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Servant Leadership, Ecofeminism, and Empowerment in *The Face of the Faceless*

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Abstract

Christian missionaries all over the world work for the upliftment of the underprivileged communities and impart knowledge and courage necessary for their sustainable development. Their selfless efforts often culminate in sacrificing their lives for the development of society at large. The service of such missionaries can be connected to servant-leadership roles. Servant-Leadership theory, propounded by Robert K. Greenleaf, as its central tenet service to others is different from other leadership theories that seek power and domination over the followers. Recognizing and appreciating others' greatness is also significant in this approach. Ecofeminism also shares some principles of Servant-Leadership, particularly predominant is the critiquing of domination. This paper analyses the unbiased consideration and support provided by Sr. Rani Maria as portrayed in the film, *The Face of the Faceless*, in empowering the tribal women of Indore, Madhya Pradesh, from the theoretical perspective, Servant-Leadership and Ecofeminism. Sr. Rani Maria succeeds to a great extent in creating an inclusive environment for the tribal people of Indore by overcoming their challenges as less privileged.

Keywords: ecofeminism, development, domination, servant-leadership, underprivileged

Leadership is pivotal to the success of any initiative, and leaders often influence their followers to achieve a common goal. Leaders frequently hold the leading position in the group, provide guidance, and divide the tasks among members. Leaders sharing the same or equal role as others in the group are uncommon.

Servant-Leadership is an approach introduced by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970 through his work, "The Servant as Leader," which prioritizes serving others and sharing similar duties as others. Servant-Leadership and Ecofeminism are perspectives that value equality rather than hierarchy. Both these

approaches highlight the interconnection between everyone and everything in nature. Servant-Leadership and Ecofeminism also aim at empowering the marginalized or weak people. Literary narratives often depict characters with the quality of a servant leader, such as the protagonist Leo in Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East*, who serves and supports a group like a servant, keeping them in good spirits with his song until he disappears. Leo has played such an important role in the party that they couldn't go on well without his presence. However, later, when he is found and brought back to the Order that funded the journey, Leo's real identity is revealed as the head of the Order. Actually, Greenleaf's idea of servant-leadership came out of this story (Greenleaf, 2). The other notable literary figures are Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, who disregards social barriers and stands up for the marginalised, and Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*, who supports and guides Frodo in his quest.

Above all, Jesus Christ is the true leader whose life exemplified unconditional service. Bible verses highlight servant leadership. For instance, in the gospel of Mark, Jesus teaches: "But Jesus called them to him, and saith unto them, Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all. For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45). In the same book, Jesus repeats the value of service: "And he sat down, and called the twelve, and saith unto them, If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all" (Mark 9:35). In the gospel of Luke, we get a glimpse of authentic leadership: "But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve" (Luke 22:26). Jesus washing his disciples' feet is the

ultimate example of humility, the selfless treatment of fellow people that Jesus expected from his disciples. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela, who upheld principles of nonviolence, patience, and resilience, succeeded in persuading their followers to act in unity towards bigger goals.

This paper analyses the film, *The Face of the Faceless*, based on the life of the blessed Sr. Rani Maria, whose unwavering efforts empowered the marginalised tribal women of Indore, from the perspectives of Servant Leadership and Ecofeminism. The film centres on the upliftment of a downtrodden community with the leadership and sacrifice of a nun who dedicated most of her life to their good. The film is also about the exploitation of women and nature. The narrative opens by highlighting the scarcity of water and the forced dependence of the tribal community on polluted water for their subsistence. Thus, the human-nature relationship is brought to focus by the director, Shaison P. Ouseph, in the initial phase of the film itself. Shortly after taking charge at the convent in Indore, Sr. Rani Maria embarks on her duty to serve the poor. When Sr. Rani Maria strolls through the tribal village with Kerly, a tribal woman, she is shocked to discover the terrible living conditions of the villagers. Superstitious beliefs and rituals of the tribals intensify their hardships. When people fall sick with a disease or at the time of delivery, they are never taken to a doctor, as it is against their traditional belief system. At one instance, Sr. Rani Maria takes an old man contracted with a contagious disease isolated by the rest of the villagers to the nearby village hospital. The doctor hesitates for a while before treating the old man and even questions the sister about her stubbornness to treat this man, who is a total stranger to her. However, the sister pleads with the doctor to save the poor old man's life and thus succeeds in getting better care for him. Sr. Rani Maria spends most of her time listening to them and praying to the Lord for his support in her mission. A nun has to strictly abide by the

rules of the convent, but Sr. Maria is often found working with the tribal villagers, especially in tilling the barren land into a fertile one suitable for agricultural activities. She also joins hands with the poor tribals in building a water body, which is necessary to meet their daily needs and for agriculture.

