

A GLIMPSE OF ECOFEMINISM IN FEMINIST THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT

Feminism is a movement that is primarily concerned with gender issues which appear in different fields like social, political, cultural, economic, environmental etc. It advocates establishing equal rights for women in contrast to the patriarchal traditions and capitalism. With the expansion of its scope, it adds many ideologies to the core thought and as the culmination, there have grown up many branches of it. Among the branches of feminism, "Ecofeminism" is the most important and popular branch which unites environmentalism with feminism. Ecofeminists argue that there is an interconnection or interdependence relationship between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature i.e. both are oppressed and exploited by men, as a result of the dominant tradition of patriarchal society and capitalism. In different parts of the world, feminists participated in this movement by conjoining their perspectives with the root ideology of ecofeminism and later in accordance with the viewpoint of feminists, it split up into several groups, these are known as, viz- Spiritual/ cultural, Materialist, and Vegetarian ecofeminism. Though they possess different opinions or approaches, as ecofeminists all are united by their fundamental belief which is to abolish masculine aggression and domination and also to establish an egalitarian society or world. The prominent feminist activists of this branch are Francoise d'Eaubonne, Karren Warren, Val Plumwood, Maria Mies, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomas, Vandana Shiva, Ana Isla, Mary Mellor, Starhawk, Riane Eisler etc. This paper strives to give a brief glimpse of the ecofeminism in feminist thought.

Keywords: Feminism, Ecofeminism, Patriarchal tradition, Capitalism, Nature/Environment, Vegetarian, Materialist, Spiritualist.

INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a socio-political-cultural movement that is primarily concerned with gender issues which appear in different fields like social, political, cultural, economic, environmental etc. It consists of myriad ideologies aimed at abolishing gender inequality in society and sustaining the same rights for women along with equal opportunities as men.

The word "Feminism", for the first time in 1837, had been coined by Charles Fourier, who is an eminent socialist and French philosopher. Despite not being widely used until the 1970s, the terms "feminism" and "feminist" had already been used in popular idiom much earlier. For example, Katherine Hebburn refers to the "feminist movement" in the 1942 movie 'Women of the year'. Besides, in the 18th-century British writer Mary Wollstonecraft had written a book in the context of feminism i.e "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" which was later worked as fuel of the first wave of feminism.

However, most historians and scholars have considered that feminism was formally introduced as a movement in the period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Western countries. In that era, though it was difficult to bring changes in a patriarchal society nevertheless feminism succeeded in changing social perspectives in various aspects of society, especially in the Western side of the world. Feminist activists had contented to establish gender equality for which they campaigned for all kinds of rights that were associated with women such as legal rights for women including the right to vote, the right to contract, the right to property, the right to work, the right to avail maternity leave, the right to earn equal pay, the right to education, the equal right in marriage, etc. And also they enhanced women's interests and other rights concerned with women's bodies, these are the rights to bodily integrity and autonomy, lawful abortion, access to contraception, to the protection of women and girls from sexual harassment, domestic violence and rape. Alongside the aforementioned campaigning rights, females' dress standards and other acceptable physical activities for females have also been given special importance in their campaigns.

Feminism's evolution is typically categorized into three waves, each characterized by distinct objectives, ideologies and achievements. The first wave (1848-1920) centered on securing fundamental rights for women, including voting privileges and property ownership. The Second wave (1960s-1980s) emerged upon these advancements, tackling issues like reproductive autonomy, workplace equality, and domestic violence. The third wave (1990s- present) prioritizes diversity, inclusivity and challenging societal norms, with a focus on global unity in intersectionality. Throughout the history of the feminist movement, numerous theorists, poets, critics and thinkers have contributed to its development, giving rise to diverse branches of feminism shaped by their unique ideologies and approaches. Despite their differences and conflicts, they were united by a shared core belief in the principles of feminism, which served as a common thread weaving their efforts together. The key branches of feminism are Radical feminism, Liberal feminism, Marxist and Socialist feminism, Cultural feminism, and Ecofeminism. "Eco-feminism" is the only significant form of feminism that has identified the interdependent connection or interlink between women and nature and also it is the first branch which has raised the voice for the preservation of the environment along with the concerned matters of women. It seeks to understand how the domination of women and the domination of nature are interconnected, and how both forms of domination can be changed and re-established in the current perspectives of society.

