

The Serpent, the House, and the Female Body: Ecofeminism and the Ecology of Violence in K. R. Meera's "Sarpayatnam"

Dr. Neethu P. Sabu

Research Scholar, Department of English, Stella Maris College

Email: getme.nitus@gmail.com

Abstract- The serpent occupies an ambivalent position within cultural memory, symbolizing fertility, danger, wisdom, sacred power, and regeneration across diverse religions and cultures. In the South Indian context, beliefs surrounding sarpadosham and sarpashalyam reinforce its association with fear, anger, and misfortune. K. R. Meera's "Sarpayatnam" challenges and overturns these inherited cultural meanings by demonstrating that violence originates not from the serpent, which symbolizes the natural world, but from the patriarchal structures embedded within marriage. Drawing upon the ecofeminist interventions of Val Plumwood, Vandana Shiva, Carolyn Merchant, Maria Mies, Ariel Salleh, and Bina Agarwal, alongside the feminist theories of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Silvia Federici, and Susan Sontag, this paper argues that women, domestic space, and the natural world become interconnected sites of patriarchal domination. This paper argues that the construction of the house and the institution of marriage are parallel manifestations of patriarchal ownership. Meera portrays the house as a colonized ecology and marriage as an ecology of violence, in which the husband's control over his wife's body, labour, and agency operates through the same extractive logic that governs humanity's relationship with nature. By reconfiguring the serpent against its dominant historical and cultural representations, Meera presents it as an ethical witness whose silent coexistence offers an alternative ecological imaginary rooted in care, shared vulnerability, and reciprocity. The paper demonstrates that, by repositioning ecofeminist inquiry from the natural landscape to the everyday domestic space, "Sarpayatnam" challenges patriarchal and anthropocentric binaries and reconceptualizes the relationship between women, ecology, and non-human life.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Patriarchy, Ecology of Violence, Feminine Subjectivity, Capitalist Patriarchy

Throughout history, the serpent has been a recurring symbol associated with fear, divinity, fertility, wisdom, temptation, immortality, and healing in cultural consciousness. It is both revered as a protector of ancestral lineage and fertility and feared as an agent of misfortune in the Indian cultural imagination, owing to its symbolic duality. The latter is ingrained in South Indian cultural practices through the beliefs of sarpadosham and sarpashalyam. Thus, the serpent is viewed as more than a venomous biological organism; it is a cultural signifier through which social order, spiritual practices, and beliefs are constructed.

The symbolic ambivalence of the serpent extends beyond South Asian religious traditions into Western cultural and theological discourse. In the Christian biblical narrative of Eden, the serpent is synonymous with disobedience, the first sin, and the Fall of humanity. The first woman, Eve, through her curiosity, is viewed as a central reason for humanity's expulsion from paradise, establishing a symbolic relationship between femininity, sexuality, and wrongdoing within Christian religious narratives. She is positioned as the origin of human suffering on earth. Feminists have long argued that the interpretation of the story of Eve has legitimized patriarchal control and surveillance over female desire and female bodies. The serpent has become a metaphor through which gendered hierarchies are framed, culturally transmitted, and reinforced. The biblical narrative casts both the serpent and the woman in a negative light, establishing the serpent's identity as one associated with fear and moral disorder.

K. R. Meera, through "Sarpayatnam," enters this discourse on women and the serpent in order to dismantle it. At first, the story appears to reproduce the cultural discourse surrounding *sarpashalyam*, creating the impression that the serpent may lead to an inevitable catastrophe. The serpent's repeated appearances in the house, in the presence of the wife, seem to fulfil the astrologer's warning. However, the anticipated danger never materializes, as Meera reverses this expectation. Violence does not originate from the serpent but from the patriarchal figure within the house—the husband—who exercises complete control over both the house and his wife, whether in financial decisions, her communication with her family, or her emotional life. He remains emotionally detached, dismisses her fear of the serpent, and humiliates her in front of his engineer friend. The writer thus relocates the danger culturally associated with the serpent to the patriarchal institution of marriage.

Meera strikingly redefines the relationship between women and nature. The serpent, naturally imagined as an object of fear, becomes the protagonist's only source of solace and the only presence that

responds to her with empathy. It appears when she is emotionally distressed after being abused and mistreated by her husband rather than at moments of temptation. It becomes a silent witness to her suffering and to everything that happens within the house. Meera's narrative overturns the historical and cultural assumption that nature is a site of danger while domestic spaces such as the home offer protection. Instead, the writer exposes marriage as the primary site of oppression for the protagonist, who represents the experiences of many Indian women, while the serpent is transformed into a symbol of protection, care, and empathy.