The introductory chapter of *The Power of Servant Leadership*, provides a condensed account of the characteristics of a servant-leader. First he has remarkable listening capacity: "The servant-leader seeks to identify the will of a group and helps clarify that will. He or she seeks to listen receptively to what is being said (and not said!). Listening also encompasses getting in touch with one's own inner voice, and seeking to understand what one's body, spirit and mind are communicating" (Spears 5). The second, he has commendable ability to empathise with others: "People need to be accepted and recognized for their special and unique spirits. One assumes the good intentions of co-workers and does not reject them as people, even when one is forced to refuse to accept their behavior or performance" (5). The third, he is noted for his healing capacity: "Many people have broken spirits and have suffered from a variety of emotional hurts. Although this is a part of being human, servant-leaders recognize that they have an opportunity to "help make whole" those with whom they come in contact" (5). Fourth, he has profound awareness: "Making a commitment to foster awareness can be scary – you never know what you may discover! Awareness also aids one in understanding issues involving ethics and values. It lends itself to being able to view most situations from a more integrated, holistic position" (6). Fifth, he has extraordinary persuasive skill: "The servant-leader seeks to convince others, rather than coerce compliance. This particular element offers one of the clearest distinctions between the traditional authoritarian model and that of servant-leadership... This emphasis on persuasion over coercion probably has its roots within the beliefs of The Religious Society of

Friends (Quakers) – the denomination with which Robert Greenleaf himself was most closely allied" (6). The sixth is the capacity to conceptualise: "Servant-leaders seek to nurture their abilities to 'dream great dreams.' The ability to look at a problem (or an organisation) from a conceptualizing perspective means that one must think beyond day-to-day realities" (6). The seventh quality of a servant-leader is the capacity to foresee what is to come: "Foresight is a characteristic that enables the servant-leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision for the future" (7). The eighth one is stewardship, the most important trait of a servant-leader: "Servant-leadership, like stewardship, assumes first and foremost a commitment to serving the needs of others. It also emphasises the use of openness and persuasion, rather than control" (7). The ninth characteristic is the commitment to the growth of people: "The servant-leader recognizes the tremendous responsibility to do everything within his or her power to nurture the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of employees" (7). The tenth and last quality of a servant-leader is his or her capacity to build a community among the group of followers.

The Face of the Faceless, an Indian film directed by Shaison P. Ouseph, delineates the plight of a tribal community in Indore. Their miseries, struggles, and the discriminations, and challenges faced by them while fighting the environmental crisis and the injustices of the feudal landlords and other upper-class sections of society form the main content of the movie. The film also portrays Sr. Rani Maria's tremendous effort in safeguarding the poor tribals from the dangers of a patriarchal society. In this endeavour, the sister plays the role of a servant-leader by exhibiting all the qualities of a good servant-leader. Sr. Rani Maria carefully listens and understands the problems of the tribal people. In spite of the restrictions of her Order, the sister frequently visits the tribal villagers, converses with them, and thus learns

about the water crisis in the village, the debt traps of the feudal landlords, and other difficulties they are experiencing. The sister empathises with the villagers even at times of great disapproval from their side. She tries to understand and forgive them for their deeds. The sister also helps them heal or overcome their physical and mental distress by providing motivational support and encouraging them in various skill-development activities. Another character that can be associated with a servant-leader is the sister's awareness of the issues and the ethics related to them. Sr. Rani Maria excels in persuading her followers into action against injustice rather than imposing authoritative control. The sister also has the capacity to conceptualise, or to seek and find development plans for the tribals. The ability to foresee or envision the possible outcome of any action is also something that makes the sister a servant-leader. Stewardship, the commitment to do selfless service to the downtrodden, confronting massive figures without even considering her own safety, is another notable characteristic of the sister. Sr. Rani Maria has also dedicated herself to the prosperity of the tribal people. She toils along with them in the fields, educates them, and actively involves them in skill development activities. The sister has succeeded in unifying the tribal villagers into a strong community, overcoming their fear of the landlords and zamindars.

This paper also examines *The Face of the Faceless* from an ecofeminist perspective, focusing on the inequality based on gender, class, and caste faced by the tribals, in addition to their sexual exploitation and financial insecurity. The tribal children of Indore used to tend the goats of the zamindar on daily wages, and Sr. Rani Maria notices and questions the unequal distribution of wages between boys and girls. In response, the patriarchal figure kills a poor goat threatening her. At this instance, the zamindar's action devalues both the woman and the poor animal and can be linked to what Greta Gaard states: "Ecofeminists have

described a number of connections between the oppressions of women and of nature that are significant to understanding why the environment is a feminist issue, and, conversely, why feminist issues can be addressed in terms of environmental concerns. For example, the way in which women and nature have been conceptualized historically in the Western intellectual tradition has resulted in devaluing whatever is associated with women, emotion, animals, nature, and the body, while simultaneously elevating in value those things associated with men, reason, humans, culture, and the mind. One task of ecofeminists has been to expose these dualisms and the ways in which feminizing nature and naturalizing or animalizing women has served as justification for the domination of women, animals, and the earth" (4-5).

