

Ecofeminism: A Brief Overview

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Abstract

The concept 'Eco-feminism' originates from last three decades which cuts across two critical perspectives specifically ecology and feminism. The prefix 'Eco' hails from ecology which is the branch of biology that studies the relationship between the biotic and the abiotic factors of earth or it means examining and analyzing the relationship between the living organisms with their environment. The word 'ecology' evolves from the natural environmental system of biological sciences. It is social, economical as well as biological movement to study how man is continually polluting and contaminating the earth by causing various pollution i.e. land pollution, air pollution, water pollution, thermal pollution and causing demolition, devastation, destruction and extinction to the natural system thereby threatening the basis of life.

Feminism being a complex movement of political, social, economical, ideological and philosophical ideas with multiple layers focuses on the empowerment of women. Feminism in its most basic sense relates to the promulgation, advocacy and upholding of rights of women on the grounds of gender equality or the equality among the sexes.

Ecofeminism thus is an overlap between the environmental exploitation and gender oppression. It inspects, investigates and inquires the conditions and happening that perpetuate and cause the subjugation, servitude and subservience of both women and nature.

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Introduction

Ecofeminism is an umbrella term that circumscribes multiplicity and numerousness of ideas viz deep ecology, ecosophy, racism, sexism, religious ecology, antinuclear movement etc. *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2010)* has exemplified ecofeminism as, "a philosophical theory and movement which combines ecological concerns with feminist ones, regarding both as resulting from male domination of society". *The Webster's New World Encyclopedia (2013)* has denominated, "Ecofeminism is a movement or theory that applies feminist principles and ideas to ecological issues"

Thus, from numerous elucidation we can assume that ecofeminism bridges and bonds ecology with feminism. Ecofeminists foresee that the domination of women and subjugation of nature are born from the same dogma of capitalist patriarchy as under the capitalist thinking men owns control over land, property and women. While deciphering the relationship between ecology and feminism, Patrick Murphy elucidated it as a dialectical relationship and thus stated:

To be a feminist, one must be an ecologist, because the domination and oppression of women and nature are inextricably intertwined. To be an ecologist, one must also be a feminist, since without addressing gender oppression and the patriarchal ideology that generates the sexual metaphors of masculine domination of nature, one cannot effectively challenge the world views that threaten the stable evolution of the biosphere in which human beings participate and perish".(Murphy, 146-161)

Thus, ecofeminism is a movement which discerns a bond between profiteering and abusing of the natural world and the denigration and persecution of women. For ecofeminists environmental injustice and social injustice are not two disparate matter of contention but one. On the surface they have the appearance of two but they are mingled in one as they uproot from the same ideology of value hierarchal thinking and philosophical oppositional value dualism. As a philosophical movement it aimed at deconstructing the oppression of hierarchal system governed by dualistic hierarchies of light/Darkness, Male/Female, Independence/ Interdependence, culture/ nature, Head/Heart, Reason/ Emotion, White/ Black etc. Greta Gard in her book *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism, theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy* (1998) very tacitly portrays her understanding of the umbrella term as:

Ecofeminism is a practical movement for social change arising out of the struggles of women to sustain themselves, their families and the common unities. These struggles are waged against the mal development and environmental degradation caused by patriarchal societies, multinational corporation and global capitalism. They are

waged for environmental balance, hierarchal and matrifocal societies, the continuance of indigenous culture and economic value and programs based on subsistence and sustainability (26-53).

