

A Critique on Ecofeminism and its Development.

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Abstract

Women and nature are linked in many ways. The marginalization of women and the destruction of nature go hand in hand. The patriarchal world views man as the center of the universe, with no space for women. A woman is thought to be inferior and different. She is always treated as unequal. Similarly, nature is not seen to be of any value in itself. Its value lies only in economic terms. In fact “destruction of diversity and the creation of monocultures becomes an imperative for capitalist patriarchy.”¹ In this modern era of progress and industrialization even the nature suffers. In fact “loss of diversity is the price paid in the patriarchal model of progress which pushes inexorably towards monocultures, uniformity and homogeneity.”²

Key Words: Material Progress, Patriarchal World, Gender-politics, Eco-politics, Environment Movements.

Whether “women have developed a special relationship with nature through their specific biology or through their historical oppression, ecofeminists seem to agree that female traits such as caring and nurturing should be part of an ecofeminist environmental ethics.”³ In the name of continuous material progress the patriarchal world has subordinated and exploited nature. However, the exploitation of women and the plunder of nature have close parallels. Gender- politics “is largely a politics of difference. Eco-politics, too, is based on nature’s variety and difference, as opposed to industrial commodities and processes which are uniform and homogenous .”⁴ Gender-politics and Eco- politics thus “converge when woman and bio-diversity meet in fields and forest in arid regions and wet lands .”⁵ Women and the environment are thus closely linked. As the “primary food producers of the world, women are closely linked to the land. As the fuel gatherers and household cooks, they are linked to the forests. As the universal water carriers, they are linked to aquatic resources.”⁶

Destruction of nature has a marring effect on women as the lives of women are closely linked to nature. If nature is destroyed, women suffer the most. Women are dependent on nature for food, fuel, fodder, and water. If any of these is polluted or destroyed it directly affects the lives of women. Their health is affected since they have to work more in order to arrange food, fuel, and drinking water for their families. Patriarchal society has always given women subordinate positions. Their role is limited to giving birth to the children and nurturing the family. If the natural resources are exploited, being the caretakers of the family, women have to struggle a lot for the sustenance of their children and families. Nature and women both are supposed to be weak and inferior. In the patriarchal set up both are subordinated, used, and exploited by the dominating powers. In the name of scientific progress and industrialization, nature is appropriated and abused. With the use of artificial means, nature is exploited and made a slave

to men. Similarly, women's activities are shaped by the patriarchal set-up. They are also slaves to men. There is a close parallel between the exploitation of nature and the subordination of women in every field of life. If nature is exploited and abused, the life of the complete family gets affected, though women are the most affected ones. According to Ulhas Rane, there is a famous story told by the elders to their children in central India which shows that the life of the whole family or even the tribe is totally dependent on the soil and the forest:

The forest was ablaze. Pushed by the wind, the flames began to close in on a beautiful tree on which sat a bird. An old man escaping the fire, himself, saw the bird and said to it, "Little bird, why don't you fly away? Have you forgotten you have wings?" And the bird answered, "Old man, do you see this empty nest above? This is where I was born. And this small nest from which you hear the chirping is where I am bringing up my small child. I feed him with nectar from the flowers of this tree and I live by eating its ripe fruit. And do you see the dropping below on the forest floor? Many seedlings will emerge from them and thus so I help to spread greenery as my parents before me did, as my children after me will. My life is linked to this tree. If it dies I will surely die with it. No, I have not forgotten my wings."⁷

This story illustrates the dependence of the people on natural resources. The exploitation and degradation of the earth's natural resources directly affect the lives of people. Women are "harshly hit by such degradation, as they are the primary users of natural resources in many countries and produce most of the world's food...As environmental degradation accelerates, the burdens they must bear increases"⁸ In the name of industrial development and urbanization the natural resources are depleted. The capitalist patriarchal system is "built upon and maintains itself through the colonization of women, of 'foreign' peoples and their lands; and of nature, which is gradually destroying."⁹ In the name of modernization, nature is being degraded and exploited. Moreover, the effect of the exploitation of nature on women is more than on men. As Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva observed:

