

Ecofeminism: A Study at the Roots of Gender Inequalities

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ABSTRACT: Ecocriticism is, as put forward by Diamond and Orenstein, ‘a new term for ancient wisdom’. It is a value system that explores the connections between androcentrism and environmental destruction. The theory emerged from various social movements, from both activist and academic fields during the 1980s. Ecofeminism, as a movement, developed from antimilitarist action movement in the United States while founding a political platform for the US Green party. The term was first used by Francoise D’Eaubonne (1980) in her article “Feminism or Death.” From the mid-1970s, ecological critique turned to play a significant role in the women’s movements worldwide.

KEYWORDS: ecofeminism, value dualism, androcentrism, gender inequalities

At the “Women and Environment Conference” at UC Berkley in 1974, convened by Sandra Marburg and Lisa Watson, the connection between women and environment was officially registered for the first time. A considerable number of women were motivated, after the meltdown at the Three Mile Island, to join the ‘first ecofeminist conference’ (as Shiva and Mies put it)—“Women and Life on Earth: A Conference on Eco-Feminism in the Eighties”, held at Amherst in March 1980. This conference noted the correlation between feminism, militarization, healing and ecology. Yenestra King, one of the organizers of the conference, observed:

“Ecofeminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice. It asserts the special strength and integrity of every living thing. For us, the snail darter is to be considered side by side with a community’s need for water...We are a woman-identified movement and we believe we have a special work to do in these imperiled times” (King 1983, 10).

In 1981, ‘Women for Life on Earth’ (WFLOE) group was formed, being inspired by the Amherst conference. The ecofeminist newsletter, “W.E.B: Women of the Earth Bonding”, came out with four issues within 1981-83. The first anthology on ecofeminism, *Reclaim the Earth: Women Speak out for Life on Earth*, edited by Leonie Caldecott and Stephanie Leland, was published in 1983. Yenestra King and Starhawk initiated ‘Woman Earth Peace Institute’, which is an ecofeminist educational centre, in 1985. Their chief goal was to disrupt the white domination within ecofeminism.

Rosemary Ruether, in 1975, warned women against the ‘symbolic role’ imposed upon them by the dominant patriarchal culture at the time of any ecological crisis: “Any effort to reconcile such a male with “nature”, which doesn’t restructure the psychology and social patterns which make nature “alien”, will tend to shape women, the patriarchal symbol of “nature”, (emphasis added) into romanticized servitude to a male-defined alienation. Women will again be asked to be the “natural wood-nymph and earth mother and to create places of escape from the destructive patterns of the dominant culture” (qtd in Dobscha 2012, 37).

Merchant (1980) questions the mechanistic view of science that undermines femininity and nature in her *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. Mies and Shiva (1993) find the connection between the ‘corporate and military warriors’ aggression against the environment and the aggression against female body in the Introduction to their book *Ecofeminism*. As they put it, women in Switzerland demonstrating against Seveso poisoning noted: “We should think of controlling our bodies in a more global way, as it is not only men and doctors who believes aggressively towards our bodies, but also

the multinationals! What more aggression against the body of women, against the children than that of La Roche-Givaudan at Seveso?" (Shiva 1993, 14).

Vandana Shiva correlates different types of violence against women and nature within *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (1988). Here Shiva analyses the fashion in which industrialization, afforestation, white revolution, green revolution, and genetic engineering have unfavourably moved the poor women throughout the world.

As Spretnak (1993) observes the archaeological evidence points that in Neolithic Age, the earth and the female were highly respected in European culture. The worshipping of the female deities in the form of various elements of nature shows the interconnectedness with the 'elemental power of the female' and nature. From the Bronze Age, the situation began to change. Some Ecofeminists like Carolyn Merchant (author of *The Death of Nature*) focuses on the upturn/subversion of the organic cosmology helping to protect nature for centuries by the revolutions (both scientific and cultural) of the 18th century European *Enlightenment*, obsessed with 'progress'.

The nature/culture dualism within the patriarchal design has been disclosed within the collection *Ecofeminism: Women, Animal, Nature* (1993), edited by Greta Gaard. It exposes the androcentric attitude that devalues women, animals and nature.

