

Across Cultures: Ecofeminism, Environment and Women in India and in the West

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ABSTRACT

The article aspires to render an overview of the principles of ecofeminism both in East with respect to India and in the West. It unveils how the ideologies synchronize with relation to their identities and how they transcend with respect to their culture. Ecofeminism is an amalgamation of the women's liberation movement and ecological fortification movement. It is delineated to augment a non-anthropocentric world-view and behaviour, opposing dualistic cultural traditions of rationalism. The paper lays emphasis on overall philosophy of ecofeminism and the specific environmental movements which are geographic, and temporal parameters and the unassailable links they share for the welfare of women across cultures.

KEYWORDS: Anthropocentric, Dualism, Ecofeminism, Gender, Nature, Patriarchy.

Introduction

Ecofeminism although hypothesized in the West, their binary oppositions are ostensive and diverse; with conscious endeavour it exceeds culture. The reason is that indispensable model of relationship in society, resumes being one of the ascendancy. The paper critically analysis the emergence of ecofeminism, the intimacy between women and nature, and the influence of Greek thought on western perspective with relation to nature. The paper aspires to understand the theoretical views of ecofeminist discourse both in India and in the West. The article also intends to trace the commonalities they share across cultures. To accomplish these two objectives, the article is divided into three sections. First in order to understand the basic principle of ecofeminism and critiques of ecofeminism a brief over view of western and Indian perspective is discussed. On basis of this, it explores the commonalities

they share across cultures. Subsequently it shows how ecofeminism provides foundation for a political movement and paves way for a new radical social theory.

Emergence of Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is a movement born out of the high interest given in last few decades to both feminism and environment movements. Ecofeminism as a theoretical tool was hypothesized in the West and was authored by French writer Francoise D'eaubonne in 1974 (D'Eaubonne 1980). It was additionally shaped by Ynestra King in 1976 and turned into a movement in 1980 to solve problems related to women and nature. D'eaubonne framed ecofeminism and linked environmental degradation with patriarchal culture and believed that a social structure based on feminism would prevent the destruction of human beings and the planet. Further, her principles were based on complete equality and the absence of all oppression. In effect, no gender group or species will have power over the other. Ecofeminism is against the male ownership of land, which has led to patriarchal culture, in which women and land are held in same esteem and exploitation of one means the degradation of the other.

Ecofeminism as a term suggests that is a joint produce of two theoretical enterprises namely feminism and ecology. It is of the view that there is a connection between the domination of women and exploitation of non- human constituents of ecosystem. Nature for centuries has been advanced as prescriptive of gender. Both women and nature in many cases share a subordinate and instrumental relation to men. Both are subjected to patterns, attitudes and institutions of male domination and control. Ecofeminism brings forth a glimmer of hope by infusing humanity within us. Necessitating virtues of ecofeminism implants benevolence which eventually reflects in magnanimity shown towards women and nature. Vijayaraj (2017) is of the view that in order to have a symbiotic living ecofeminism works to dismantle the dualistic concepts and tries to reconstruct an egalitarian society. On the whole ecofeminism is a revolutionary movement that tries to establish a new relationship between women and nature as well as non-human ecosystem.

Women and Nature Interface

For many ecofeminist critics, ecology is a feminist issue and they highlight the fact that women and nature are always interrelated. According to Rao (2012) the works by ecofeminists such as King (1981), Mary Daly (1978), Merchant (1983), Susan Griffin (1978), Ariel Kay Salleh (1984), Azizmohammadi and Kohzadi (2014) and Karen Warren (1990) suggest that ecofeminism is a feminist issue. In the view of the association between oppression of women and degradation of nature Gaard (1993), an ecofeminist raises the following questions,

- a). Why the nature is a feminist issue?
- b). Why feminist issues are embraced in terms of environmental concerns?

Regardless, of the logical inconsistencies about the idea of these affiliations, many ecofeminist agree that environment is a feminist issue.

The axiom 'ecofeminism' raises query in our mind as to why women and nature are interrelated, thus implying the necessity to analyze the association between women and nature and women's dependency on nature. Even though few ecofeminists reject this connection and some strongly associate, most of the ecofeminists opine that the association between women and nature are sustained based on ideology, biology and the history of oppression (Adams 1994). Ecofeminism admits that the relationship between women and nature has historically been used to exploit them (Archambault 1993). But, they chose to espouse this connection as a basis of empowerment and as a source for their critique of the patriarchal domination of women and nature. In this regard Eckersley (1992) points out, "This is an obviously ecofeminist project because it exposes and acclaims what has traditionally been regarded as Other - human and non-human nature". In general, ecofeminists claim that women are in a better position than men to associate with nature, and in fact they are closer to nature and can derive unique insight from this bond.

