliver: Attention, Embodiment, and Ecological Communion

Mary Oliver's poetry consistently positions attention to the natural world as a spiritual and ethical practice with implicitly feminist dimensions. Poems such as "The Summer Day," with its famous closing question "Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and

precious life?", invite readers to recognize the value of their own existence through attention to nonhuman life (in this case, a grasshopper). The poem enacts a mode of being that contrasts with the instrumental rationality associated with patriarchal modernity: rather than seeking to master or exploit, the speaker attends, wonders, and remains open to what the natural world might teach.

The analysis reveals that Oliver consistently represents nature as a space of feminine freedom and self-discovery. In "Sleeping in the Forest," the speaker describes sinking into sleep on the forest floor: "I thought the earth remembered me, / she took me back so tenderly." The earth here is explicitly gendered female and figured as maternal, receiving the speaker into a space of rest and renewal unavailable in the human social world. This representation risks the essentialist association of women with nature that critics have identified; yet Oliver's earth is not passive matter but an active, remembering presence that relates to the human speaker as subject rather than object.

Oliver's treatment of embodiment proves particularly significant for ecofeminist reading. Poems throughout her career celebrate bodily experience and sensation in ways that challenge the mind/body dualism central to Western patriarchal thought. In "Wild Geese," perhaps her most anthologized poem, Oliver writes: "You do not have to be good. / You do not have to walk on your knees / for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting. / You only have to let the soft animal of your body / love what it loves." This invitation to honor bodily desire rather than subjecting it to moral or religious discipline aligns with feminist critiques of patriarchal control over women's bodies. The "soft animal" of the body possesses its own wisdom that the rational mind should heed rather than dominate.

The analysis identifies in Oliver's work a consistent pattern of finding in nature models for an alternative mode of being. Creatures in her poems (herons, owls, bears, grasshoppers, snakes) embody qualities the speaker seeks to cultivate: presence, instinct, vitality, unselfconsciousness. In "The Black Snake," the speaker encounters a snake killed on the road and meditates on death and the life force that continues despite individual mortality. The snake's "survey of the kingdom" before death represents a mode of attention and presence that the speaker admires and implicitly contrasts with distracted human consciousness. Nature thus provides not escape from human concerns but resources for reimagining human existence.

Kamala Das: Nature, Desire, and Resistance to Patriarchy

Kamala Das's poetry employs nature imagery in markedly different ways than Oliver's, yet with convergent ecofeminist implications. Where Oliver's speakers seek communion with nature as spiritual practice, Das's speakers more often use natural imagery to figure female experience, particularly experiences of desire, constraint, and resistance that patriarchal society refuses to acknowledge. The natural world in Das's poetry serves as a vocabulary for articulating what cannot be directly spoken within the bounds of respectable femininity.

In "An Introduction," Das's manifesto-like assertion of poetic and personal identity, nature imagery figures the authentic self that social convention suppresses. The speaker declares: I was child, and later they / Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs / Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair.

This frank attention to the female body's natural development challenges the silence surrounding female physicality in conservative Indian society. Das grounds female identity in bodily experience, resisting the disembodied ideals that patriarchal cultures impose on women.

The analysis reveals that Das consistently associates patriarchal marriage with confinement and death, while natural spaces represent freedom and authentic life. In "The Old Playhouse," one of her most powerful poems, the speaker describes how marriage has transformed her into a "swallow" trapped in a "cage" where she has forgotten "the ways of the sky." The natural image of the bird figures a freedom and vitality that patriarchal domesticity

destroys. The speaker has been reduced from a creature capable of flight to a captive whose wings have atrophied. This imagery aligns with ecofeminist analyses of how patriarchy simultaneously constrains women and destroys natural vitality.

Das's Kerala landscape functions throughout her poetry as a space of memory, belonging, and feminine genealogy. Poems recalling her grandmother's house and the ancestral home evoke a matrilineal space (Kerala traditionally practiced matrilineal inheritance) that contrasts with the patriarchal marriage into which the adult speaker has been absorbed. In "My Grandmother's House," the speaker mourns the loss of this feminine space: "There is a house now far away where once / I received love." The grandmother's house, embedded in the Kerala landscape with its specific trees, animals, and sensory textures, represents an alternative to patriarchal family structures, a space where female love and authority organized domestic life.

