

Discourse on Ecofeminism: A Review

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Abstract

The exploitation and oppression of women in patriarchal societies are closely associated with human supremacy and massive natural resource exploitation. The entire biotic community suffers from men's exploitation and domination over nature, just as men's dominance over women is harmful to the societal order, at least ethically. Therefore, understanding the worth, dignity, and necessities of every living form within the biotic community is made easier by ecofeminism, or the connection between women and earth or nature. Thus, the present paper explores the growth and development of ecofeminism which is a feminist movement that aspires to stop the dual dominance, exploitation and control of nature and women. It lays the foundation for the peaceful coexistence of men, nature, and women by encouraging the formation of a caring, loving, and sympathetic attitude toward all living things. Further, the paper also enunciates so many ecocritics, environmentalists, ecologists, ecofeminists regarding their views on ecofeminism.

This earth is my sister: I love her daily grace, her silent daring, and how loved I am, how we admire this strength in each other, all that we have lost, all that we have suffered, all that we know: we are stunned by this beauty, and I do not forget: what she is to me, what I am to her.

(Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*)

In the last few decades, ecofeminism has gained significant momentum, both as a movement and as a concept. As a subset of third wave feminism, ecofeminism aims to promote the development of lifestyle choices and perspectives independent of gendered norms of power. Drawing parallels between

environmental movements and feminism, ecofeminism sees little difference between the two and links environmental domination and degradation with women's subjugation and oppression. The term 'Ecofeminism' was first coined by French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne in (*Feminism or Death*) *Le Feminisme Ou la Mort* (1974) and later evolved and developed by Ynestra King around 1976. As she enunciates:

The common ground for women's liberation and the preservation of life on earth is to be found in the activities of those women who have become the victims of the development process and who struggle to conserve their subsistence base: for example, the chipko women in India, women and men

who actively oppose mega dam construction, women who fight against nuclear power plants and against the irresponsible dumping of toxic wastes around the world, and many more worldwide. (12)

During the 1970s, seminars and workshops held by prominent women in academia and other professions gave rise to ecofeminism. The term Ecofeminism was first used in 1974 at the University of California, Berkeley's "Women and the Environment" conference, organized by Sandra Marburg and Lisa Watson. The global ecofeminist movement began with the first ecofeminist conference, which took place in Amherst, Massachusetts in 1980. Environmental catastrophes, including the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island, gave rise to this movement, which resulted in the "Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism" conference in the 1980s. The conference focuses on the historical and contemporary relationship between feminist and environmental issues. It examines the relationship between feminism, militarisation, racialization, stereotyping and bigotry, and the relationship between these factors and the degradation of the environment. After the conference, Susan Adler's initiative led to two further conferences. The first was held at Sonoma State University, California. The second was in London. The ecofeminist movement gained international attention through conferences, movements and protests against environmental catastrophes. Ecofeminism recognizes the relationship between women and nature through reproductive, lunar cycle, menstruation and emotional connections. Over the years, the ecofeminist movement has developed into a variety of sub-branches. These sub-branches include liberal ecofeminism, radical ecofeminism, spiritual or cultural ecofeminism, social ecofeminism, womanist ecofeminism and activist ecofeminism. Beyond its scholarly beginnings, ecofeminism formally entered the mainstream in 1980. As feminism pertains to women and ecology to nature, ecofeminism is the meeting point of these two fields. It encompasses both a philosophy and a movement; therefore no one term can adequately capture it. As Pragati and Devendra in "Unveiling Ecological Feminism in Manga

Series Buddha by Osamu Tezuka" (2025) delineate that "the sustenance of life in nature relies on cooperation, mutual care, and love. Within the framework of ecofeminism, it is acknowledged that humans have an inseparable connection to nature, with women being particularly intertwined with it compared to men. This perspective highlights the association of patriarchal society with culture and women with nature". (1)

Similarly, As Mary Mellor in *Feminism & Ecology* (1997) defines Ecofeminism as:

[A] movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and Degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. It emerged in the mid- 1970s alongside second-wave feminism and the green movement. Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements, while at the same time offering a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non- human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women. (1)

Further, in the 1980s, it became a mainstream movement. If we look at the term ecofeminism on a morphological level, ecology is related to nature, whereas feminism is with women. Ecology or nature represents women because woman can give birth just as nature nurtures all creatures and culture signifies patriarchy, or a male-dominated society. Thus, Ecofeminism is both a movement and a philosophy and there is no single definition of it. It came to light around the 1990s, when the third wave of feminism was active. So many environmental movements in ecofeminism occur like Chipko movement in India, Love Canal movement in the United States, Green Belt Movement in Kenyan, and Women and Trees in Bangladesh etcetera. As Val Plumwood in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) delineates, "Both to activist struggle and to theorising links between women's oppression and the domination of nature over the last two decades". (1)