The synthesis of women and nature is based on three claims namely, empirical, conceptual and epistemological character (Warren 1996). The ecofeminist empirical claim highlights the socio political and economic structures that mitigate many women's lives to poverty, ecological deprivation and economically impotent (Eaton et al. 2003). In a nutshell,

as per empirical claim, women are the first casualties of environmental deterioration because of their intimacy and dependency on nature. The second conceptual claim unveils the patriarchal ideologies as genesis of subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature. Finally, in epistemological perspective, historically women have been viewed as agrarian cultivators who favour sustainable and renewable agriculture. They are viewed as stewards of nature, whose mission is to protect, preserve and nurture the environment (Mies and Shiva 1993). These three connections pave way to initiate discussion on enslavement of women and exploitation of nature.

Western Ecofeminist Discourse

The comprehensive thought of the Earth as a Mother has a long custom. The mythological Greek goddess GAEA or GE (Gaia or Ge), is accepted as the portrayal of the earth. The descriptions of her existence as a heavenly being dates back to the Homeric Sonnets. Gaia is a rough blessedness thought to be one of the primal parts that created air, sea and the sky. She is accepted as the impressive mother of all. In 1970's the Gaia philosophy was formulated by James Lovelock, an environmentalist and it was co-authored by Lynn Margulis, a microbiologist, both prescribed that *“Every living being and their inorganic surroundings on Earth are positively fused to shape a singular and programmed complex system, keeping up the conditions for life in the planet”* (Lovelock and Lovelock 2000).

The structural theory of value dualism asserts that in western history, nature, emotion, woman, body and animal are regarded as oppositional and inferior to their respective disjunctive pair. Based on this perspective Warren (1997) advocates that western tradition origin is based on oppressive conceptual framework that is analogous to all 'isms' such as sexism, racism, speciesism, anthropocentrism, naturism, militarism and heterosexism. This oppressive conceptual framework is characterized by notion of power, relationship of domination and an inner logic that explicates and endorses subordination. The epicentre of these “isms” is patriarchy, power and male gender supremacy. It is like a structure of argumentation which justifies subordination on the ground that superiority vindicates subordination. In this regard, Gaard and Larocque (1993) affirm that the fundamental

objective of ecofeminism is to put an end to the hegemony of race, class, gender and sexuality by confronting the hierarchical structure of despotism and domination. In the same vein, Warren (1997) postulates that the patriarchal persecution over nature and the women are because of the hierarchical, spiritual and social believes that prevail in the male tyrant society. Women and nature have been incessantly exploited by capitalists. Therefore, she censures that the culture, tradition and the patriarchal ascendancy are the root cause for the rise of scientific revolution, globalization, and capitalism.

In the West, Socrates in *The Origin and Branches of Philosophy* says, “*I am an admirer of learning, trees and open nation won’t show me anything, whereas men in the town do*”. Terrestrial nature, for him, is delightful; however it is a sort of shallow, exotic excellence. The Greek thinker, Aristotle considered nature as imperfect. Thus he was not ready to appreciate the assortment in nature. As indicated by Aristotle, a living creature to be viewed as wonderful must have a specific course of action of parts and of distinct magnitude. To him, magnificence involves size and order and along these lines anything to huge, too little, or lacking particular limits couldn’t be comprehensible. The Greek savant of the fourth century BC, particularly Plato and the Neo-Platonist Plotinus were not fascinated by plants and herbs. They saw nature as perishable in a consistent condition of change. Their attention was in objects of learning or reason, which were held to be lasting, and perpetual. The Greek reasoning with such a practical perspective towards nature probably affected the Western world to have an exploitative demeanour towards nature.

Each individual is a part of other lives and non-lives and all are part of the earth. This concept requires respect for everything that surrounds us since part of the self interrelates with the rest of the creation. The western civilization, on which modern development is based, oppositely teaches us that nature is a commodity, and that society consists of human beings only. Humans consequently see themselves as masters of the environment, which has led to the death of nature. It is a perception that helps to realize the deterioration of nature that is intimately linked to western state of mind concerning women and culture (Birkeland 1993).

The modern Europeans pondered themselves above nature. New progressions like tractors and chemicals were constrained on nature. These two changes ended up in air pollution, water defilement, and resource utilization. It changed the function of nature, human culture and in addition human attitude towards nature. These anthropogenic changes had a boomerang effects over human race.

