

## Eco-Feminism

DR.PRASHANT PANWAR  
SENIOR LECTURER  
POLITICAL SCIENCE  
GOVT.P.G. SANSKRIT COLLEGE,JODHPUR



**Eco-feminism** describes movements and philosophies that link feminism with ecology.<sup>1</sup> The term is believed to have been coined by the French writer Francoise d'Eaubonne in her book, *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974).

**Eco-feminism** is a social and political movement which points to the existence of considerable common ground between environmentalism and feminism, with some currents linking deep ecology and feminism. Eco-feminists argue that a strong parallel exists between the oppression and subordination of women in families and society and the degradation of nature through the construction of differences into conceptual binaries and ideological hierarchies that allow a systematic justification of domination ("power-over power") by subjects classed into higher-ranking categories over objects classed into lower-ranking categories (e.g. man over woman, culture over nature, white over black). They also explore the inter-sectionality between sexism, the domination of nature, racism, speciesism, and other characteristics of social inequality. In some of their current work, eco-feminists argue that the capitalist and patriarchal systems that predominate throughout the world reveal a triple domination of the Global South (people who live in the Third World), women, and nature. This domination and exploitation of women, of poorly resourced peoples and of nature sits at the core of the eco-feminist analysis.

As *Ynestra King*, wrote:-'Eco-feminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice. It asserts the special strength and integrity of every living thing. For us the snail darter is to be considered side by side with a community's need for water, the porpoise side by side with appetite for tuna, and the creatures it may fall on with Skylab. We are a woman-identified movement and we believe we have a special work to do in these imperilled times. We see the

<sup>1</sup> MacGregor Sherilyn, *Beyond mothering earth: ecological citizenship and the politics of care*. vancouver UBC Press.2006

devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors, and the threat of nuclear annihilation by the military warriors, as feminist concerns. It is the masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies and our own sexuality, and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its way.'

Eco-feminist activism grew during the 1980s and 1990s among women from the anti-nuclear, environmental, and lesbian-feminist movements. The "Women and Life on Earth: Eco-feminism in the Eighties" conference held at Amherst (1980) was the first in a series of eco-feminist conferences, inspiring the growth of eco-feminist organizations and actions. The politics behind these eco-feminist organizations, conferences, and actions were based on an assessment of critical links that were thought to exist between militarism, sexism, classism, racism, and environmental destruction.

Vandana Shiva claims that women have a special connection to the environment through their daily interactions and this connection has been ignored. She says that women in subsistence economies who produce "wealth in partnership with nature, have been experts in their own right of holistic and ecological knowledge of nature's processes." However she makes the point that "these alternative modes of knowing, which are oriented to the social benefits and sustenance needs are not recognized by the capitalist reductionist paradigm, because it fails to perceive the interconnectedness of nature, or the connection of women's lives, work and knowledge with the creation of wealth."<sup>2</sup>

In *Eco-feminism* (1993) authors Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies critique modern science and its acceptance as a universal and value-free system. Instead, they view the dominant stream of modern science as a projection of Western men's values. The privilege of determining what is considered scientific knowledge has been controlled by men, and for the most part of history restricted to men. Shiva and Miles list example including the medicalization of child birth and the industrialization of plant reproduction.<sup>3</sup>

Theorists-

- **Françoise d'Eaubonne** - Called upon women to lead an ecological revolution in order to save the planet. This entailed revolutionizing gender relations and human relations with the natural world.
- **Sallie McFague** - A prominent eco-feminist theologian, McFague uses the metaphor of God's body to represent the universe at large. This metaphor values inclusive, mutualistic and interdependent relations amongst all things.
- **Rosemary Radford Ruether** - Has written 36 books and over 600 articles exploring the intersections of feminism, theology, and creation care.

<sup>2</sup> Shiva Vandana, *Staying alive : women ecology and development*, London: Zed Books, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Mies, Maria and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism*. Halifax, N.S.: Fernwood Publication.

- **Vandana Shiva** - Shiva is a physicist, author, activist, feminist and philosopher from India. She was a participant in the Chipko movement of the 1970s, which used non-violent activism to protest and prevent deforestation in the Garhwal Himalayas of Uttarakhand, India then in Uttar Pradesh.
- **Maria Mies** - Mies is a German social critic who has been involved in feminist work throughout Europe and India. She works particularly on the intersections of patriarchy, poverty, and the environment on a local and global scale.

A range of woman/nature interconnections are being explored within eco-feminist thought and action, three connections seem central to eco-feminist theory—the empirical, the conceptual and/or cultural/symbolic, and the epistemological.

**The empirical** claim is that in most parts of the world environmental problems generally disproportionately affect women. The increased burdens women face result not from environmental deterioration per se, but from a sexual division of labor found in most societies that considers family sustenance to be women's work. It is increasingly difficult for women in such societies to provide food, fuel, or water. Empirical data supports this claim.