Environmental injustice is concerned with deteriorating, degrading, depreciating, debasing and decomposing ecosystem and environmental resources while as social injustice is concerned with the problems of racism, sexism, classism, poverty etc. Ecofeminists look over the conditions of oppression resulting in backing down of both women and environment. While drawing a parallel between the environmental injustice and social injustice ecofeminists claim that they are intimately linked as, "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" (Salleh, 26)

Man being a parasite on the earth consumes too much and gives little back to it subsequently forgetting that nature needs not rule over it, can sustains itself smoothly without any human intervention. But nowadays there is so much meddling of man on natural world that geologists have named the present era as Anthropocene, the age of humans. Environmental degradation along with its consequences on human existence buds out to be a central problem in the current macrocosm for man shaping ecofeminism immensely relevant. Power and despotism smother both the feminine and the natural world. The tyranny over the feminine world directly links to staining environmental honor of our planet rendering issues of power, dominance and subordination immensely momentous to ecofeminism. As is explicit from the term ecofeminism, it emerges out to be a confluence of ecology and feminism. Donald Worsler, the historian of environment wraps up the ecological disaster by saying:

we are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical system function...historians, along with literary scholars, anthropologists and philosophers can't do the reforming of course , but they can help with the understanding(The Earth,15).

Ecofeminism extricates socio-political fabrication for those who abominate identity of ecology and women. While as feminism is a versatile movement the cardinal principle of which is the participation of women in all the fields- social, economic, political in opposition to the patriarchal domination and violence, ecofeminism is an offshoot of feminism, applying its basic tenets to the environmental issues. Thus, ecofeminism is a philosophical and speculative movement which aims at repudiation and debarment of all kinds of subjugation while endorsing and acknowledging the reciprocity and affinity that human beings share with nature. Ecofeminism is also a branch or part of that philosophical domain which explores ethicality of how humans influence and think about their natural ambiance. It explores how the oppression of

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both women and ecology may stem from the same sources of envisaging the whole world.

Since ecofeminism doesn't represent a homogenous standpoint, it is problematic to curtail it to some basic principle. However, one of the main issues it addresses is the degree of androcentrism, the viewpoint that puts the patriarchal interests ahead of others. Large contention within ecofeminism is how much of the problem can be attributed to the patriarchal discourse regarding women and ecology. Some of the ecofeminists at extreme claim that it is only patriarchal hegemony that directly leads to Eco feminine subjugation and thus call for a radical change of perspective by empowering women. According to Greta Gaard:

Ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology, which authorizes oppression such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality and physical abilities is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. Ecofeminist theorists consider the interconnections between sexism, the domination of nature, racism, speciesism and other social inequalities.

In 1974, the alliance was made between ecology and feminism and a conference was hosted by Sundra Marburg and Lisa Watson subtitled *Women and Environment* at Berkley in Northern Clifornia. In 1975, Rosemary Radford Reuther pinpointed that, "women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationship continues to be one of the dominances" (New204). Thus, ecofeminism serves as aideological and theoretical discourse to spell out 'knot' between the subjugation of women and demolition and devastation of nature.

There are numerous ecological concerns like Global Warming, pollution, climate change, deforestation, depletion of ozone, ecological imbalance etc. This constructed an apprehension and consciousness about the depletion of environment and the severe threat that it is facing in the contemporary times. This led to the emergence of environmental movement across the globe, the main concern of which is that humans all over the world should respect their Mother Earth that nurtures them. Based on this consciousness and understanding, numerous kinds of environmentalism have evolved including – Deep Ecology, Gaia, Ecosophy, as the shallow understanding of environmental degradation will not help and would not solve any problems but in turn will create further problems for the earth and the creatures living in.

Ecofeminism emphasizes that all forms of life exist on this planet earth and one should not forget that human beings are the late entrants in the Great Chain of Being. Susan Griffin articulates to Lisa Lynch in an interview:

We belong to nature. We can't breathe without nature. So there are various degrees in which interdependence manifests itself, and one would be in a kind of slime mold that is really considered one organism that spread—can spread for miles underground. The other would be in a forest in which everything there is dependent on everything else to thrive. That was a principle of Darwin...then you have literally the way human beings are born, or conceived and born. The way we develop in utero is that the woman and her uterus and the organism within the uterus are one in the same way that mitochondria are part of human body. You know? They can have independent life, but it is the part of the body. So I think that the claim that women should have control over their own bodies is quite literal. You know, the whole idea of being separate from nature I think is tied to this kind of stark individualism that we are living out. The consequences of now, the failure to understand that we are economically interdependent all over the world, and communities thrive better. But when you look at an ecological system everything is dependent on everything else. That kind of label is associated with men .so, this construct underlies a huge amount of what we do in the world. (Lynch,30-31)