The erotic dimension of Das's nature imagery deserves particular attention. In poems such as "The Freaks" and "The Looking Glass," natural imagery figures sexual desire and experience with an explicitness that scandalized contemporary readers. The body's desires are represented as natural forces that social convention cannot finally suppress, emerging despite attempts at control like water finding its way through obstacles. This naturalization of female sexuality challenges the patriarchal construction of respectable femininity as asexual or sexually passive, claiming for women the same "natural" desires attributed to men.

Convergences and Divergences: Toward a Comparative Ecofeminism

The comparative analysis reveals significant convergences between Oliver and Das despite their different cultural contexts and poetic modes. Both poets construct nature as a feminine space offering alternatives to patriarchal social structures. Both employ embodied, sensory imagery that challenges mind/body dualisms. Both find in natural processes (growth, desire, death, renewal) models for understanding female experience that resist patriarchal frameworks. These convergences suggest that ecofeminist themes emerge independently in women's poetry across diverse cultural contexts, though shaped by local conditions.

The divergences between the poets prove equally illuminating. Oliver's nature is primarily wild, nonhuman, and approached through solitary contemplation; her speakers seek escape from human society into natural spaces where different modes of being become possible. Das's nature is more often domestic and cultivated (gardens, ancestral homes, the Kerala landscape of memory), and her speakers struggle within human social structures rather than retreating from them. These differences reflect distinct cultural traditions: Oliver inherits American wilderness ideology and Transcendentalist nature mysticism, while Das writes from within Indian domestic spaces shaped by different constructions of nature-culture relationships.

The poets also differ in their treatment of the female body. Oliver's bodies are porous and continuous with nature, dissolving boundaries between self and world through sensory immersion. Das's bodies are more sharply bounded, defined against social constraints that seek to control them. This difference may reflect distinct cultural constructions of selfhood: the relatively permeable self of American Romantic tradition versus the more defended self negotiating hierarchical Indian social structures. Yet both poets insist on the body's significance and resist its subordination to mind or soul.

The analysis also reveals different relationships to poetic tradition. Oliver works within and transforms the American nature poetry tradition, engaging predecessors including Whitman, Emerson, and Roethke while developing a distinctively female voice within that tradition. Das writes more oppositionally, using the confessional mode to break silences that Indian literary convention had maintained around female sexuality and desire. Her nature imagery often functions ironically, contrasting natural vitality with the deadening effects of social convention. These different relationships to tradition shape how each poet deploys natural imagery for feminist purposes.

Discussion

The findings of this analysis demonstrate that ecofeminist themes emerge significantly in the poetry of both Mary Oliver and Kamala Das, though articulated through different imagery, forms, and cultural frameworks. Both poets construct nature as a feminine space that offers alternatives to patriarchal domination, employing natural imagery to critique social constraints on women and to imagine modes of being that resist hierarchical dualisms. This convergence across vastly different cultural contexts suggests that the connection between feminism and ecological consciousness identified by ecofeminist theory finds expression in women's literary production across the globe.

The analysis confirms Val Plumwood's argument that challenging hierarchical dualisms requires simultaneous attention to multiple forms of domination. Both Oliver and Das, in different ways, resist the dualisms (culture/nature, mind/body, male/female) that Plumwood identifies as structuring Western thought. Oliver's poetry dissolves boundaries between human and natural, inviting identification with nonhuman creatures and processes. Das's poetry insists on the body's claims against social and religious demands for its suppression or control. Both strategies challenge the logic of domination that positions nature and the body as inferior to culture and mind.

The question of essentialism that has troubled ecofeminist theory arises in reading both poets. Oliver's representation of nature as feminine and maternal, and her celebration of bodily instinct over rational control, could be read as reinforcing the very associations between women and nature that patriarchy has used oppressively. Similarly, Das's naturalization of female sexuality risks confirming rather than challenging essentialist gender categories. Yet both poets deploy these associations strategically, revaluing what patriarchy devalues rather than simply accepting patriarchal categories. Oliver's maternal earth is not passive matter but an active, remembering presence; Das's natural desires are forces of resistance to patriarchal control rather than justifications for it.

