

The Significance of Eco-feminism in Environmental Philosophy: Critical Appraisal

Dr. Roshida Rodrigues
Assistant Professor,
DCT's Dhempe College of Arts and Science,
Miramar Goa

ABSTRACT

Ecofeminism describes movements and philosophers that link feminism with ecology. It also connects the exploitation and domination of women with that of the environment and argues that there is a connection between women and nature. Eco-feminists believe that this connection is illustrated through the traditionally 'female' values of reciprocity, nurturing and co-operation, which are present both among women and in nature. They also draw connection between menstruation and moon cycles, child birth and creation. Women and nature are also united through their shared history of oppression by a patriarchal western society. Devaluation and abuse of nature and women have gone hand-in-hand. To overcome this problem, we must analyze and resist both together and devise an ideal which liberates both.

Key terms: patriarchy, anthropocentrism, androcentric, intrinsic value, deep ecology.

Introduction

Ecofeminism, as one of the social movements emerged both as political activism and intellectual critique. Ecofeminism argues that both the domination of women as well as the environmental degradation is mainly due to consequences of patriarchy and capitalism. Thus, they argue that women's equality is not to be achieved at the expense of destroying the environment nor environmental improvements to be gained at the expense of women. It proposes for reversing certain current values, thereby privileging care and cooperation over aggressive and dominating behaviors which can benefit both society and environment. Ecofeminism elaborates the connectedness and wholeness of both theory as well as practice. It asserts the spatial strength and integrity of every living thing

Ecofeminism is one of the progressive movements, that have its roots in the social change movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Various female environmentalists has provided the foundation for a full-blown feminist approach to ecology and environmentalism. Some of the pressing issues involved in developing a theory of ecofeminism are how did problems arise? Whys should these problems concern feminists? And why and how ecofeminism can offer the best framework for analyzing the pressing issues of environment.

What are the issues that concerns feminist?

Some of the issues concerning the feminist include global distribution of wealth, use of renewable and non-renewable resources. Overproduction of waste and others. Ecofeminists theory is uniquely positioned to undertake a holistic analysis of these problems in both their human natural contexts. Ecofeminism's central claim is that these problems stem from the mutually reinforcing oppression of humans and of the natural world [2]. It is not possible to address women's oppression without addressing environmental degradation. The human and the natural are always interconnected inextricably, as the same cannot be addressed separately.

Eco-feminists provide a number of approaches for understanding the global oppression presently. Some of the Ecofeminists argue that the separation between culture and nature is due to the scientific revolution. This is clear in the writing of Rene Descartes and Francis Bacon, where nature was given the status of machines to be used for the benefit of the mankind. Man could experiment on animals as animals and nature had no feeling and they could not reason. "The only meant that animals in nature ad authorized unlimited animal experimentation without anesthesia. Animals were well-fashioned machines, which could be tortured as well animal pain were not real but rather was like striking of a well-timed clock.

The patriarchal religion is also a reason for separation, which dates back 4500 B.C., When the shift from goddess worshipping cultures to male deities[2]. The earth and women's fertility were seen as sacred and holy in the goddess religions. God was seen as immanently present in the universe and there were no hierarchy of gender. With the advent of certain patriarchal religions, people worshipped the sky God, and nature

was seen as God's creation. The role of the male in the reproduction was elated above the role of the female; women were compared to fields which would gestate and bear the male seed" [2]. The shift did not happen overnight, and many men and women resisted, but by the time of the Jews and the Greeks, the change had been largely effected. This is also seen in the Judeo-Christian tradition, where God at the top appointing Adam to be in charge of his entire creation. Women was created from Adam's rib and placed below him, and below the divinely appointed heterosexuals were the animals and the rest of nature, all to serve man. The patriarchal domination of both nature and women was divinely commanded [2].

Patriarchal domination is also the result of human evolutionary development. The evolutionary shift occurred as a result of the emergence of hunting behavior amongst males. The hunter's destructive, competitive, and violent activity directed towards his prey is what originally distinguished man from nature [2]. Woman's body is considered as smaller, weaker, and reproductive, that prevents her from the full participation in the hunting activity and thus a woman is relegated to the realm of non-culture. The reproductive capacity and life-bearing activities were in sharp contrast to the death-oriented activities, which underlie culture. Thus women, animals and nature are considered inferior to the cultural activities of men and can be thought of as separate from them. [2].

Ecofeminists also uses metaphorical or ideological explanations of the separation of culture from nature and look at the way that patriarchal culture describes the world in terms of self other dualisms. These value dualisms give rise to value hierarchies, where all things described as other are of lesser value [2]. Dualisms of self/other are manifested as culture/nature, man/woman, white/nonwhite as a result a kind of domination is built in to such dualism because the other is negated in the process of defining a powerful self, in such a case, the privileged self is always a male and a woman is always devalued. Ecofeminists, takes these dualism as an effective means for explaining the twin dominations of women and nature, as both are configured as 'other'. Ecofeminists also emphasize the woman-animal connection as both are seen as other." they observe that the feminization, naturalization, or animalization of an other is often requisite to its ensuing subordination [2]. Metaphors of language also

reveal its ideological underpinnings, phrases such as ‘the rape of nature’, ‘mother nature’ and ‘virgin forests’ all feminize nature and thus in a culture where women are seen as subordinate, authorize the subordination of nature. Colloquialism for women such as ‘pussy’, ‘bitch’, ‘old hen’, ‘sow’ indicates that women are animalized and this reinforces women’s inferior status by appealing to a woman’s animal nature. The claim is that language also plays a role, that is it feminizes nature and naturalizes women and also describes, reflects, and perpetuates the domination of nature (including animals) and is culturally (and not merely figuratively) analogous.