Emergence

Ecofeminism the global feminist movement as described by the famous American marine biologist in one of her famous magnum opus book *SilentSpring* (1962) voices the deterioration and degradation of nature. Carson's book looked up and thus laid foundation on the modern ecological movement that came to climax in 1970 as the nationwide earth day.

Francoise-d' Arbonne –a French feminist in 1974 in her classic book *Feminism or Death* has been deemed with first poetizing and coining the term Ecofeminism. This book became an alarm and a sign of things to come, as women became aware to save the planet earth by leading an ecological revolution. She created the ecology–feminism centre in Paris in 1972.In this book she puts in writing about the stronger connection women share with nature. She is of the view that patriarchy is the main cause of both, feminist and ecological problems.

Ecofeminism as a movement started to gain popularity when large number of women in united states came together in the first ever ecofeminist conference *women and life on earth* in 1980's at Amherst resulting later in the growth of organizations and ecofeminists. It has been hailed as a third wave feminism, as in first and second wave feminism the issues of women's education, women's rights, women's bodies, women's sexualities were the focal point. The third wave went

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extra mile to look women's relationship with nature and surrounding. Ecofeminism has dawned out of this understanding. The concept was further progressed and promoted by a feminist theorist Ynestra King in 1976. She spelled out:

Ecofeminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice.... We see the devastation of earth and her beings by the corporate warriors and threat of nuclear annihilation by the military warriors as feminist concerns. It is the same masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies-and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its own way. (King,10)

Throughout the globe women have been working to eradicate, expunge and uproot the environmental issues both at national and international level. For example women of the Green Belt movement in Kenya planted and cultivated millions of trees in derelict, desolated and deserted lands. Similarly, in India, women became an indispensable, intensive and integral part of Chipko movement to rescue trees from being cut down by hugging them. In Canada, women outcried the uranium processing near their towns. In USA, house wives wrought at local level to clean up the waste sites.

Sherry B Ortner in his essay *Is female to male as nature is to culture?* in 1974 turns inside out the concept of women being subordinate, subsidiary and second fiddle to men and brings to light that women are closer to nature. Works of ecofeminist writers like Vandana Shiva, Mary Miller, Ariel Sallahetc also dig into the relationship between gender and nature. The contribution of all these writers engender an accustomed conclusion that women are closer to nature than men and both are equally oppressed, exploited and dominated by the hierarchy which is the very insight of feminism.

Various Trends Among Ecofeminism: -

Ecofeminism being a well-developed philosophical theory emerged in late 1980's and it brings into forefront a synthesis of modern feminist paradigms. There are numerous approaches that spotlight intrinsic connection between dominance, oppression and subordination of women and nature. Some of intrinsic, indispensable and integral works done on ecofeminism like *New Woman, New Art-Sexiest Ideologies and Human liberation* in 1975 by Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Woman and Nature - The Roaring Inside Her* in 1978 by Susan Griffin, *The Death of Nature – Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* in 1980 by Carolyn Merchants – all provide an essential historical proof regarding the affinity between woman and nature.

Hence by going through numerous ecofeminist literature, we get to know that the study of these books makes us acquainted with the fact that in the process

of development and modernity, new forms of exploitation and oppression have come to the forefront leading towards more destructive world. In this respect Ecofeminism as a philosophy as well as movement helps us to analyse both social and ecological problems which is the need of the hour, as then only our social and economic interests will be managed.

Thus, Ecofeminism is an attempt to amalgamate two realistic divergent aspects of life to help them to attain their sustainability, equality and liberty. It presents the issues from the categories of patriarchy which is responsible for the degradation of both nature as well as oppression of females. Ecofeminists address the issues of how male dominate the matriarchy and how their economical interests destroy, degrade and exploit the nature. They believe that environment and women share the common goal of restoring their own nature and the quality of life they deserve.