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines ecofeminism as "a philosophical and political theory and movement which combines ecological concerns with feminist ones, regarding both as resulting from male domination of society". Similarly, Karen Warren, in her work *Ecofeminist Philosophy* (2000) explicates, "Ecological feminism or ecofeminism is an umbrella term which captures a variety of multicultural perspectives on the nature of the connections within social systems of domination between those humans in subdominant or subordinate positions, particularly women, and the domination of nonhuman nature" (1). Ecofeminists contend that the answer stems from a capitalist, patriarchal, masculine worldview that sees women and the natural world as inferior 'others'. Additionally, Radford Ruether in *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (1975), explains several different issues related to ecofeminism. The book profoundly explores the degradation of environment as well as women by patriarchy. As she delineates:

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 relationships continues to be one of dominance. They must unite the demands of movement of the women's with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this society. (204)

The goal of ecofeminism is to comprehend not only the contradictions that exist in our lives today, but also the historical context in which they first appeared. For many years, the belief that gender was the primary barrier to women's independence resulted in androcentrism. Man took advantage of nature to the same extent that women did. Science, technology, and the concept of a rational society have advanced, proving that feminist goals are feasible. As Devendra Kumar Sharma in his book review "An Indian Response to Ecofeminism: A Literary Study" (2024) explicates "Today, we are living in a global era where capitalism has become the god of all religions and commercialization and consumption are the mantras of success". (148).

An ecological whole includes social, political, and cultural institutions. The movement that encompasses the whole picture in the twenty-first century is called ecofeminism. In *The First Sex* (1971), Elizabeth Gould Davis delineates the prehistoric society, where she assumes the matriarchal society might have been more superior to men. She explains that women are closer to nature because of their natural character than men. As she says "Man is the enemy of nature: to kill, to root up to level off, to pollute, to destroy are his instinctive reactions.....Woman, on the other hand, is the ally of nature, and her instinct is to tend, to nurture, to encourage healthy growth, and to preserve ecological balance" (335-336). This is the nature of men to control, subjugate, dominate, conquer, or command over them through their power, which could be either mental or physical. William Leiss in *The Domination of Nature* (1972) explicates, "It was Francis Bacon who formulated the modern agenda of power over nature through science and technology he also highlighted the role of technology in mastering both the external world of nature and the human being" (158-159). And because of their dominance everyone is suffering, even Men themselves. Environmentalists wondered why people thought nature was less important than humans. Men now have the benefit of controlling and taking use of nature since it has been gendered as feminine. Carolyn Merchant in *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1980), discusses the scientific revolution and the progression or industrial growth and development especially 16th and 17th century, is "progress for whom?" Actually, it is directly proportional to nature and culture. She proposes the "ecosystem model of historical," (42) change which further "looks at the relationship between the resources associated with a given natural ecosystem... and the human factors affecting its stability or disruption over a historical period" (42-43). She discusses the importance of Nature as well as women ('Mother Nature') for the existence of humans. Throughout history nature has been seen as a loving mother, cultivated like virgin soil and feared and denigrated as an unpredictable force. As she posits "the image of

an organic cosmos with a living female earth at its center gave way to a mechanistic world view in which nature was reconstituted as dead and passive, to be dominated and controlled by humans” (xvi). Further, Susan Griffin in *Woman and Nature* (1978) defines the relationship between women and nature as:

Woman Speaks with Nature. That she hears voices from under the earth. That wind blows in her ears and trees whisper to her. That dead sing through her mouth and the cries of infants are dear to her. But for him this dialogue is over. He says he is not part of the word that he was set on this world as a stranger. He sets himself apart from woman and nature. (Griffin, p.1)

Vandana Shiva and Bina Agarwal are the two major prominent figures on the Southeast Asian continent. Shiva in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1989), believes that development becomes so destructive in third world countries. As she says “development could not but entail destruction for women, nature and subjugate cultures, which is why, throughout the third world, women, peasants and tribals are struggling for liberation from development just as they earlier struggled for liberation from colonialism” (2). She enunciates that third world development was ‘maldevelopment’. It is just the continuation of the previous western colonial period. Further, she believes that in India, women are closer to nature. As she delineates “Women in India are an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and in practice. At, one level nature is symbolized as the embodiment of the feminine principle, and at another, she is nurtured by the feminine to produce life and provide sustenance” (37). Bina Agarwal has a different view of Shiva because she claims or blames the environmental circumstances under which women’s responses. Shiva, as Agarwal suggests, puts most South Asian women to the same standard that Western ecofeminists do for all women. Agarwal describes Shiva as an essentialist who acknowledges that women have a unique connection to nature and, as a result, a unique comprehension of it. Agarwal is willing to acknowledge that some women who work and live in natural settings may have a unique

awareness of their surroundings, but she is vehemently opposed to the essentialist explanation for this claim. She claims that the only difference between Shiva and Western ecofeminists is that Shiva thinks that Western development objectives in former colonies were mostly to blame for the “death of the feminine principle” in indigenous civilizations that valued life and nature. As Agarwal in “The Gender and Environmental Debate: Lesson from India.” (1992) enunciates that “Undeniably, the colonial experience and the forms that modern development has taken in Third World countries have been destructive and distorting economically, institutionally and culturally. However, it cannot be ignored that this process impinges on preexisting bases of economic and social...inequalities” (125). Further, especially in Indian context Loveleen Mohan in her *An Indian Response to Ecofeminism: A Literary Study* (2023) explicates the Indian literary thought on ecofeminism. She enunciates that “Ecofeminist movement has been influential in carving space for both women and Nature, engendering an interface vis a vis the androcentric and anthropocentric perspective that had occupied central space in the mainstream thought” (iii). She says that because of the development of capitalist society, humans have degraded their relationships with nature, ecology and women. And nature, which nurtures us, is now breathing her last breath. As she says, “Ironically, Nature, who taught the principles of life to human beings, is herself today pinning for breath” (26). Similarly, M. Maria and Shiva (2010) in *Ecofeminism* say “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”. (6)