ECOFEMINISM

It is already mentioned that ecofeminism is an important branch of the feminism movement which grew up during the second wave of this movement with unique speculations. It is a combined form of two specific ideologies i.e. feminism and environmentalism, which argues that there is an interlink between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women, and that connection is the reason for their oppression and degradation. According to Ecofeminists, capitalism and patriarchy are the causes of the oppression of women and the deterioration of nature. This cause can be decayed only through revising pre-established values of society and replacing the androcentric and anthropocentric perspectives with egalitarian perspectives. Ecofeminism believes that issues like sexism, racism, and environmental harm are all connected and come from the same source. So, it seeks to end all the forms of oppression or domination and recognize the connection between people and the natural world.

The term 'Ecofeminism' was first introduced by French author Francoise d'Eaubonne in her 1974 book 'Le Feminisme Ou La Mort' (Feminism or Death), which highlights the crucial connection between feminism and environmentalism. In the book, she argues that feminism must play a key role in tackling both environmental degradation and gender inequality.

The history of ecofeminism reflects two pivotal incidents that contributed to the popularization of the movement and also underscored the notion that women have a deeper affinity with nature and are more attuned to its well-being. One of these pivotal events is the Chipko movement, which emerged in the 1970s in India, where rural women led a groundbreaking protest against deforestation and logging, embracing the trees to prevent felling, and thus demonstrating a powerful example of feminist environmentalism and the intrinsic connection between women's empowerment and ecological conservation. Another is the Green Belt Movement, founded by the visionary Wangari Maathai in Kenya in 1977, which empowered local communities, particularly women, to take charge of their environment by planting trees, promoting sustainable livelihoods, and advocating for environmental conservation, ultimately cementing the movement's legacy as a powerful example of grassroots ecofeminism activism.

While these two events were significant catalysts for ecofeminism, they were not the sole sources of this movement. Besides, many ideologies have influenced and helped bring ecofeminism into force. One notable ideology among these is "Ecocriticism". It is an interdisciplinary field of study that examines the relationship between literature, culture and the environment, which analyses how literary works represent and interact with the natural world, and how these representations reflect and shape cultural attitudes towards the environment. Ecocriticism has impacted ecofeminism in several aspects such as in the critical analysis of environmental representations, environmental imagination, challenging anthropocentrism, material ecocriticism, interdisciplinary approaches, environmental justice etc. These impacts enhanced ecofeminist thought, critique, and activism, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the relationships between humans, culture and the environment.

The spirit of ecofeminism has been explored by numerous pioneering feminists who argued and advocated in favour of its speculations or beliefs, including Rachel Carson, who exposed the environmental hazards of pesticides, Françoise d'Eaubonne, who coined the term 'Ecofeminism'. Vandana Shiva, founder of Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology, Carolyn Merchant, writer of *Death of Nature, Women, Ecology and Scientific Revolution*, Val Plumwood, who critiqued anthropocentrism and promoted ecological thinking, Karren Warren, Greta Gaard, Susan Griffin etc.

From a philosophical standpoint, ecofeminism is a holistic and inclusive approach that integrates feminist theory, ecological consciousness and social justice, recognizing the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman worlds, and challenging dominant Western paradigms that perpetuate patriarchal and anthropocentric attitudes towards nature.

Ecofeminist philosophy concentrates on examining and addressing the intersections of oppression, particularly the unjustified domination of women, Indigenous communities, and the natural world, all of whom are relegated to the category of 'other', and seeks to dismantle the patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist systems that perpetuate these injustices.