Ecofeminism gained the attention in the post-world war era because of the devastating effects of the two wars both on the ecology and human life. Women and natural ambiance became the worst victims of the recent wars across the globe. So, different ecologists and the academicians with the help of different agencies organized many conferences concerning the same with *Women and Life on Earth: A Conference on Ecofeminism in the Eighties* at Amherst being the first one of its kind. The main aim of such conference was to highlight the different threats to ecology, devastation of biodiversity due to some gruesome human activities in past, the relationship between women and nature, shared past of subjugation of women and nature by men and many other issues alike.

Women-Nature Connections

In *Feminism and Ecology Making Connections* Karen Warren along with few other ecofeminists were able to find various connections between women and ecology. These are:

- 1. Historical and Casual Connection:** - According to some feminists, domination of women and nature can be traced back to the history of mankind. Spretna and Rizler trace this domination to the invasion of Indo-European cities by nomadic tribes of Eurasia about 4500 B.C.
- 2. Conceptual Connections:-** In structural theory of value dualism, both women and nature are regarded inferior to man and culture respectively, which forms the base of the biased relationship between the two. Furthermore, before 17th century, nature was regarded as an organic model, as benevolent female, as a nurturing mother but after scientific revolution nature came to be regarded as mechanist model i.e. machine.
- 3. Symbolic Connections:** - There is a symbolic association and devaluation of women and nature in art, literature, religion and theology and symbolic connection between sexist and naturalist languages. For instance, women is

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often described in animal terms as cows, foxes, serpents, bitches etc. Simultaneously nature is often described in feminine and sexual terms like nature is raped, mastered, conquered, controlled, etc.

Thus, ecofeminists reflect close connection between environmental exploitation and subjugation of women. Ecofeminists presume that the large structure society is the capitalist patriarchy and men is controlling both nature and women through mental institutions, the end product of which is nature as a resource and women as a worker both functioning as a means to profitable end. Thus, patriarchal system owns control over women as well as nature as they both are considered as mere objects of exploitation and passive pawns to tread over and subjugate. Ecofeminism is an activist academic movement that undermines the intrinsic connection between nature and women i.e. the non-human and human world and sees a critical connection between the domination of nature and exploitation of women. Ecofeminists claim that nature and women are intimately linked as nature is often referred as feminine because it represents qualities of a woman. Nature is feminized as it is the embodiment of all the features that woman possesses. They both share qualities of reproduction and nurturing. Women don't treat nature as object to be exploited, curbed and tamed as man does because nature is feminine and as such feminine qualities are found in females. While as man has got masculine qualities, that is why they cannot connect themselves with nature. Women believe in working with nature, not against it unlike men who see nature as a force or threat to be curbed and subdued.

Thus, Ecofeminism as a philosophy came into vogue in 1970's with a multitudinous sensibility of the vital connection between woman and nature. This philosophy focuses on how patriarchy treats both nature and women. It introspects the gender categories effect so as to highlight the ways in which the social and ideological norms exert unjust dominance and subjugation over women and ecology. So, the prime focus of Ecofeminism is basically the intimate relationship between women and nature as they both are disrespected and dishonored, longing for the restoration of 'deserving esteem' that they have lost. Ecofeminists inspect, investigate and audit connections between the social and environmental justice and how both are dealt with within an androcentric society as the earth is matriarchal and society is driven by men. Susan Griffin aptly remarks:

Nature has a value that can't be reduced to its usefulness to culture, and women have a value that can't be reduced to her usefulness to man. So, at the heart of the Ecofeminism is the opinion that when we overthrow patriarchy then only nature can be saved. As they believe that the great threat to environment and matriarchy is not

from entire humankind but only from men and institutions of male power”. (video lecture, Dr. Banerjee)

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