André Collard and Joyce Contrucci in *Rape of the Wild: Man’s Violence Against Animals and the Earth* (1989) explain the environmental impact on human existence, which includes language, culture, religion, societal norms etcetera. They discuss normalization of male violence against females. She enunciates that “[E]cofeminism demonstrating and explaining the unity of women and the nature and the oneness of women’s struggle to save our Selves

and to save the planet” (ix). Additionally, Judith Plant in *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* (1989) explains:

Our aim is a non-violent and ecological feminist transformation of societal structures. Our aim is radical, non-violent change outside and inside of us. The macrocosm and microcosm! This has to do with transforming power! Not power over power to dominate or power to terrorize – but shared power, abolishing power as we know it, replacing it with the power of non-violence or something common to all, to be used by all and for all! Power as the discovery of our own strength as opposed to a passive receiving of power exercised by others, often in our name. Creating a truly free society- based on ecological and feminist principles that can mediate humanity's relationship with nature- is our common aim...living, producing, working and living in comprehensible human dimensions is another common goal for us all... ecofeminism draws on the principles of unity in diversity, a most important aspect in times of social simplification. (10-11)

Ariel Salleh's *Ecofeminism as Politics* (1997) explicates how ecofeminism is intertwined with political revolutionary movements like the Green Socialist, Feminism, Marxism and Postcolonialism etcetera. And the growth and development of capitalist society have degraded and devalued women, workers and farmers as well as nature or Mother Earth. In the forward of the book, it mentions:

Capitalism is gendered, racialised, and anti-nature in both cultural assumptions and economic instruments. Its anthropocentric reasoning denies the creativity of nature and hence Rights of Mother Earth. Meanwhile, women, indigenous people, farmers and peasant workers are defined as less than human. Big Money is based on rules that reward only those who exploit the Earth... (ix)

Linda Vance in “Ecofeminism and Wilderness” (1997) delineates, “A basic tenet of ecofeminism

holds that the patriarchal domination of women runs parallel to the patriarchal domination of nature. Both women and nature have been controlled and manipulated to satisfy masculinist desires, we say; both have been denied autonomous expression and self-determination” (60). Further, Greta Gard in “Women, Water, Energy: An Eco-feminist Approach,” (2001) delineates the injustice against the environment and women and says “More than a theory about feminism and environmentalism, or women and nature, as the name might imply, eco-feminism approaches the problems of environmental degradation and social injustice from the premise that how we treat nature and how we treat each other are inseparably linked” (159).

There are many works that focus only on environmental issues, and many of them also integrate feminist and ecological concerns. The Western polemical discourse has a relatively large body of work overall. It is exceedingly challenging to include every polemical work within the parameters of this study. Therefore, the following is a list of the key ecofeminist works, like-Sherry B. Ortner's “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” (1974), Radford Ruether's, *New Woman/ New Earth* (1975), Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (1978), Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (1980), Susan Griffin's *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (1980), Mary Mellor's *Breaking the Boundaries: Towards a Feminist Green Socialism* (1992), Greta Gaard's *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (1993), Val Plumwood's *Feminism and Mastery of Nature* (1993), Val Plumwood's *Feminism and Mastery of Nature* (1993) Carol J. Adams' *Neither Man nor Beast: Feminism and the Defense of Animals* (1994), Karen J. Warren's *Ecological Feminism* (1994) Mohan, Loveleen's *An Indian Response to Ecofeminism: A Literary Study* (2023) and many more.

According to ecofeminists, the explanation lies in a male, patriarchal capitalist worldview that sees nature and women as second-class “others.” The dichotomy between culture and nature, man and woman, is derived from this. Ecofeminists seek to understand not only the current dichotomy in our lives but also the origins of these dichotomies in history. For

centuries, gender was seen as the primary impediment to women's freedom, resulting in androcentricism. Men exploited nature as much as their female counterpart, the woman. However, advances in science, technology and rational civilization philosophy have shown that feminist goals can be achieved. All political, social and cultural structures are part of an ecological system. The whole picture in the twenty-first century is this struggle.

In a nutshell, for the survival of the earth, it is indeed vital to save our ecology, nature and the subjugation of women. So many ecologists, environmentalists, and ecofeminists have already discussed the endangered situation of nature because of the unprecedented growth of science and technology, as well as the patriarchal society and culture. Now it's time to take action to save our beautiful planet.

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