This symbolic transformation offers a productive framework for an ecofeminist reading of the story. The term "ecofeminism," coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in *Feminism or Death*, advances the view that environmental and gendered exploitation arise from patriarchal structures. Rather than treating these two forms of oppression separately, ecofeminist critics argue that women and nature are subjected to the same hierarchical structures of domination. Carolyn Merchant, Ariel Salleh, Val Plumwood, Bina Agarwal, and Vandana Shiva provide critical frameworks that expose the interconnected patriarchal structures sustaining exploitation, control, extraction, and environmental degradation. At its core, ecofeminism does not merely question the structures responsible for ecological destruction; it reimagines the relationship between humans, the natural world, and systems of power.

Unlike many ecofeminist scholars who have predominantly explored literary representations of landscapes and environmental catastrophe, Meera's "Sarpayatnam" depicts a serpent within the domestic space. Through this shift, Meera demonstrates how patriarchal structures extend their power simultaneously over women, land, non-human life such as the serpent, and architecture. The serpent emerges as an ecological presence whose habitat is violated by human construction on the land. The husband's acquisition of the plot of land, despite ecological warnings from the astrologer, leads to the destruction of the serpent's existing habitat, while his attempt to kill the serpent is governed by the same logic through which he exercises authority over his wife's body, dowry, labour, and emotional life. The coexistence of the serpent and the wife suggests that ecological exploitation and domestic oppression arise from the same principle of ownership. Their peaceful coexistence further destabilizes patriarchal and anthropocentric understandings of nature. Meera thus demonstrates that the exploitation of both the natural world and women is mutually constitutive and structurally inseparable.

"Sarpayatnam" stages two fundamentally different ecological imaginaries. The first, represented by the husband, is rooted in patriarchal authority, anthropocentric mastery, and ownership as the central principles governing women and non-human life. The second, grounded in shared vulnerability, reciprocity, and coexistence, is embodied by the serpent. The husband continuously asserts domination over his wife, the domestic space, the land, and her financial autonomy, whereas the serpent exists within the narrative as a silent witness to the protagonist's suffering, empathizing without claiming authority and emerging as an ecological presence that recognizes her pain. These contrasting relationships that the husband and the serpent establish with the protagonist expose the limitations of patriarchal domination and challenge anthropocentric assumptions that privilege control over coexistence. Through this ethical contrast, Meera reimagines the serpent not as an object of fear but as a figure of ecological care, thereby locating violence not in nature but within patriarchal structures of power.

In light of the theories of Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Simone de Beauvoir, Susan Sontag, Michel Foucault, Carolyn Merchant, Vandana Shiva, Ariel Salleh, Maria Mies, Bina Agarwal, and Val Plumwood, this paper argues that "Sarpayatnam" shifts the locus of violence from nature to patriarchy, exposing patriarchal structures as the primary site of fear. Meera transforms the serpent from a historically and culturally feared figure into a symbol of feminine subjectivity, ecological coexistence, and ethical care. The protagonist gradually comes to perceive the serpent as a silent companion and her only source of solace within the domestic space, where the patriarchal husband constitutes the true source of violence and fear. By dismantling binaries such as human/non-human, nature/culture, domination/care, and masculinity/femininity, Meera challenges patriarchal and anthropocentric modes of thought and suggests that liberation can be realized not through domination or mastery but through relational existence, coexistence, and the recognition of shared vulnerability across human and non-human life.

Meera accomplishes this objective of presenting the serpent as a non-dangerous presence through the lived encounters that the protagonist has over the course of time. The serpent here gets its meaning through the continued encounters that the wife has with it rather than through inherited belief. The first encounter of the wife with the serpent, after preparing her husband's favourite tomato curry and chapatis and doing other household chores that are expected of an ideal Indian wife, is significant. She enters the bathroom to bathe and notices the crystal-like eyes of the serpent. The writer places the serpent in an ordinary domestic setting, not in isolated temples or forests, which are associated with serpents. The writer rejects the spatial separation between wilderness and civilisation created by humans. She suggests that the wilderness has entered the domestic space, or it never left. The protagonist's reaction is instinctive as she is fear-stricken and attempts every possible way to identify the opening through which it could have

entered the house. She uses leftover construction timber to close it. The serpent here has acquired meaning through cultural memory, and for the wife, the serpent is nothing more than danger.

