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The Nexus of Environmental Degradation and Women's lives: An Ecofeministic perspective of Kavery Nambisan's *The Town like Ours* S. Saheetha Banu¹

Abstract

This paper examines the intricate relationships between environmental degradation and women's suffering in Kavery Nambisan's *The Town like ours*. The novel highlights the impact of environmental neglect on women's lives, livelihoods, and well-being, revealing the complex dynamics of women's relationships with nature and society. And also show casing their anger, fear and commitment to environment preservation and sustainability. Ecofeminism, a philosophical framework that converges the exploitation of nature and patriarchal domination that emerges ecology and feminism. By virtue of their unique nurturing roles and emotional connections, women tend to be more protective and more concerned about the land and environment. The impact of industrialization on women's lives has been profound exacerbating existing social and economic disparities. Authors like Kavery Nambisan and Sara Joseph bring attention to the diverse experiences of women in a patriarchal society, highlighting their struggles against environmental degradation and their intricate relationship with the natural world.

Keywords: Environmental degradation, women's suffering, ecology, feminism, social justice, intersectionality, sustainability

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The Nexus of Environmental Degradation and Women's lives: An Ecofeministic perspective of Kavery Nambisan's *The Town like Ours*

The Town like ours tells a deeply moving story that captures the damage wrought by environmental exploitation, social inequalities, and spiritual disconnection, all conveyed through a tightly woven narrative grounded in a specific community's unraveling. At the heart of the story is Rajakumari, a central character who embodies both the soul of the land and the spirit of its people. She is not a conventional hero seeking glory, but a quietly powerful figure whose presence and actions create ripples of healing and remembrance across the community. Her relationship with the land is visceral and profound, bound not through duty or obligation but through instinctive love, deep memory, and spiritual awareness. Through her, the novel explores the intricate relationship between human beings and their natural surroundings, as well as the responsibilities that come with that bond.

The arrival and dominance of Suganda Enterprises marks a turning point in the town's story. This corporate entity, masquerading as a bringer of development and prosperity, becomes a vehicle of ecological destruction and moral decay. Far beyond being a mere industrial operation, Suganda represents the destructive impulses of modern capitalism and its tendency to commodify nature and people alike. It poisons the soil and air, but also damages the cultural and psychological fabric of the town. Traditional ways of life begin to fade, stories are forgotten, and people grow disconnected from each other and from the land that once sustained them. In this way, Suganda Enterprises is not just the antagonist but also a symbol of a broader system that thrives on extraction, erasure, and domination.

A haunting manifestation of this environmental and social crisis comes in the form of children born with prematurely grey hair. These children are not just anomalies but living symbols of the consequences of unchecked industrial growth. Their grey hair, a visual and emotional shock, is a metaphor for accelerated aging, inherited trauma, and the toxic legacies passed down through generations. Their condition suggests a spiritual and ecological imbalance—a world in which the natural cycle of life has been disrupted. These children carry the weight of both prophecy and punishment, their bodies reflecting the poisoned legacy of a society that has lost its way. Yet, far from being mere victims, they emerge as sensitive, perceptive beings who, despite their marginalization, hold keys to deeper truths.

Their unusual condition brings with it an intuitive awareness and a form of wisdom that surpasses their age. This heightened sensitivity positions them as seers or messengers, their very existence questioning the dominant narrative of progress. Through their experiences and interactions, the novel presents a complex engagement with ecofeminism, which highlights how both women and nature are subjected to systems of control and violence. The text doesn't simply compare women and nature—it shows how both are victimized by the same logic of oppression. In this world, the land is treated as a female body—violated, stripped, and silenced—and it is through the voices and efforts of women, particularly Rajakumari, that a new mode of resistance begins to form.

Rajakumari's connection to nature and her intimate knowledge of the rhythms of the land align her with ecofeminist thought. She doesn't challenge oppressive systems with loud speeches or formal activism, but with everyday acts of care and remembrance. She tends to neglected spaces, listens to children's fears, and keeps alive the rituals and stories that link people to the earth. Her form of resistance is gentle yet transformative. Her spirituality is also deeply grounded—not defined by any religious system, but by a sacred bond with the world around her. She feels the pulse of the earth, responds to the suffering of others, and sees the divine in the ordinary. Her spiritual life is a quiet force that helps anchor the community, offering a different way of seeing and being that contrasts sharply with the mechanical, soulless world of corporate expansion.