Here the category of "other" denotes individuals or groups that are marginalized, excluded, dominated, oppressed, or considered inferior by dominant cultures or power structures. This includes women, Indigenous peoples, people of colour, non-human animals and the natural world. The ecofeminist philosophers argue that the subjugation of the category of "others" by patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist systems is not only unjustifiable but also unnecessary and that these oppressive structures can be dismantled and replaced with a more equitable and sustainable relationship between all beings and the earth, based on principles of reciprocity, mutualism, and respect for the intrinsic value of all life.

In this context, philosophers like Val Plumwood and Karren Warren, pioneers in ecofeminist thought, draw on feminist theory to critically examine the intersection between human domination of women and the natural world. Plumwood states that "the mastery of nature is a pervasive feature of the dominant Western cultural framework."¹ and also Warren notes, "The logic of domination is the same logic that leads to the domination of women, people of colour, and the natural world"². Their thoughts reflect that they develop a comprehensive framework for understanding the mechanisms of oppression and the possibilities for the liberation, contending that the liberation of humans and the non-human world are inextricably linked.

The philosophers have claimed that the unjustified domination of women and the domination of the non-human world are deeply intertwined through historical, experiential, symbolic and conceptual links. The historical and conceptual connections between both are rooted in the parallel processes of the feminization of nature and the naturalization of women. That is attributing feminine characteristics to the natural world and reducing women their reproductive and nurturing roles, erasing their agency and autonomy and perpetuating gender-based

oppression. Moreover, the feminists have critiqued the patriarchal perspective which conceptualizes that nature, body, and emotion are historically associated with women; which are seen as inferior and culture, mind, and reason are historically associated with men; which are seen as superior.

However, ecofeminism has pointed out the features of the oppressive conceptual framework. Here, the oppressive conceptual framework refers to a system of ideas, beliefs, and values that perpetuates and justifies the domination, marginalization and oppression of certain groups or individuals. The features are-

1. The oppressive conceptual framework imposes a simplistic and hierarchal structure on the world, splitting into rigid and opposite categories, such as male vs. female, reason vs. emotion, culture vs. nature, and mind vs. body. This binary approach distorts reality perpetuates harmful stereotypes and legitimates discrimination, marginalization, and oppression.

2. It perpetuates a hierarchal mindset, where one aspect of a binary is elevated and valued above the other, reinforcing harmful power dynamics and perpetuating inequality. This up-down thinking assigns a superior status to the dominant group or perspective while relegating the marginalized to an inferior position, distorting reality and justifying discrimination.

3. It relies on a flawed dualistic approach, pitting two concepts or groups against each other as opposing forces, where one is deemed superior and the other inferior. This binary thinking oversimplifies complexities, perpetuates harmful stereotypes, and reinforces power imbalances, creating a false narrative of mutual exclusivity and limiting our understanding of the world's nuances.

4. It views power as a means of control and domination, where one entity exercises authority over another, often through coercive or exploitive means. This "power over" approach perpetuates hierarchal relationships, dominance and oppression.

5. It sustains a system of privilege, where the privileged group enjoys unearned advantages and maintains power, while the marginalized group faces persistent disadvantages and exclusion. This framework perpetuates inequality by normalizing and legitimizing the dominant group's benefits while obscuring or dismissing the struggles of the marginalized, thereby reinforcing social and economic disparities.

6. It is rooted in a logic of domination, which is a fundamental principle that prioritizes the interests of the powerful over the marginalized, justifying exploitation, ensure and violence against the oppressed. This logic underpins systems of oppression, legitimizing the denial of rights, perpetuating harmful stereotypes, and maintaining inequality.

Through analyzing these features, ecofeminist philosophers have identified the oppressive conceptual framework as the root cause of environmental degradation, social injustice, and subjugation of women. They have claimed that alongside with destruction of nature, women will disappear one day because in which way both are oppressed and exploited by patriarchal tradition, there are no more days to see this truth. Therefore, they critique the pre-established oppressive conceptual framework to develop an egalitarian society that prioritizes the ethic of care, reciprocity, and mutualism and fosters a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of human and non-human liberation, ultimately cultivating a more just, sustainable and compassionate world.