We saw that the impact on women of ecological disasters and deterioration was harder than on men, and also, that everywhere, women were the first to protest against environmental destruction. As activists in the ecology movements, it became clear to us that science and technology were not gender neutral; and in common with many other women, we began to see that the relationship of exploitative dominance between man and nature, (shaped by reductionist modern science since the 16th century) and the exploitative and oppressive relationship between men and women that prevails in most patriarchal societies, even modern industrial ones. were closely connected

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Environmental pollution and chemical contamination of the environment affects the health of women and children the most. If we take the examples of Love Canal and Bhopal disasters the point would be clear. In both these cases women and children were adversely affected and women resisted such environmental pollution. Lois Gibbs' account of Love Canal disaster explains this:

Love Canal was a site where, for decades, Hooker Chemical Company had dumped their chemical wastes over which houses were later built. By the 1970s it was a peaceful middle-class residential area but its residents were unaware of the toxic dumps beneath their houses. Headaches, dizziness, nausea and epilepsy were only a few of the problems afflicting those near the canal. Liver, kidney, or recurrent urinary strictures abounded. There was also an alarmingly high rate of 56 percent risk of birth defects, including childhood deafness, and children suffered an unusually high rate of leukemia and other cancers.”¹¹

There was an increase in the number of abortions, and stillbirths. There was "a 75 percent above normal rate of miscarriage, and above 15 pregnancies of Love Canal Women, only two resulted in healthy babies. It was the mothers of children threatened by death and disease who first raised the alarm and who kept the issue alive.”¹² In Bhopal Gas Tragedy also, women and children were the most affected ones. There was a gas leakage from Union Carbide's pesticide plant. As a result, thousands died and the survivors were affected badly. Some lost their eyesight, others had skin problems but women had additional complications of their reproductive systems. Since then there is a higher rate of abortions and other complications in women and children affected by the gas The survey of the Bhopal Information and Action Group shows the effects of the gas disaster:

A few months after the gas disaster, I had a son. He was alright. After that I had another child in the hospital. But it was not fully formed. It had no legs and no eyes and was born dead. Then another child was born but it died soon after. I had another child just one and a half months back. Its skin looked scalded and only half of its head was formed. The other half was filled with water. It was born dead and was white all over. I had a lot of pain two months before I delivered. My legs hurt so much that I couldn't sit or walk around. I got rashes all over my body. The doctors said that I will be okay after the child birth, but I still have problems.¹³

Thus, environmental destruction poses a severe threat to women and children. For the past few decades women have become aware of this destruction and "women's coalitions have been developing strategies and fighting against the threat to their children that results from threats to the environment.”¹⁴ For the survival of their children and families women have tried to fight against such disasters:

Chipko Women of Himalaya have organized to resist the environmental destruction caused by logging.

The Love Canal home owners' association is another well-known example of young house wives' persistent action to ensure health security for their families, this has now resulted in the Citizens' clearing house for Hazardous Waste.

The Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan, a group of women victims of the Bhopal disaster, has continued to struggle for seven years to obtain justice from Union Carbide Corporation.¹⁵

Thus, in the environmental movements, women take the lead since they want to conserve it for the sustenance of their families. In these movements, it is women who more than men realize that in order to sustain their lives, they have to conserve nature. In these movements, women have taken a lead role which is “a reversal of the logic which has treated women as subordinate because they create life, and men as superior because they destroy it. All past achievements of patriarchy have been based on alienation from life and have lead to the impoverishment of women, children and the environment.”¹⁶

Throughout the world, environmental movements have thus raised the issues of nature's plunder and the possible ways of its survival According to Dankelman and J. Davidson, “Many recent studies on the impact of ecological deterioration on women... have highlighted not only the fact that women and children are the main victims of this war against nature but also that women are the most active, most creative and most concerned and committed in movements for conservation and protection of nature and for healing the damage done to her.”¹⁷ Since women have to be totally dependent on natural resources for daily sustenance, they take the leadership of these movements. Men are not concerned that much as they are interested in money making only even at the cost of natural resources. According to Gopal Joshi, men are interested in material gains only:

As the men do not collect fuel or fodder they are not concerned about the maintenance of the forests. They are more interested to earn money, even if they have to cut trees for that. But the forests are the women's wealth.¹⁸

Thus, women are more concerned about the maintenance of natural resources. Women throughout the world are against industrialization and development which has led to the destruction of nature. Women are “more concerned about a survival subsistence perspective than are men, most of whom continue to believe that more growth, technology, science and ‘progress’ will simultaneously solve the ecological and economic crises; they place money and power above life.”¹⁹ Men are not concerned about nature since its destruction does not affect them but women have to pay the price for it. Thus, women have come forward to save the environment:

...the new vision of non-exploitative, non-colonial, non-patriarchal society which respects, not destroys nature, did not emanate from research institutes, UN-organizations or governments, but from grassroots movements ... who fought and fight for survival. And in these movements it is women who more than men understand that a subsistence perspective is the only guarantee of the survival of all ...and not integration into and continuation of the industrial growth system.”²⁰

Men only want to conquer nature for material gains. In the name of development, the ecological balance is tilted precariously. The capitalist patriarchal system has threatened not only women but the bio-diversity also. The social hierarchy has always placed nature and women on a lower pedestal. According to Ortner, "Nature is subordinated to man; woman to man consumption to production; and the local to the global, and so on. Feminists have long criticized this dichotomy, particularly the structural division of man and nature, which is seen as analogous to that of man and woman."²¹ The environmental pollution and destruction have thus not only affected the lives of women but have made them active members of the environmental movements in their fight against this plunder. The ecofeminist movement is an endeavour to save nature, the environment, and all life forms in general. Diamond and Orenstein observe:

An ecofeminist perspective propounds the need for a new cosmology and a new anthropology which recognizes that life in nature (which includes human beings) is maintained by means of co-operation and mutual care and love. Only in this way can we be enabled to respect and preserve the diversity of all life forms including their cultural expressions, as true sources of our well-being and happiness. To this end ecofeminists use metaphors like 'reweaving the world,' 'healing the wounds,' and re-connecting and interconnecting the 'web'.²²

Women know the need of the hour-the preservation of the creation. They are trying to find solutions to the destructive effects of capitalism and industrialization. One reason "why women are becoming increasingly critical of modern development and integration into the world market is the recognition that this has led to more and more violence against women."²³ Women now are not just passive receivers, rather they contribute actively to the movements for sustaining nature. In their daily lives, they have always been in direct contact with nature and the environment. They care for it, nurture it, and try to preserve it. The exploitative relationship between man and woman is similar to the exploitation of nature by man. As a result of the growing modernization, nature is under threat of extinction. The common cause to preserve nature, throughout the world, has united women:

The battle of thousands of women for better water management, soil conservation, land use, and maintenance of their survival base (forests, fuel, fodder) against the industrial interests confirmed that many women, worldwide, felt the same anger and anxiety, and the same sense of responsibility to preserve the bases of life, and to end its destruction. Irrespective of different racial, ethnic, cultural or class backgrounds, this common concern brought women together to forge links in solidarity with other women, people and even nations .²⁴

Economic globalization and development have commodified natural resources. The capitalist patriarchy in the name of globalization has transformed all aspects of everyday life "into globally-traded commodities. Food, land, seeds, plants and animals are now all commodities on international market."²⁵ In order to get material gains natural resources are used and abused according to the convenience of the capitalist patriarchy. Women are deprived of even the basic necessities of life-food, fuel, and fodder:

The impact of globalization is therefore to take resources and knowledge that have hitherto been under women's control and the control of Third World communities to generate sustenance and survival, and put them at the service of corporations engaged in global trade and commerce to generate profits.²⁶