INDIAN ECOFEMINIST DISCOURSE

This section discusses the viewpoints of some Indian ecofeminists. In India, the ardent supporter of ecofeminism is Vandana Shiva, an activist, renowned environmentalist and ecofeminist thinker who has made significant contribution in the field of ecofeminism. Her works include *The Violence of the Green Revolution* (1993), *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (Shiva 1988), *Ecofeminism* (Mies and Shiva 1993) and *Biopiracy* (Shiva 2012).

Shiva (1988) reprimands the present day science and innovation as a western, androcentric which is inherent with violent and propagandize mercilessness against women and nature. The western model of development has moved far away from conventional Indian rationale, which sees prakrithi as a living and creative, a feminine principle through which all forms of life arise. Historically, women's indigenous knowledge of nature has sustained life. With capitalist development and colonial intercession, the conservative social orders are disturbed. This Western development has exploited the feminine principle and it has viewed women as 'resource' to be plundered. They are no longer amalgamated with sanctity, activity or creativity, but with passive nature. In this regard, it can be said that the western development attitude has led to marginalization, devaluation, displacement and eventually the dispensability of women. The association of women and their innate knowledge of nature and skills which they have garnered through their everyday interaction with nature is relegated in the name of modern science. But, Shiva views Third World Women as not only as a hindrance in the procedure of change but also as the women who are empowered and have the power to change.

Further, she contends that whatever point the women have remonstrated against environmental obliteration or atomic demolition they were mindful of the relationship

between male-centric severity against women, different people and nature (Mies and Shiva 1993). These movements pivot around ecofeminist measures of connectedness, wholeness, deep sense of being in defiance with antagonistic male-centric science that is commissioned toward disconnection and isolation. It is contended that the ecofeminist position, i.e., a subsistence perspective is set up in the material base of continual subsistence age of women all over the world. The combat of women and men to safeguard their survival base can turn into the mutual view for women's freedom and conservation of life on earth.

India has a history of environmental activism and movements even before ecofeminism emerged as an academic discipline in the western world (Chanda 2014). Shiva gives an example of Chipko movement, instigated by rural Indian women of the Garhwal district in the Himalayas. Those illiterate women dissented against the commercial felling of trees by hugging them. Though they were ignorant about the western concept of ecofeminism, they comprehended the ecological importance of forests in their lives. The notion of tree-hugging was adopted to impede activities such as deforestation, lumbering and mining (Gadgil and Guha 1994).

In India, however, seventy percent of the population depends on orthodox system of production for survival and sustenance. The western developmental inclination has destroyed Indian agrarian culture, indigenous people's knowledge about nature, sustainable way of life and biological diversity (Shiva 2012). Contemporary scientific knowledge related to agriculture has excluded women from the latter domain by marginalizing and devaluing their indigenous knowledge and skills (Agarwal 1992). Liberalization, privatization, and globalization have redesigned rural economy by shifting subsistence farming to cash crop farming, mix cropping to monoculture, with profound environmental impact due to usage of excessive chemical fertilizers and depletion of ground water (Datara 2011). Shiva (1988) argues that women are adversely affected by the exploitation of the earth because they are the most vulnerable in the patriarchal society and suffer dual oppression. When the traditional agricultural methods are abandoned and natural resources are plundered recklessly, men

move out of their ancestral soil and go to cities for better opportunities, it is the women who are left alone to work in the land without sufficient food.

Agarwal (1992) another representative of ecofeminist theory claims that historic degradation of nature and exploitation of women are synchronous. Both women and nature turn out to be the victim of the western development. Any infliction on nature harms women in same manner, as women are seen closer with nature than men. But, none of the ecofeminist endeavors tries to build up this linkage through strong confirmation or the strong contention. It positions domination of women and nature predominantly in conviction framework, in this manner disregard the “interrelated material sources of dominance based on economic advantage and political power”. They label women as merely stewards and supporting creatures as opposed to their human possibilities and capacities in nurturing and preserving the environment (Biehl 1991; Rao 2012). For Agarwal (1992), the ecofeminist theories are exiguous because its ethos formulates relationship between gender and nature without considering the political, social and economic factors that are intrinsic with the domination. So, women cannot be considered as homogeneous class inside or across cultures, on the basis of class, race, culture and caste.