MAJOR PRINCIPLES OF ECOFEMINISM

Ecofeminists have developed some common ideologies that guide their philosophy, activism and aim and those ideologies are considered major principles of ecofeminism. These are-

1. The Oppression of women and the degradation of women are connected because they share a common source:

Eco-feminists realized that in a patriarchal society, masculine attributes are conceptualized as more worthy than other groups and this perception or convention is the cause of all kinds of dominant activities to other groups, such as women and nature. And also this causation pushed nature and women towards the ending point of cessation.

Feminists cognise that patriarchal dominance culture is the prime cause of degradation or oppression of nature and marginalized groups including women, children, people of colour etc. But domination or exploitation is not confined to merely the said groups. Further, capitalists take the privilege of this dominant culture and that's why they propel this culture.

2. Replacement of dominant culture with an ethic of care :

Ecofeminists intend to establish an ethic of care where everyone can equitably share rights and respect without any kind of suppression and realize their responsibility to each other instead of patriarchal domination. Ecofeminism takes a stand against the cultural dominance which has been developed by masculine aggression. That's why it contended to renovate the entire dominant culture through the implementation of an ethic of care concept.

3. Domination is entirely unacceptable because all forms of oppression are deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing :

Ecofeminism is completely inflexible with the domination concept because according to ecofeminists' view, all kinds of domination are interrelated and ecofeminism has laid emphasis on having a zero-tolerance approach against domination or oppression traditions.

Feminists believe that all discrimination and disenfranchised situations emerge from a dominant culture which is mainly encouraged by the patriarchal system and capitalism for their privileges, for example- if we look at the ancient patriarchal society then it is noticed that women were not given the right to divorce no matter will depend that how many difficulties have been faced by them, because masculine groups known that if this right was given to women, men would lost their previous license to use them as property.

4. To bring equality requires understanding the interconnectedness of oppressions:

Ecofeminism asserts that to bring a positive or real change in both cases, the exploitation of nature and the oppression of marginalized groups, it is necessary to understand their connections to patriarchal society because masculine aggression or capitalism encourages all kinds of exploitation or oppression. So, to bring changes in prevalent society it should have to destroy the patriarchal traditional perceptions or capitalism. Besides, ecofeminists invited all feminists to think about environmental or ecological issues. In this regard, an ecofeminist, Wilkinson says "It is really critical that we understand the gender dynamics around climate impacts because we need to have strategies and approaches through adaption and resilience that respond to those inequities."³

5. Affected communities must lead the charge against its causes:

Ecofeminism emphasizes an inclusive care ethic along with the issues concerned with marginalized groups and calls people to fight or lead a movement against the cause of environmental degradation to provide equal rights to both, women and nature and also to prevent all kinds of exploitation.

TYPES OF ECOFEMINISM

Ecofeminists share a core belief in the interconnectedness of women's oppression and environmental degradation but they have possessed different perspectives on the nature of the relationship between the oppression of women and the degradation of nature. With regard to this, Karren Warren has stated that "The difference opinion among ecofeminist theorists, critics and writers reflect the 'plurality of position' one finds in dissimilar variants of feminism including liberal, Marxist, radical, socialist and cultural feminism. The range of disciplinary approaches and philosophical orientations like symbolic and literary, spiritual and religious, epistemological, political, historical, conceptual, empirical, socio-economic, linguistic and ethical interconnections available to dissect or deconstruct the women/ nature analogy and culture/nature oppositions further complicates the debates within ecofeminism."⁴ Also some methods share similar approaches, while others stick to their unique perspectives. Additionally, even within a single field of study, there can be disagreements and debates. And these

disagreements or different perspectives of ecofeminists have led to the emergence of various sub-branches of ecofeminism, including:

Vegetarian Ecofeminism:- This branch was grown by the vegetarian activists of ecofeminism. Who added one more perspective with the core ideology of ecofeminism, those activists that as with men's oppression of women, killing non-human animals is a kind of dominance. Also, Vegetarian ecofeminists believe that all kinds of suppression are interconnected so, it must be ended and also they give preponderance to prevent the exploitation deeds of humans over nonhuman animals.