Tribals borrow money for fertilizers and seeds from the Thakur, and he often misuses the opportunity by situating them in debt traps. At one similar instance in the film, a tribal family faces terrible loss when they are forced to give up the profit from the sale of their produce, and their daughter is brutally raped by the landlord's men. Actually, the lord of the house borrowed the money to meet the expenses of his daughter's marriage. Unable to face the disgrace of the incident, the farmer commits suicide. The ruthless behaviour of gangsters over innocent girls can be connected to something ingrained in them about gender: "As the establishment of the sex/gender role system sets up a male-dominated and female-subordinated sexual hierarchy, the powerlessness of women especially restrains their ability to confront sexual inequality and gender injustice. Consequently, women as a group share their vulnerability to male violence, discrimination by male dominant cultural institutions, and the mystification of male superiority, regardless of their different ages, classes, and ethnic backgrounds" (Li 284). *The Face of the Faceless* also depicts the brutal killing of farmers over the debt issue by the upper-class feudal landlords.

One such instance is when the landlord's men ride a tractor over a farmer's body, burying him in the soil in front of his wife. No one pays attention to the pleadings of the woman, and it is painful to watch her struggle to take his dead body from underneath the ground. Tribal women are tied to a tree and severely beaten when they fetch some water from the wells of the upper-class people, on account of untouchability. However, Sr. Rani Maria instills in them the importance of acquiring mental, physical, and financial freedom to live a life of self-respect. The sister toils with them in the fields and helps them attain high yields in agriculture. With the support of nature, together they begin developing a gender inclusive world to live a peaceful life. Moreover, the sister assists them in taking a bank loan for building a school and sewing machines for skill development. Sr. Rani Maria, with other missionaries, spends most of their time imparting knowledge to the underprivileged tribal community and thus empowering them, especially women, through education. These initiatives for development using agriculture and other means show women's role in environmental management. In this regard, Ranjeeta Mukherjee also comments: "This extensive and intimate relationship with the land means that women, often exclusively, have extensive knowledge of traditional remedies and plants, indigenous farming practices and local methods of crop cultivation. Agriculture development policies and programmes should be inclusive of women to meet local needs. Investing in women's education furthers economic goals and improves the health and wellbeing of future generations" (Mukherjee 4).

With the power gained from such actions, the tribals desist from seeking support from the feudal lords. This arouses their anger, and they begin to threaten the poor in village meetings. The landlord Amar Singh's men destroy the agricultural fields and the school, nullifying the arduous efforts of Sr. Rani Maria and her followers. Environmental destruction (burning

of agricultural fields) portrayed in the film and sexual exploitation of tribal women directly display the basic premise of Ecofeminism. In this context, Janis Birkeland remarks: "Ecofeminism is a value system, a social movement, and a practice, but it also offers a *political analysis* that explores the links between androcentrism and environmental destruction. It is "an awareness" that begins with the realization that the exploitation of nature is intimately linked to Western Man's attitude toward women and tribal cultures or, in Ariel Salleh's words, that there is a parallel in men's thinking between their 'right' to exploit nature, on the one hand, and the use they make of women, on the other"(18). However, without any delay, the sister approaches the concerned authorities for justice and gains support in the matter. Sr. Rani Maria also provides food and shelter to the poor tribals. Amar Singh visits the convent and threatens the sister against protecting the tribals. Even so, the sister receives him with compassion. At the close of *The Face of the Faceless*, Amar Singh assigns Samindar Singh, a villager caught in the debt trap, to kill the sister. Finally, while travelling in a bus, Sr. Rani Maria is stabbed to death by Samindar Singh. However, the sister's mother forgives the assassin and kisses his hands, an ultimate act of mercy and leniency. The current news of the arrest of the Christian nuns, Preeti Mary and Vandana Francis, in Chhattisgarh, on charges of human trafficking and forced religious conversion can be read in line with the case of Sr. Rani Maria. The Keralite sisters, from the Order of the Assisi Sisters of Mary Immaculate (dedicated to serving the marginalised and vulnerable), were caught by the police while they were taking three tribal girls to the Agra convent for jobs. Even after the explanation of the tribal girls about the selfless act of the nuns to find jobs for them and that there was no forced conversion, the authorities proceeded with the arrest.

Servant-leadership and Ecofeminism are perspectives highlighting equity. Both negate

exploitation and hierarchy as harmful threats. Continuous attempts challenge dominance and resist exploitation by using ways of empowerment (farming, education, skill development) are apparent in the film, *The Face of the Faceless*. Sr. Rani Maria's servant leadership to resolve environmental issues such as the one at the time of water scarcity (she organises and works with the villagers in building a water body), and during the destruction of agricultural fields by the landlord's men (she leads the tribals in protests), helps the tribals, especially women, attain mental strength. Hence, *The Face of the Faceless* is a true representation of servant leadership and ecofeminism.

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