Meera refuses to validate this fear. Contrary to the wife's expectation, the serpent disappears without posing any danger; it does not chase or threaten her. It follows the same pattern every time. It watches her, observes her, and retreats without attacking her. The danger anticipated by the protagonist as well as the reader never materializes. This method that the writer utilizes is what Val Plumwood elaborates as the need to dismantle the dualistic logic through which Western and patriarchal thought constructs nature as the threatening "other" requiring control. Patriarchal epistemology establishes its power through binary oppositions such as civilisation versus wilderness, man versus animal, and reason versus instinct. In all these binaries, nature is portrayed as threatening or fearful. Meera's "Sarpayatnam" quietly resists it. It continues to coexist according to its natural rhythms in spite of the attempts made by humans to threaten its existence and destroy its habitat. Meera urges readers to distinguish between the meaning given through cultural narratives and the serpent itself. Every appearance of the serpent erases the fear in her mind until it becomes a comforting presence. On the contrary, the husband dismisses the possibility that a serpent could be in the house. He sees reality through his rational confidence as an engineer, and the presence of the serpent challenges his certainty that humans could control any space. His dismissal thus serves as a representation of anthropocentric knowledge rather than a genuine scientific concern.

Carolyn Merchant contends that modernity redefined nature as available for control, exploitation, and possession rather than viewing it as an interconnected natural system. Meera critiques this epistemological shift through the continual ecological presence of the serpent despite human control over the land, reasserting the idea that the land belongs to both ecological and human life and that nature cannot be controlled through modern construction.

The narrative also shows the change in the protagonist's responses over the course of time. The questions she asks herself, from how to escape the serpent to why the serpent has never harmed her, reflect her shift from fear to inquiry. After a certain point, she stops viewing the serpent through inherited cultural assumptions and instead observes its behaviour around her. Her observations and knowledge replace superstition and culturally inherited meanings. The serpent does not change; rather, the way the protagonist perceives it changes over time. This epistemological transformation resonates with Bina Agarwal's critique of essentialist ecofeminism, in which she rejects the notion of an innate closeness between women and nature based on biological identity. Agarwal suggests that ecological consciousness is not an innate quality of femininity but a socially and historically constituted one. K. R. Meera adopts a similar narrative in which the protagonist's affinity with the serpent develops through repeated acts of coexistence that dismantle cultural and patriarchal assumptions about gender, nature, and danger. Ecological knowledge is thus created through engagement, observation, lived experience, and rationality. The writer shifts the danger from the serpent to the cultural narratives that have determined what serpents are permitted to signify. Meera's "Sarpayatnam" lays the foundation for a different ecological ethic, suggesting that coexistence is possible only after unlearning culturally inherited structures of fear.

"Sarpayatnam" not only reflects the construction of the house by the husband as an ecological encroachment but also reflects the violence replicated within the institution of marriage. The house is not just an architectural intervention that displaces the serpent from its natural habitat; it is a site where the protagonist's labour, emotions, bodily autonomy, movement, and economic agency within marriage are regulated. Therefore, both ecological exploitation and the subjugation of female subjectivity by patriarchal power are manifestations of the same structures of authority. The violence inflicted on nature and women within marriage emerges from the desire to control, possess, and discipline.

Meera's story offers a powerful critique of patriarchal authority within marriage through its representation of domestic labour that receives neither recognition nor appreciation. The protagonist performs the labour expected of an ideal wife, yet these repeated acts of care and service, which sustain the household, remain invisible and gradually consume her physically and emotionally. The marital relationship mirrors patriarchy's extractive relationship with nature, in which both women and the natural world are expected to sustain life selflessly while receiving neither recognition nor value in return. Ariel Salleh identifies this financially invisible and undervalued labour performed by women as meta-industrial labour in her Marxist ecofeminist critique. Meera portrays the protagonist's continuous labour throughout the day not to celebrate her sacrifice but to throw light on the endless emotional and physical labour that receives no recognition.

Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies' critique of capitalist patriarchy as a system that legitimizes the extraction of labour and resources while concealing exploitation through the language of marital duty, obligation, and progress is reflected in Meera's story. Additionally, the writer depicts this extractive logic through the husband's view of his wife's natal family as a continuing source of capital even after her father divides his property equally between his daughters. Despite her legal entitlement to the land, the protagonist is never consulted regarding the purchase of land or domestic expenditure, nor can she object

to her husband's demands. This reveals that patriarchal marriage grants the husband authority over material resources that legally belong to the wife.

The narrative demonstrates that control over the protagonist's finances extends to the regulation of her body. Her speech, emotions, movements, and contact with the outside world and her family are monitored, and any form of refusal is met with violence. This violence is not an outburst of anger but a disciplinary mechanism intended to re-establish patriarchal domination whenever power is threatened. Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, argues that power structures discipline their subjects by regulating everyday behaviour through surveillance, conditioning, and punishment. Meera's protagonist becomes such a subject, continuously modifying her emotions and speech, suppressing her anger, and performing obedience to avoid conflict. Thus, the patriarchal structure operates as a pervasive system that elicits fear, governs everyday actions, and secures compliance through the anticipation of punishment or social exclusion.