The basic concept of ecofeminism is the realization that various systems of oppression are, according to Gaard, 'mutually reinforcing'. Patriarchal society, as the Ecofeminists believe, is based on four 'interlocking pillars'— racism, sexism, class exploitation and environmental destruction. The dominant culture portrays not only women but all the oppressed social classes as being 'closer to nature'. Greta Gaard, in her "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism" reflects after Warren:

An early impetus for the ecofeminist movement was the realization that the liberation of women—the aim of all branches of feminism—cannot be fully effected without the liberation of nature; and conversely, the liberation of nature so ardently desired by environmentalists will not be fully effected without the liberation of women: conceptual, symbolic, empirical and historical linkages between women and nature as they are constructed in Western culture require feminists and environmentalists to address these literary efforts together if we are to be successful (Gaard 2012, 440).

The basic aim of ecofeminism differs from that of liberal feminism. Ecofeminists do not demand equal rights with men, what they seek is a liberation of women as women, and the recognition of the importance of the activities traditionally associated with women like childbirth, nurturing and the jobs done within the domestic arena.

Norwood (1993) presents the association of women with nature and the efforts of the women in preserving the environment in *Made from this Earth*. Within the book, she observes that, promoting its own history, and recognising the contribution of women in nurturing plants and animals, are the only ways in which ecofeminism may exhibit how women's culture can initiate the base of a better world in the coming days.

The basic argument of ecofeminism is based on the assumption of the existence of a difference between entities and their relatedness to one another in a hierarchical fashion. Value dualisms, as Karren Warren explains, are ways of conceptually organizing the world of binary. Each side of the dualism is "seen as exclusive (rather than inclusive) and oppositional (rather than complementary), and where higher value or superiority is attributed to one disjunct (or, side of the dualism) than the other" (qtd in Gaard 2012, 143). The 'master identity', as explained by Val Plumwood, creates and depends on a 'dualized structure of otherness and negation'. She also provides a list of the dualized pairs of the key elements in that structure; though she never claims for the completeness of the list:

culture/ nature

reason/ nature
 male/ female
 mind/ body
 master/ slave
 reason/ matter (physicality)
 rationality/ animality (nature)
 reason/ emotion (nature)
 mind, spirit/ nature
 freedom/ necessity (nature)
 universal/ particular
 human/ nature (nonhuman)
 civilized/ primitive (nature)
 production/ reproduction (nature)
 public/ private
 subject/ object (Plumwood 1993, 43)

For the sake of emphasizing the distinction between the elements of the pairs, the contribution of the downside is ignored or 'back grounded' as not so important or relevant. She also observes that in creating such dualism, women have always been linked with the 'underside' of each pair. This thought has associated women to nature than culture, to body than to mind, to the primitive rather than the civilized. The distinction comes from the hierarchy of value created by the paradigm of social oppression:

1. God
2. Man
3. Woman
4. Children
5. Animals
6. Nature

This paradigm provides men their 'superiority', the authority to dominate and use nature, animals and women to their own purpose. Plumwood traces the root of such 'dualistic split' back to Plato and Aristotle, particularly within Plato's philosophy of vilification of both the body and of nature. Greta Gaard finds out a number of characteristics 'about the interlocking structure of dualism' disclosed by the ecofeminists. One of them is about the connection within the 'devalued' category. Plumwood theorizes the 'linking postulates' connecting such dualism:

1. Backgrounding, in which the master relies on the services of the other and simultaneously denies his dependency;
2. Radical exclusion, in which the master magnifies the differences between self and other and minimizes the shared qualities;
3. Incorporation, in which the master's qualities are taken as the standard, and the other is defined on terms of her possession or lack of those qualities;
4. Instrumentalism, in which the other is constructed as having no ends of her own, and her sole purpose is to serve as a resource for the master;
5. Homogenization, in which the dominated class of others is perceived as uniformly homogenous (Plumwood 1993, 42-56)
6. Plumwood finds out 'plenty of good reasons' (Plumwood 1993, 213) for the feminists to discard the concept of connection with nature. She observes:
7. The masculine rational sphere of public life, production, social and cultural life and rational justice is contrasted with the feminine sphere of the private, domestic and reproductive life, the latter representing the natural and individual as against the social and cultural. (Plumwood 1993, 213)