Ecofeminists recognize that the association between women and nature has historically been used to exploit them, but they choose to embrace this connection as a source of empowerment and as the basis for their critique of the patriarchal oppression of women and nature. [4]

Biological conditions are experienced differently by different individuals, and bodily experiences are themselves conditioned by culture. Lynne Segal points out that one has to be a little more than skeptical of an over-emphasis on the significance of ‘female biology’ where a woman’s body is seen in terms of sex and reproduction entirely. This is a reflection or an example of the power that patriarchy exercises over a woman’s experiences of their own bodies.

Vandana Shiva, the Indian physicist, through her work “Staying Alive” (1989) unveiled the outcome of what she called ‘maldevelopment’ for the lives of women and for nature. Shiva condemns the modern concept of science as a system which claims to be universal, independent of any ethical values, and which restrains the pluralistic expressions of knowledge [6]. According to Shiva, with ‘maldevelopment’, forests are separated from rivers, the fields from forests and animals from culture, generating and spreading death. She also connects the death of the ‘feminine principle’ with ‘maldevelopment’ to describe the introduction of western intensive agriculture to the “Third World”. [6] In her essay titled, ‘Development, Ecology and Women’, she connects the relationship as: ‘Maldevelopment’ militates against this equality in diversity, and superimposes the ideologically constructed category of

western technological man as a uniform measure of the worth of classes, cultures and genders. Diversity and unity and harmony in diversity, become epistemologically unattainable and unreachable in the context of mal-development which then becomes closer to women's underdevelopment (increasing sexist domination) and nature's depletion (deepening ecological crisis) [6]. According to Karen Warren, there are many Ecofeminists and ecological feminist philosophers who have documented empirical evidence linking feminism and the environment. For example, health hazards caused by the presence of radiation, pesticides, toxic and other pollutants and borne disproportionately by women and children in the works of Caldecott and Leland 1983; Diamond 1990; Kheel 1989; Philipose 1989. [5]

As author, Val Plumwood, puts it if one mistakenly construes environmental philosophy as only or mainly concerned with ethics, one will neglect a key aspect of the overall problem which is concerned with the definition of the human self as separate from nature, the connection between this and the instrumental view of nature and broader political aspects of the critique of instrumentalism [7].

Critiques of ecofeminism

Ecofeminists literature reveals the historical exploitation and domination of women and nature as victims in the name of development. It is however understood that any harm to nature harms women equally, as women are more closer to nature. Moreover, none of the Ecofeminists literature attempts to establish this connection through concrete evidence. The views of the Ecofeminists establishes a kind of domination of women and nature mainly in ideology, thereby neglecting the interrelated material sources of dominance based on economic advantage and political power [8]. In-fact, these Ecofeminists concepts of women retain the patriarchal stereotypes of what men expect women to be. Ecofeminists, freeze women as merely carrying and nurturing beings instead of expanding the full range of women's human potentialities and abilities. The use of metaphors of women such as 'nurturing'- like the earth, and of the earth as female abound are regressive rather than liberating women. [9]

Despite these limitations, the Ecofeminists are continuously working within the socialist fabric as they have much more potential than the other Ecofeminists perspectives in considering the association or bond between gender and environment and thereby consequently promoting an organic, holistic and inclusive perception of reality.

To conclude, a relational ethics proposed by Karen Warren based upon contexts within which interactions occur, the relational ethics is characterized by compassion and humility in treating with what is 'other than I'. An Ecofeminists perspective about woman and nature involves a shift in attitude from 'arrogant perception; to 'loving perception' of the nonhuman world... Any environmental movement or ethic based on arrogant perception build a moral hierarchy of beings. In contrast, 'loving perception' presupposes and maintains difference-a distinction between the self and other, between human and at least some nonhumans-in such a way that perception of the other as other as other is an expression of love for one who/which is recognized at the outset as independent, dissimilar and different. [3]. This form is very frequent among Ecofeminists writing. An ethic of care cannot be derived from a process of intellectual abstraction. 'loving perception' is the base of ethic of care. Ecofeminism makes a central place for values of care, love, friendship, trust and appropriate reciprocity, wherein one is doing something in relationship with an 'other', an 'other' whom one can come to care and treat respectfully.

References

1. Attfield R, *Environmental Ethics*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2003,pp 19-20
2. Gaard G and Gruen Lori, *Ecofeminism: toward global justice and planetary health*, Environmental Philosophy: Critical Concepts in the Environment, ed by J Baird Callicott and Clare Palmer, Volume II Society and Politics, Routledge, London,2005, pp 276-283

3. Hay P, *A companion to Environmental thought*, Rawat Publication, Jaipur, 2002, pp 74-84
4. Archambault A., *A critique of Ecofeminism*, Canadian Women Studies, volume 13, no.3, pp 19-21
5. Warren, Karen J. *Ecological Feminist Philosophies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.1996.
6. Shiva V ., *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. London: Zed Books..1988.
7. Plumwood, V. *Ecofeminism: an overview and discussion of position and arguemnts*, Australasian Journal of Philosophy, Supplement to Vol.64 (june 1986), pp 120-137.
8. Agarwal B., *The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India*, in "Feminist Studies", 18, 1, Spring 1992.
9. Biehl J, *Ecofeminism and Deep Ecology: unsolved conflict?* Our Generation, Vol 19, 1988, pp19-31
10. King, Y., *Healing the Wounds: Feminism, Ecology and the Nature/Culture Dualism*, Gender/body/knowledge: Feminist reconstruction of Being and knowing, Alison Jaggar and Susan Bordo, eds. New Jersey, Rutgers University Press 1989