The protagonist admits that she fears both her husband and her father. This complicates the conventional idea that the natal home offers security while the marital home is a site of abuse and suffering. Meera portrays patriarchy as a continuous institutional structure that transcends individual households. Simone de Beauvoir's conception of woman as the "Other" reflects the protagonist's relational existence, in which her identity is mediated through male authority. First as a daughter and then as a wife, she maintains domestic harmony through obedience, sacrifice, and silence.

The incident involving Chackochan demonstrates that patriarchal authority is reproduced collectively rather than by a single individual. Chackochan's assessment of the protagonist exclusively on the basis of her reproductive potential reflects the expectations imposed on the female body. He also remarks that pregnancy would make her look mature. This is the only conversation he has with her. He is neither a family member nor someone close to her, reflecting that her husband is not the only abuser but part of a wider masculine collective sustained through shared assumptions and mutual validation. Her husband responds to Chackochan's remark about his wife's body with amusement, normalizing the reduction of the female body to its reproductive function. He remains unconcerned about her discomfort as his colleague discusses and judges her rather than recognizing her as an autonomous subject. Meera depicts that patriarchy survives not through the violence perpetrated by a single individual but through male solidarity. Susan Sontag reflects on gendered politics by arguing that patriarchal culture positions women's bodies as the primary site for enforcing patriarchal expectations. Meera shows that the protagonist's body becomes a site expected to remain sexually available for her husband, economically beneficial through dowry, reproductively productive, emotionally compliant, and socially respectable. These demands compel her to continuously perform socially and patriarchally sanctioned femininity, displacing her individuality.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity further illustrates that ideal femininity is produced through the repeated performance of socially and culturally sanctioned behaviours. The protagonist repeatedly attempts to become an ideal wife through silence, obedience, domestic labour, and emotional restraint, but after some time her suppressed anger and resistance reveal a selfhood that refuses complete compliance with her outward performance. She imagines pouring water over Chackochan for his remarks about her body and personal life, revealing the instability of patriarchally constructed femininity. Silvia Federici's analysis of domestic labour further provides a productive framework for understanding the political economy of patriarchy. She argues that domestic activities such as cleaning, caregiving, and cooking remain economically unrecognized despite sustaining society. Meera similarly exposes that the protagonist's domestic labour sustains the household and benefits her husband's public life while providing her with neither recognition, economic agency, nor autonomy.

"Sarpayatnam" constructs an ecology of violence through a system in which domestic labour, economic dependency, architecture, bodily discipline, and reproductive expectations collectively sustain patriarchal authority. Violence is therefore maintained through structures rather than isolated acts. The serpent never harms the protagonist, yet it is the humans who occupy its habitat and repeatedly attempt to kill it. By relocating fear from the serpent to the husband, who becomes a threat to both the wife and the serpent, Meera redefines both the agent of domination and the very meaning of danger.

Meera's strongest ecofeminist intervention lies in the ethical opposition between the serpent and the husband. The husband embodies an anthropocentric and patriarchal imagination structured by control, ownership, and domination, whereas the serpent represents an alternative ethic rooted in empathy, care, and coexistence. It silently witnesses the protagonist's suffering and gradually becomes her silent companion. The serpent neither interrupts the violence inflicted upon her nor provides physical protection; instead, it functions as an ethical presence that acknowledges her suffering without attempting to control her, claim ownership over her, or expect anything in return. It simply coexists with her and becomes a source of solace.

Thus, the distinction between the husband and the serpent is not merely biological but fundamentally ethical. The husband asserts ownership over his wife, her family's wealth, the land, and the

house, treating them as extensions of his authority. The serpent, by contrast, despite being displaced from its natural habitat, neither attempts to reclaim it through violence nor retaliates against human intrusion. Instead, it adapts to coexistence, challenging patriarchal notions of power founded upon domination and mastery.

Meera's "Sarpayatnam" demonstrates that the exploitation of nature and women arises from a shared patriarchal epistemology rooted in ownership and mastery. The serpent, displaced by humanity's desire to occupy and control the land, mirrors the protagonist's own dispossession within the domestic space. Meera refuses to treat ecological and gendered violence as separate concerns, presenting both as products of patriarchal attempts to dominate and control.

The paper further argues that "Sarpayatnam" moves beyond eco-political discussions situated within natural landscapes to locate them within the geography of the home, where land, property, labour, architecture, and bodily autonomy intersect. In this way, Meera demonstrates that environmental violence begins not only with the destruction of forests but also with the everyday patriarchal structures of authority that govern domestic life. She effectively dismantles the binaries of nature/culture, fear/care, and human/non-human by offering an ecofeminist vision grounded in interdependence and reciprocity. Ultimately, "Sarpayatnam" suggests that the liberation of both the natural world and women is possible only through the abandonment of domination and mastery in favour of coexistence, reciprocity, and ethical care.

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