Ecofeminism in Indian Literary Works

Since ancient times women have been related with the land in numerous civilizations. Anthropological and archaeological examinations have uncovered the fact that women have been related with nature and men with culture since ancient times. In India, the Ramayana, the holy text of Hindus offers a profound comprehension of women and nature association through the character Sita, which dates back to 5000B.C. It is trusted that when Lord Janak ploughed the fields to please divine beings, his plough was such at one place, when he uncovered that place he found a baby girl in a mud vessel. He named the baby girl as Sita, who is called ‘Bhumikanya’ (Daughter of the Soil).

The Tales of Panchtantra underscore the exceptional position which is given to the set of all animals. Creatures are given human attributes of dialect as well as emotions and intelligence. The Panchtantra passes on a message to humanity by featuring the issues

through the qualities of the creatures. Diverse traits of creatures have been recognized and are wonderfully used in these stories.

The Indian literary works express man's amicability with nature. The Indian writer Tolkappiyar, in his perfect work of art 'Tolkappiyam' endeavored to incorporate the biological system. He discusses the divisions of Land: the five-crease division of land into Kurinchi, Mullai, Marudham, Neydhal and Palai. A nearer investigation of these Tinai (place where there is a division) demonstrates reality. Their chieftains affirm the amicability between nature, man and God. The division is predictable with the Panchbhudha tatva- the theory of Five Natural Elements (Rao 1993).

Selvamony (1996) in his work legitimizes his view by utilizing poetic verses from different literary works and comments that in India, human and nature (non-human) coincide in each part of the life. Indian eco-moral vision included three extreme regards- Aram (moral quality and values of life), Things (PoruL) and happiness (inbam). Social progression will engage an overall population to comprehend its conclusive eco-moral vision basic for it to be the best society for all its human and non-human people (Rao 1993).

Selvamony (2017) in his work *Poetic Aesthetics* mentions that in each Tinai (place where there is division) is having their own human and non-human which exists together in nature for the improvement of their society. In contrast to the western perspective, the Indian perspective towards nature is different. In the East, nature is interconnected with the lives of the people. The eastern perspective towards nature is highly positive since it attempts to see human life in harmony with nature. For the Western scholars, nature is either a creature to be vanquished or a machine to be utilized. This reflects the utilitarian perspective of life.

The Indian relationship with the nature contrasts from that of the Westerner. In the West, man has segregated himself from nature, ached it and used it to fulfill his own specific need. In the West love of animals and love of nature is an individual perspective and not a natural law. Just as a tree is rooted to the soil and the creeper embraces the tree so an Indian unites himself with nature. From nature he came and to nature he would return, as ashes. The

association between an Indian and nature is one of the coexistences rather than mastery and subjugation.

SOLIDARITY BETWEEN INDIAN AND WESTERN ECOFEMINISM

This section tries to bring out the commonality between Indian and western perspective on ecofeminism. To substantiate the ripeness that exists between Indian and western perspective on ecofeminism, an essentialist and constructionist ideologies of ecofeminism is explicated and corroborated with much evidence. Further, the ecological movement led by Indian and western women are described and the commonalities they share across culture is reflected.

Ecological Movements across Cultures

A few exhilarating movements of ecofeminism include: The Green Belt Movement in Kenya, Love Canal in US, Chipko Movement in India and, Green ham common movement in Britain. The primary objective of these movements is to manifest and substantiate with much evidence that ecological destruction is more unendurable for women than that of men. Degradation of nature coerce women across cultures to quell their diversity irrespective of their culture. Their unified thought to protect their surroundings brought them together.

Love Canal movement began in the city of New York in United States and was pioneered by Lois Gibbs, a homemaker-turned-environmental crusader. She zealously led the movement after her son experienced health problems in 1978 due to the dumping of waste. Love Canal movement portrayed the fears of people in industrial societies and about the hazards concealed behind it. In Kenya, the Kenyan Green Belt movement (GBM) was spearheaded by Professor Wangari Maathai a recipient of Nobel peace prize 2004. The sole objective of GBM was to resolve the fuel problems existing in rural areas. The movement intent was to prevent creeping desertification and soil erosion. The foremost aspiration of GBM is to recuperate the land, replenish the soils and conserve water by planting trees. Developing employability skills, providing them employment and empowering them enabled the people to remain in their community rather than migrating to urban areas in search of job or charity.