A second claim is that women and nature are connected **conceptually and/or culturally/symbolically**. These connections are articulated in several ways. Many agree with Ruether that Western cultures present ideas about the world in a hierarchical and dualistic manner that is lived out in the way the world is organized. The claim is that dualist conceptual structures identify women with femininity, the body, Earth, sexuality, and flesh; and men with masculinity, spirit, mind, and power. Dualisms such as reason/emotion, mind/body, culture/nature, heaven/Earth, and man/woman converge. This implies that men have innate power over both women and nature. This dualistic structure was championed in the Greek world, perpetuated by Christianity, and reinforced later during the scientific revolution. In this cultural context, the twin dominations of women and nature seem justified and appear “natural,” primarily because they are reinforced by religion, philosophy, and other cultural symbols, networks, and constructions.

The eco-feminist **epistemological claim** follows from the connections noted between women and nature. The fact that women are most adversely affected by environmental problems makes them better qualified as experts on such conditions and therefore places them in a position of epistemological privilege; that is, women have more knowledge about earth systems than men. This means that these women are in a privileged position to aid in creating new practical and intellectual ecological paradigms. This kind of understanding is advocated by Indian eco-feminist Vandana Shiva.

Various responses to the woman-nature link exist. Although both a historical and cross-cultural connection, some claim the link should be deconstructed and contested. It has not served either women or the Earth. Others say it should be celebrated and honored. Still others consider it to be part of past rather than present history. Eco-feminist responses to these contested points vary given the preclinations of the particular theorist (e.g., eco-feminists may be Marxists, socialists, cultural eco-feminists, radical eco-feminists, post colonialists, postmodernists, eco-womanists, goddess-worshipers, deep ecologists, social ecologists, etc., or from a variety of religious backgrounds or none at all).

Some of the earliest eco-feminist texts in theology and religion examined the historical origins of patriarchy via the philosophical and theological traditions of Europe and the Mediterranean and found that patriarchal religion justified the domination of both women and nature. In historical reconstructions by Gerda Lerner, Marija Gimbutas, Carol Christ, and others, it is alleged that goddess-centered cultures that valued women and nature predated the patriarchal and militaristic systems that overthrew them. As patriarchal gods replaced Earth goddesses, both women and nature were degraded. According to these reconstructions, male domination and hierarchy became the religious symbols and social norms.

Cultural eco-feminists embrace goddess-oriented eco-feminism. Drawing from nature-based religions, paganism, goddess worship, Native American traditions, and the Wiccan tradition, some eco-feminists construct feminist spiritualities that they view as being friendlier to nature and women than the patriarchal religious traditions.

Rosemary Radford Ruether, Anne Primavesi, Sallie McFague, and other Christian eco-feminist theologians do not explicitly promote worship of pre-historic goddesses but they do question the historical accuracy of the claims. They argue that the possible existence of pre-historic goddesses may serve as a “liberation from the ultimacy of the biblical / Christian image of the patriarchal god,” but they claim that a historically uncertain past will not liberate the present. **McFague and Merchant** examine the connections between religion, culture, and scientific worldviews, claiming that the mechanistic models of Western science led to a rupture between the material world and the sacred that has harmed both women and nature. McFague, Primavesi, Merchant, Ivone Gebara and others look to the science of ecology to articulate a “common creation story” as part of an eco-feminist/natural sciences dialogue.

A variety of regional, ethnic, and cultural eco-feminisms exist. **Vandana Shiva** frequently invokes Hindu concepts and goddesses in her eco-feminist thought. *Eco-feminism and the Sacred* included essays from Buddhist, Native American, Hindu, womanist, Christian, and Jewish writers. **Ruether's** text, *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism*, includes essays from contributors living in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. **Gebara**, a Brazilian theologian, articulates an eco-feminist liberation theology connecting social justice to ecological health.

#### **Eco-feminist critics-**

some of whom are eco-feminists themselves, warn of essentialist positions latent in some forms of eco-feminist thought. Others doubt that the woman/nature link holds cross-culturally. The borrowing of symbols from other traditions by some eco-feminists is often harshly criticized, especially by Native Americans such as Andy Smith. Others criticize the dominance of white well-educated and privileged North American eco-feminists. There is also much debate over the place of eco-feminism within other ecological paradigms, such as with social ecology or deep ecology. Finally, for many the historicity of the matriarchal to patriarchal shift remains suspect. The central premise of eco-feminism remains; the dominations of women and nature are linked in various ways (e.g., historically, materially, culturally, or conceptually).

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9. Judith Plant, ed., *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* (Philadelphia, Pa.: New Society Publishers, 1989).
- 10 Rosi Bradiotti, et al., *Women, the Environment, and Sustainable Development: Towards a Theoretical Synthesis* (London: Zed Books, 1994)  
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13. Rosemary Radford Ruether, ed. *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996).
14. Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Eco-feminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1999).

### Web-Links

- 1.<http://www.ecofem.org/>
- 2.<http://www.erraticimpact.com/~ecofeminism/>
- 3.<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/env.html>
- 4.<http://eserver.org/feminism/>
- 5.<http://www.wedo.org/>