8. For Plumwood, “Feminine ‘closeness to nature’ in this sense is hardly a compliment” (Plumwood 1993, 214). She wants the women to demand their ‘full and equal participation in the sphere of humanity and rationality’ (Plumwood 1993, 215) from which they have been ruled out. She is in search of a new regendered model for the solution of the question of suppression:
9. What is needed is a regendered model, which realigns the gender identities and challenges the dualisms on which they have been based...On such alternative model of the human we would not *overemphasize* or *overvalue* the characteristics that set humans apart from the natural world (Plumwood 1993, 234).

In 1993 Ellen O’Loughlin, an ecofeminist writer, suggests, “We have to examine how racism, classicism, ageism, and sexism are all related to naturism” (qtd. in Gaard 2012, 141). Greta Gaard, with an aim of associating queer theory to ecofeminism says, “The first argument linking ecofeminism and queer theory is based on the observation that dominant Western culture’s devaluation of the erotic parallels its devaluation of women and of nature” (Gaard 2012, 140). According to the queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the heterosexual/queer dualism shows ‘ineffaceable marking’ of the normative dualisms and thus has affected Western culture (mentioned in Gaard 2012, 141). Among those linking postulates mentioned earlier, backgrounding, radical exclusion and incorporation are shared by the queers. As Gaard argues, the essential part of the project of ecofeminism is disclosing the reason/erotic and heterosexual/nature dualism. She asserts, “...we can explore how nature is feminized, eroticized, even queered. The critical point to remember is that each of the oppressed identity groups, each characteristic of the other, is seen as “closer to nature” in the dualisms and ideology of Western culture” (Gaard 2012, 146).

On the question of the existence of any such link between women and nature, three stances of the ecofeminists could be found. One group, including critics like Beihl, is of the opinion that men and women have just the same access to nature and that the concept of the connection between women and nature is wholly socially constructed. The opposing view, shared by Prentice and others, believes in the biological construction of the gender behavior and the closeness of women to nature, reflected in their reproductive capabilities. A ‘third way’ suggested by Plumwood, Warren, Gaard and such other ecofeminists, rejects the structure of dualism and argues for the acknowledgment of the equal share of culture and nature of both men and women. Warren points out eight sorts of connections between women and nature as identified by ecofeminists:

1. Historical, Typically Causal Connections
2. Conceptual Connections
3. Empirical and Experiential Connections
4. Symbolic Connections
5. Epistemological Connections
6. Political (Praxis) Connections
7. Ethical Connections
8. Theoretical Connections

The ecofeminist philosophers, as Charlene Spretnak reflects, find a common ground with deep ecology in its ‘rejection of rationalist value theories and an environmental ethic grounded in abstract principles and universal rules believed to be undiscoverable through reason alone’ and also the rejection of ‘Eurocentric sense of discontinuity between humans and nature’ (Spretnak 1993, 185). Val Plumwood negates the idea of interconnectedness and inter-dependence of all the entities in the ecosystem. Plumwood observes that such identification prevents particular attachments which are important. Marilyn Frye makes the readers aware of the importance in cultivating a ‘loving eye’ which can be a ‘fitting summery of the mission of ecofeminism’ (Ladkin 2012):

*The loving eye is contrary to the arrogant eye.
The loving eye knows the independence of the other.*

...

The loving eye is one that pays a certain sort of attention...

...

The loving eye doesn't make the object of perception into something edible, doesn't try to assimilate it, doesn't reduce it to the size of the seer's desire, fear, and imagination, and hence doesn't have to simplify. It knows the complexity of the other as something which will forever present new things to be known. The science of the loving eye would favor The Complexity Theory of Truth (in contrast to the Simplicity Theory of Truth) and pre suppose The Endless Interestingness of the Universe (Ladkin 2012).