The above mentioned movements were successful and led to the formation of many organizations and projects. According to sources, the movement was powerful, global and a well-organized phenomenon. The goal of the movement is to deconstruct oppressive social, economic and political system, and reconstruct forms that are more viable. These movements promoted life-preserving values and policies for the betterment of the environment. It not only captured the attention of the media, but also that of policy makers, students, and academia, but most importantly of the masses. It created a social awareness for the well-fare of the environment. These movements are conscious, collective and organised to challenge the system. Chipko leaders and activists were primarily village women. Dhoom Singh Negi, Bachi Devi and many other village women were the first to save trees by hugging them. They coined the slogan: “What do the forests bear? Soil, water and pure air” (Shiva 1988). The name of the movement ‘Chipko’ come from the Hindi language and the word means ‘embrace’ or ‘Stick’ or ‘hug’: Villagers hug the trees, saving them by interposing their bodies between them and the contractor’s axes.

The essentialist and the constructionist is of a view point that patriarchal culture is the sole reason for the oppression of women and the victimization of nature. Essentialist ecofeminism theory contends that women, by virtue of their biologically based dissimilarities, are superior in some areas, such as nature and environment. Eisler (1990) an essentialist ecofeminist, observes that before the emanation of patriarchy there was partnership culture, where women were respected and nature was worshipped as divine. There was sexual equality and fairness among the social classes but rise in patriarchal ideologies paved way to inequality, both women and nature was devalued.

According to Ortner (1974), Women are perceived as being closer to nature for numerous reasons. First, “proportionately more of woman’s body space, for a greater percentage of her lifetime, and at sometimes great-cost to her personal health, strength, and general stability, is taken up with the natural processes surrounding the reproduction of the species”. Second, “Woman’s physiological functions have tended universally to limit her social movement, and to confine her universally to certain social contexts which in turn are

seen as closer to nature”. Orter points out in the light of the fact that women bear and nurse children from their own bodies, all people infer that the bonding between mother and child is a “natural” bond. Consequently, women are deemed “by nature” essentially responsible for the socialization of young children. The reason is that young children are more “animal-like” than adults (at first they do not speak, cannot control their excretory functions, etc.), their socialization is apparently a lower order than the “higher-order” socialization activities in which men engaged themselves in lawmaking and religious customs as considered.

Merchant (1983) observation reflects in view of the constructionist perspective the bond between women and nature is socially constructed. During primeval, earth was contemplated as one among them and nature was adulated as a ‘nurturing mother’. Women and nature were parallel: ‘Mother Nature’ rendered humanity and also its wrath in the form of as well as plagues, storms and famine. Women possessed qualities of both virgin and witch. The witch became the face of the fury of nature. Essentialist ecofeminism theory contends that women, by virtue of their biologically based incongruity exhibits supremacy in areas, such as nature and environment. This superiority is termed as the ‘feminine principles’ (Shiva 1988). Many other eco-feministic writers endorsed the conjecture that women, due to their intimacy with nature developed innate women-nature connections. But, the advancement of scientific revolution in Europe marred the image of nature and mother earth were deluded as a product to be plundered. Plumwood (2002) among others, uses the structural idea of ‘value dualism’ to establish the conceptual source which different western social models throughout history have used to persistently enslave, specially women and nature. She argues that the western intellectual tradition has its origin from value dualism and she predominantly focuses on the rationalistic tradition which is the epitome of supremacy for the oppression of women and nature. In each of the value dualism namely culture/nature, reason/emotion, man/women, mind/body, human/animal the imperative part is respected and the second is disvalued. Those second downgraded term is habitually connected with ‘women’ or the ‘female’. The cardinal turbulence of all these hardships is man’s anthropocentric attitude towards nature. So ecofeminism involves in depth analysis of the dualism that structure patriarchal culture and as a theory it tries to re-conceptualize these relationships in non-hierarchical, non-patriarchal

ways. Ecofeminists envision a new way of seeing the world and strives toward a new way of living in the world as co-members of the ecological community.

CONCLUSION

Ecofeminist dissent in their approach, one space in which there is a general agreement among ecofeminists in India and in the west is that they want egalitarian and ecologically sustainable society. They desire a civilization without sexual division of labor and the life integrated with the local public. This notion is shared by many green scholars and in fact it is the idealistic part of ecofeminism. Ecofeminists across the cultures are unified against the suppression of women and nature. They are of the view that patriarchal ideologies are primeval and it has flourished over centuries and has spread its wings across the entire domain. The only driving force behind women to fight against this tyrant is motherhood. Cutting across boundary lives motherhood is a magnificent quality gifted by nature to women to endure them against the patriarchal domination. This intrinsic quality unifies every woman universally. Motherhood is a global phenomenon which is the back bone of their resistance against enslavement. The patriarchal ideology should be ostracized for the very existence.

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