The comparative dimension of this analysis contributes to ongoing efforts to develop global or cross-cultural ecofeminism. Critics have rightly cautioned against imposing Western ecofeminist frameworks on non-Western contexts, where different cultural constructions of nature, gender, and their relationship may obtain. The comparison between Oliver and Das reveals both genuine convergences (the construction of nature as feminine space, the critique of patriarchal constraint, the celebration of embodiment) and significant differences shaped by cultural context. This suggests that ecofeminism should attend to local specificities while recognizing transnational patterns in women's engagement with ecological themes.

The findings also contribute to understanding poetry's distinctive capacity for ecofeminist articulation. Both Oliver and Das employ the resources of poetic language (imagery, rhythm, sensory particularity, metaphorical condensation) to evoke relationships between women and nature that philosophical or political discourse might struggle to capture. Poetry's attention to the body (both the body represented and the bodily experience of reading aloud) aligns with ecofeminist resistance to disembodied rationality. Jonathan Bate's argument for poetry's distinctive ecological significance finds support in these ecofeminist readings.

The implications of this analysis extend to both literary criticism and environmental thought. For literary criticism, the study demonstrates the productivity of reading women's nature poetry through ecofeminist frameworks, revealing dimensions of meaning that purely formalist or purely feminist readings might miss. For environmental thought, the analysis suggests that women's literary production constitutes a significant archive of ecological wisdom that deserves attention alongside scientific and philosophical approaches to environmental crisis. Poetry offers not only representations of nature but models for relating to the natural world that may prove valuable in cultivating the ecological consciousness that our

current moment demands.

Conclusion

This article has examined the intersection of ecological consciousness and feminist sensibility in the poetry of Mary Oliver and Kamala Das through an ecofeminist theoretical lens. The analysis reveals that both poets construct nature as a feminine space offering alternatives to patriarchal structures of domination, though they articulate this construction through different imagery, forms, and cultural frameworks. Oliver's American nature poetry invites contemplative attention to the wild natural world as a space of spiritual renewal and embodied wisdom. Das's Indian confessional verse employs nature imagery to figure female experience, critique patriarchal constraint, and claim spaces of feminine autonomy within the Kerala landscape of memory and belonging.

The comparative analysis identifies significant convergences between the poets: both resist the hierarchical dualisms (culture/nature, mind/body, male/female) that ecofeminist theory identifies as underlying both gender oppression and environmental destruction; both celebrate embodiment against patriarchal demands for bodily control; and both find in natural processes models for understanding and valuing female experience. These convergences suggest that ecofeminist themes emerge independently in women's poetry across diverse cultural contexts, shaped by but not reducible to local conditions.

The study contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations about ecofeminism, ecocriticism, and women's poetry. By demonstrating the productivity of ecofeminist reading for two culturally distinct poets, the analysis suggests avenues for further comparative work. Future research might extend this approach to other women poets from different cultural contexts, examine how ecofeminist themes develop historically within specific literary traditions, or investigate reception to understand how readers respond to ecofeminist dimensions of women's nature poetry.

In an era of accelerating environmental crisis, the ecofeminist visions articulated by Oliver and Das acquire urgent significance. Both poets imagine relationships between humans and nature that challenge the logic of domination driving ecological destruction. Both invite attention to the natural world and to embodied experience as sources of wisdom that instrumental rationality cannot provide. Their poetry suggests that addressing environmental crisis requires not only technological and political solutions but transformation in how we perceive and relate to the more-than-human world. In this sense, ecofeminist poetry contributes not merely to literary tradition but to the broader cultural work of imagining and creating sustainable futures.

Works Cited

- Bate, Jonathan. *The Song of the Earth*. Picador, 2000.
- Bond, Diane S. "The Language of Nature in the Poetry of Mary Oliver." *Women's Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1992, pp. 1–15.
- Das, Kamala. *Summer in Calcutta*. Edited by Rajinder Paul, Writers Workshop, 1965.
- . *The Descendants*. Writers Workshop, 1967.
- . *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*. Orient Longman, 1973.
- Gaard, Greta, and Patrick D. Murphy, editors. *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*. University of Illinois Press, 1998.
- Glotfelty, Cheryl, and Harold Fromm, editors. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Griffin, Susan. *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*. Harper & Row, 1978.
- Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. Harper & Row, 1980.

- Oliver, Mary. *American Primitive*. Little, Brown, 1983.
- . *House of Light*. Beacon Press, 1990.
- . *New and Selected Poems*. Beacon Press, 1992.
- . *Thirst*. Beacon Press, 2006.
- Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 1993.