Charlene Spretnak finds out a spiritual dimension of ecofeminism. For her, 'the ecofeminist alternative to the Western patriarchal overview' is "a radical reconceptualization that honors holistic integration: interrelatedness, transformation, embodiment, caring, and love" (Spretnak 1993, 187). This concept bears resemblance with several Eastern and indigenous spiritual belief systems. Spretnak discovers the link of ecofeminism to all the major religious traditions, and the use of female imagery in reference to 'the divine'. She comments, "Particularly, in patriarchal society, the choice of female metaphors is a healthy antidote to the cultural denigration of women" (Spretnak 1993, 187).

The most serious charges brought against ecofeminism are that of essentialism, ethnocentrism, anti-intellectual goddess-worshipping etc., most of which are the 'sweeping generalization, often made without specific and supporting documentation' (Gaard 2011, 32). The ecofeminists of the 90s identified the signs of gender essentialism within ecofeminism and sought to improve and expand the theory. Victoria Davion differentiates between the gender essentialism of the 'ecofeminine' and the critique of gender roles indispensable for ecofeminism in "Is Ecofeminism Feminist?" published in 1994. Davion shows that women may also be oppressors of other women and of the natural world (Davion 1994, 19-20). Earlier ecofeminists like King (1989) and Plumwood (1991) also identified the emphasis on gender as a social construction. In the sphere of 'animal ecofeminism' that came into visibility with the publications like Collard and Contrucci's *Rape of the World* (1989), Adams's *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990), three essays (by Adams, Curtin, Slicer) introducing ecofeminist critique of speciesism in *Hypatia's* special issue on "Ecological Feminism", and Gaard's anthology *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (1993) that first set species at the centre of ecofeminism, soon the charge of essentialism came to dominate the critique. From the mainstream feminism Kathryn George (in "Should Feminists Be Vegetarians?"), Beth Dixon (in "The Feminist Connection between Women and Animals") and Mary Stange (in *Woman the Hunter*, 1997) emphasized on the consideration of nonhuman animals within feminism as essentialist and ethnocentric. In response to this allegation Adams referred to the ongoing debate on George's flawed nutritional data. Donovan highlighted the absence of studies on traditional vegetarian populations. And Gaard and Gruen pointed out George's failure to use feminist methodology "in her uncritical embrace of overconsumption, along with persistent slippage from logic to insinuation and faulty inference" (Gaard "Ecofeminism Revisited" 37). Dixon charged ecofeminism of claiming that feminists must defend animals as they are also oppressed like women. Gaard and Gruen defended ecofeminism from such charge by referring to the intersectional analysis of oppression as found in Plumwood's (1993) development of the master model, Iris Young's "Five Faces of Oppression" (2004, 37-63) and Marilyn Frye's (1983) birdcage analogy indicating towards the different structures of oppression.

Ecofeminism also received criticisms from the deep ecologists and social ecologists. Instead of sharing the ecocentric spirit of the deep ecologists, the ecofeminists criticize deep

ecologists for alleging anthropocentrism solely as the root cause of destruction of the natural world. Rather the ecofeminists charge androcentrism for the loss. In turn, deep ecologists consider ecofeminists to be simply wrong regarding these diverging viewpoints. The debate tended to end with the essay “Is There an Ecofeminism-Deep Ecology ‘Debate?’” where Deborah Slicer commented that the deep ecologists did not seem to be listening to or reading ecofeminist arguments, or accurately representing and responding to the viewpoints of the ecofeminists. The social ecologist Janet Beihl charged ecofeminism for essentialism in *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* (1991). In doing so, Beihl seems to overlook the social ecofeminist branch developed by King and Heller. This allegation was refuted by ecofeminist activists and philosophers like Buege (1994). Gaard (1992), Gruen (1992) and Plumwood (1992) united. Plumwood commented that Beihl’s argument remained “caught in the old credo of a single ground of hierarchy and a single solution to domination, a reduction which is fundamentally misconceived, insensitive to difference, and blind to exclusion” (Plumwood 1993, 36).

However, nowadays Ecofeminism is taking the centre-stage into the realm of gender studies. Gradually it is adding more significant dimensions to this particular area of studies. It is being incorporated within the syllabi of renowned universities across the globe. There is still much scope for such inter-theoretical debates regarding the arguments of the ecofeminist critics. In this study, I have tried to throw light only upon some of them. The topic demands extensive study and I intend to do that within my future works.

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