The spiritual themes in the novel are subtle yet pervasive, expressed through dream-like moments, ancestral memories, and intuitive insight. The narrative draws from indigenous and folkloric traditions, building a world where the unseen and the intangible are just as real as the physical. Spirituality in this context is not about dogma or ritual but about connection—between people, between past and present, between humanity and nature. Rajakumari's spiritual strength lies in her ability to read the signs that others miss, to hear what is unsaid, and to honor what others have forgotten. The children with grey hair share this gift; their visions and dreams are treated not as fantasy but as glimpses into a deeper reality. Through them, the novel invites the reader to imagine a world in which knowledge is not only empirical but intuitive and sacred.

The town itself is brought to life with an almost human presence. It holds memories, suffers pain, and speaks through wind, water, and stone. This animistic portrayal challenges the industrial worldview that treats the environment as a lifeless commodity. In this narrative, rivers murmur with ancient voices, trees remember what people forget, and silence carries meaning. Rajakumari lives in harmony with this world, her home filled with elements of the natural realm—plants, birds, and objects steeped in history. Her way of life reflects a form of ecological consciousness that is both spiritual and practical. She respects the land not just as a resource, but as a relative, a being with whom one must live in mutual respect.

The Invasion of Suganda Enterprises disrupts this harmony. Its presence marks a shift toward a reality dominated by numbers, chemicals, and lifeless routines. People begin to forget their songs, the tastes and smells of clean air and water, and even the names of the plants that once fed and healed them. A collective forgetting takes place, and the town starts to lose its soul. In this context, the grey-haired children appear as strange relics of a world that's been tampered with. Their existence does not fit into official records or clinical diagnoses. They are too human and too strange to be easily understood, and that is precisely what gives them power. They resist classification, and through their difference, they open a space for alternative ways of knowing and remembering. Sugantha factory's production of agarbathis marked the beginning of this transformation, replacing the natural smells of the village with artificial fragrances.

Kumari's family background was not so well and it often gave her many challenges to deal with. She became insane when her father himself called her "Chudayil" and this made her to think more about her life and came upon a chance to escape the family. She thought that this escapism would do great wonders in her life but all in vain. She has expressed the daily routine of a village girl which has been absolutely framed by the society. This can be proved through the following lines, "Like any village girl I worked in the fields, fetched water, gathered dung, stacked sun dried sheaves of paddy and fed the chickens" (Nambisan 25). Kumari, the narrator of this novel tries to explain the condition of village girls who were summoned to do their domestic works as their full-time job.

Rajakumari takes these children under her wing—not through formal means, but through shared experience and understanding. She recognizes their pain, listens to their silences, and offers them a sense of belonging. In a society that has turned away from empathy, she provides a sanctuary of care and connection. Her acts of kindness are revolutionary, especially in a context where the system works to isolate and marginalize those who do not conform. Through her nurturing, she offers a glimpse of a different future, one built not on control and conformity, but on compassion and co-existence.

As tensions rise between the corporate establishment and the local people, various forms of protest emerge. Women, particularly the mothers of affected children, begin to speak out. Workers whose bodies have been devastated by years of exposure to toxins also raise their voices. While these protests are often fragmented and quickly suppressed by authorities aligned with Suganda Enterprises, they continue to emerge in quieter, more persistent forms. Sharing heirloom seeds, telling old stories, performing forgotten rituals—these become acts of rebellion. Rajakumari participates not as a leader, but as a steady presence. She helps revive the cultural memory of the community, guiding children through songs, myths, and traditional practices that reconnect them with the land and with each other.

The novel refuses to offer an easy or idealistic ending. The environmental damage is not erased, and the grey-haired children do not magically return to normal. Instead, the novel offers a vision of slow and difficult healing—a process grounded in truth, memory, and spiritual restoration. The children begin to share their visions and insights with the larger community. At first, they are met with skepticism and fear. Over time, however, some begin to listen. Their voices, once ignored, begin to change the way people understand their world. Rajakumari remains at the heart of this change. Her life is marked by sorrow and loss, but she never gives up on the town or its people. Her strength lies in her ability to endure and to love even when hope seems lost.

In the end, *The Town like ours* is a meditation on what it means to forget and what it means to remember. It critiques a society that values profit over life and encourages a return to values rooted in care, humility, and interconnectedness. Through ecofeminist and spiritual themes, it calls for a different kind of progress—one that honors the earth and all its inhabitants. Rajakumari, in her quiet defiance, represents the kind of wisdom the world desperately needs. She teaches that resistance can be as simple as nurturing a child, tending a garden, or telling a story. And the children with grey hair, once seen as

broken, emerge as carriers of truth and possibility. Their presence demands attention, not because they fit into existing systems, but because they challenge those systems to become something better.

Through Rajakumari and the children, the novel paints a powerful picture of a community on the brink—its past wounded, its present unstable, but its future still open to redemption. Their stories, filled with sorrow and vision, serve as reminders that the earth remembers, that healing requires listening, and that sometimes the most unlikely voices carry the deepest truths.

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