This branch is recognized as a part of the academic and philosophical field of ecofeminism which advocates that just as there is a close connection between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women, there is a close link between the oppression of nonhuman animals and the oppression of women. Hence, it argues that consuming meat is one kind of encouragement for the way of exploitation of animals and this kind of act equally leads towards oppression or violence of animals and women.

Vegetarian ecofeminism believes that "meat eating is a form of patriarchal domination that suggests a link between male violence and a meat-based diet."⁵ "The personal is political" is a famous quotation concerned with vegetarian ecofeminism which refers to that is the hypocrisy of feminists to procure products manufactured in sweatshops, like the hypocrisy of feminists to procure products produced by factory cultivation. Hence, Feminists state that if a feminist accepts these hypocrisies then it will be a supportive action toward sweatshops and factory farming and also it will be a supportive action toward the patriarchal system.

However, Vegetarian ecofeminism is a combination of two types of ideology that are- Vegetarianism and ecofeminism. Vegetarianism always claims the protection of non-human animals and also develops thoughts in favour of protest against violence of all types which is reflected in their diets, vegetarianism believes that there is no difference between non-human animals and humans in cases of suffering and dying because violence produces the same pain and same difficulties and it also leads to the same terrible of death. So, it ought for us to eradicate practices of such kinds of actions rather than encourage or support speciesism and other patriarchal or hierarchal thoughts.

Whereas ecofeminism argues to protect nature as well as marginalized groups from all kinds of dominations initiated by patriarchal traditions alongside this perspective it claims an egalitarian society like vegetarianism. Consequently, this sub-branch came into existence as a combination of both and remains unique for its specific view, i.e.- liberation for animals and women.

Materialist Ecofeminism:-

It is another branch of ecofeminism that originated with an effort that is to the global dismantle patriarchy and capitalism globally. This branch was disseminated into different parts of the world by its activists and scholars, those key activists and scholars are – Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomas in the country of Germany, Ariel Sallah in the country of Australia, Vandana Shiva in the country of India, Ana Isla in Peru; and Mary Mellor in United Kingdom. In connection with the concept of Materialist ecofeminism, author Jannifer Wicke has offered her opinion that "Materialist Feminism as a feminism that insists on examining the material conditions under which social arrangements, including those of gender hierarchy, develop... materialist feminism avoids seeing this gender hierarchy as the effect of a singular...patriarchy and instead gauges the web of social and psychic relations that make up a material, historical moment."⁶ She expresses that "all kinds of material conditions play an important role in the case of the social construction of gender and evaluates the various aspects of these construction in which women assist and partake."⁷ It emphasizes the material or physical aspects where women and nature both are exploited due to capitalism or patriarchal traditions. In this branch, feminists deemed that gender is a social construct and that patriarchal society forcefully imposed gender roles upon women by specifying some responsibilities such as taking care of children and family, childbirth etc. Consequently, they lose their rights and freedom. So, they contended against prevalent society to bring social change rather than look for transformation under the capitalist system.

Materialist feminism claims an ideal society where there is no dominating group and also women are getting equal rights, such as socially, politically and economically like men. Materialist feminists also realized that some prevalent institutions such as labour, power and property are caused by the oppression of women and the environment, which are referred to as capitalism and social hierarchies and owing to this capitalism or imbalance of power women and poor men could not break their lower economic barrier, belong to ethnicities. Therefore, they are campaigning to eliminate the causes of all economic and social constraints that deprived women and nature of their rights.

Moreover, materialist ecofeminism fights against capitalism and hierarchal institutions for the liberation of women from all kinds of social and economic oppression. So, from this view, it is also called 'social feminism', "socialist ecofeminism" or "Marxist ecofeminism."