The ecological balance is being destroyed and women have to suffer the most. Ecological feminism "sees in the current trend the ultimate concentration of capitalist patriarchy and its violence against nature and women."²⁷ For capitalist gains and dominance women and nature are forcefully exploited. New scientific discoveries have subdued nature to get power. Nature and women both are made slaves and are forced to serve the patriarchal society. Just as nature is to be abused so is a woman. They are valued only if they are of any use to the males. Man is always the owner and woman and nature are always made slaves. Both are controlled and subordinated. Even the development criterion is a patriarchal project. The patriarchal set - up rules the production and shapes the development process. Women's work is always marginalized and thought to be of no importance. Their work is devalued, and their activities in relation to nature are marginalized: The "rise of industrialism led to a patriarchal construction of nature as passive, inert and valueless and gendered these constructed qualities"²⁸ Ecological feminism asserts the conservation of nature and environment so that once again the ecological balance could be brought back:

'Nature', 'limits and boundaries', 'organisms', and 'species' have emerged as central to the discourse and politics of ecology. Biodiversity conservation in particular includes the recognition of the intrinsic worth of species and of ecological barriers that make diversity and distinctiveness flourish. Post-modern feminists and the genetic engineering establishment have, however, treated nature and boundaries as mere constructions which can and should be dispensed with.²⁹

Thus in the struggle for survival, women have come forward to conserve nature. They have participated strongly in environmental movements fighting to save the earth and natural resources. The ecofeminists believe in the sanctity and value of all life forms. It challenges the patriarchal concept of development which values natural resources just for money only. Globalization has broken the spiritual link with nature. Nature now is valued in terms of material gains:

The 'global' as construct does not symbolize planetary consciousness. In fact it excludes the planet and peoples from the mind, and puts global institutions in their place. The concept of the planet is invoked by the most rapacious and greedy institutions to destroy and kill the cultures which use a planetary consciousness to guide their daily actions in the concrete. The ordinary Indian woman who worships the tulsi plant worships the cosmic as symbolized in the plant. The peasants who treat seeds as sacred see in them a connection to the universe. Reflexive categories harmonize balance from planets to plants to people. In most sustainable traditional cultures, the large and the small have been linked so that limits, restraints, and responsibilities are always transparent and can not be externalized. The large exists in the small, and hence every act has not just global but cosmic implications Treading gently on the Earth becomes the natural way to be.³⁰

However, the scientific and industrial revolution has viewed nature as just a commodity, a resource for profit and material gains. The colonization of natural resources has a close parallel with the colonization of women and the Ecofeminist perspective not only finds a connection between women and nature but also between all life forms and nature. It challenges the philosophy of domination based on race, class, gender, and other social hierarchies. It asserts the importance of respect for humanity and natural resources both. Ecofeminism is a resistance against the destruction of nature in all forms:

The colonization of regenerative sources of the renewal of life is the ultimate ecological crisis: patriarchal science and technology, in the service of patriarchal capitalism, have torn apart cycles of regeneration, and forced them into linear flows of raw materials and commodities. The self-provisioning, self-regenerative systems have been reduced into 'raw' material and consuming systems have been elevated into 'production' systems which supply commodities to consumers ...The destruction of regeneration is not revealed as destruction, instead the multiplication of 'producers' and 'consumers' and commodities signals growth.³¹

Ecofeminists thus point out that industrial growth and the scientific mindset have exploited nature. Nature has been exploited as a commodity to be used for material gains only. Moreover, the modern or post-modern society uses patently sexist language to perpetuate violence against women and a manipulated idiom of advertisement to exploit nature or the environment often through the mediation of women. Ecological feminism however "creates the possibility of viewing the world as an active subject, not merely as a resource to be manipulated and appropriated."³²

Thus the basis of Ecofeminism is to expose the affiliation between women and the environment and the strategies of their exploitation in the patriarchal set-up. The crux of the problem lies in the politics of defining women and nature. Environment and nature are the constructs of dominant classes. They create that form of the environment that suits their ideology of oppression so that they can subordinate women and the environment both.

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