Spiritual and cultural ecofeminism:- Based upon its name it can be assumed that this branch has ripened by conjoining a unique vision with the root ideology of ecofeminism which is completely different from former branches. Because of its perspectives, it has also gained more popularity among the authors of ecofeminism. Those ecofeminist authors are respectively- Starhawk, Riane Eisler and Carol J. Adams.

Regarding using the term "spirituality" in the title, author Starhaw says "This is an earth-based spirituality, which recognizes that the Earth is alive, and that we are an interconnected community."⁸

Although, in general spirituality must be concerned with religion spiritual ecofeminism is not concerned with one particular religion. It contains some organic feelings which are mostly found as core things in many religions such as the value of caring, compassion for others, and non-violence.

Though ecofeminism formally emerged in the period of the second wave of feminism it has been prevalent in many societies since the ancient period. Hence, its thoughts are reflected in some traditions, for instance- In ancient Greek society people worshipped Gaia with the vibes of spirituality, which is known as the deity of nature or Mother Earth, and this tradition has more similarities with the thoughts of spiritual ecofeminism.

Moreover, in respect to spiritual ecofeminism, Wicca and Paganism both are extremely influential. Because the aim of these two traditions demonstrate their views of nature and the earth. The aim of these two is more alike, such as both striving to set up strong social values by showing profound respect for nature and also worshipping nature as a feminine goddess.

Spiritual ecofeminists also critique such kinds of religions which support patriarchal traditions. Especially they criticize Judaism and Christianity. It identifies a connection between, Judeo-Christians based on the common faith i.e.- both believe that God sanctioned the rights to humans for dominion over the earth and the degradation of nature or eco-system. Since, the main principle of ecofeminism is –"women and nature both are inextricably connected", So, it is simply considered that the exploitation of the earth or nature is synonymous with the exploitation of women. Hence, spiritual ecofeminism keeping in view of above mentioned states that Judaism and Christianity endorse the patriarchal tradition because sanctioning the right of humans to domination over the earth or nature indicates that they are allowing men to subjugate or oppression onto women. Furthermore, this branch enunciated that if these two religions are not reformed their ideas about 'disembodied male God' then it will invite the people to boycott these religions and enjoyment of nature by developing the 'Earth based-spiritualities"

In the context of practising the "earth-based- Spirituality" a prominent spiritual ecofeminist Starhawk says "the three most important concepts of earth-based spiritualities are the immanence of the Goddess in the living world, interconnection of mind, body and nature and a compassionate lifestyle."⁹

Spiritual ecofeminism is also called 'cultural ecofeminism' because this branch has possessed a tendency to establish community value, the value of intuition, an ethic of caring, and a good relationship between nature and humans. So, in this regard, an ecofeminist, Carolyn Merchant expresses in her book "Radical Ecology that cultural ecofeminism, that "celebrates the

relationship between women and nature through the revival of ancient rituals centered on goddess worship, the moon, animals, and the female reproductive system"¹⁰

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be stated that though Ecofeminism is just a sub-branch of the entire feminism movement it has a vast scope because it touches many issues, including social, economic, spiritual, nature, preservation of nonhuman animals etc. Even, some of them are more sensitive. Ecofeminism basically examines an intrinsic connection or link between women and nature that both are oppressive and exploited by the same cause. It is a clash against male-dominated patriarchal society and capitalism which intends to establish equal rights for women and to restore the health of nature. Besides, it is also struggling to protect the dignity of nature as well as women. The efforts of sub-branches cannot be ignored because they have been granted a unique status to it by adding some new perspectives and also they have been able to build an effective practical image of ecofeminism.

Moreover, apart from the feminist perspectives, if we look at its necessity in our practical life then it seems that though it is not free from criticism we cannot be denied its positive effects, because, in the present time in which way the environment is polluted by humans' deeds, we have already seen and also we are reaped the fruit. So, some essential initiatives are needed to protect our livelihood and to sustain nature for future generations. Therefore, it can be considered a good initiative to protect the environment and preserve nature as well as to protect women's rights or liberty.

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