

An Introduction to Ecofeminist Thought 1

A historical analysis

Early texts of Carolyn Merchant (1980) and Susan Griffin (1978) documented how modern Western culture associated women and nature.

In pre-16C Europe, the connection between women and nature rested on two divergent images;

- organic conceptions of nature and gender, whereby the earth was seen as a nurturing mother
- nature as wild, uncontrollable (storms, droughts etc.)

In premodern Europe the former of these two images dominated. Seager (1993) notes that work, culture, nature and daily life were interwoven into a seamless web, and a nurturing, female-identified earth was considered to be the root of all life. She explained that some historians of science argue that this:

“constrained the abuse of nature: as long as the earth was considered to be alive and sentient, it could be considered a breach of human ethical behaviour to carry out destructive acts against it. As Carolyn Merchant says, “one does not readily slay a mother, dig into her entrails for gold or mutilate her body” (Seager 1993).

However, scientific revolution, the growth of market culture and the earlier destruction of pagan animism through the spread of Christianity undermined the image of the organic cosmos and the second image came to dominate.

Thus according to Merchant, the view that mother nature is caring and bountiful was eclipsed by the view that nature is a fearsome, wild woman who must be controlled by knowing her.

Nature was reduced to a set of laws presumed to be knowable. Nature didn't act, it was a physical backdrop to be acted upon (Seager 1993). Men of science struggled to subdue nature/woman, to know her secrets, to tame her wilderness and

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to put nature to work in the service of human enterprise (Seager 1993). Thus the scientific revolution is seen by many ecofeminists as heralding the era in which women, as well as nature, came to be dominated, controlled and exploited. As Seager notes, the literature of male exploration is rife with metaphors of raping the wilderness, penetrating virgin lands, conquering a capricious Nature, mastering the wild and subduing untamed lands.

Academic conceptions of ecofeminism: Common strands in ecofeminist thought

Agarwal (1992) and Jackson (1993) summarise some of the common strands of ecofeminist thinking.

There is a link between women and nature

“Nature, as the excluded and devalued contrast of reason, includes the emotions, the body, the passions, animality, the primitive or uncivilised, the non-human world, matter, physicality and sense experience, as well as the sphere of faith, irrationality and madness” (Plumwood 1993)

In patriarchal thought women are regarded as closer to nature and men closer to culture. To feminists the woman-nature linkage is regarded as an important underpinning of the subordination of women. If nature is portrayed, as in the above quotation, as inferior to culture, and women are associated with nature then logically women are seen as inferior to men (Agarwal 1992).

Simone de Beauvoir wrote about the association of men with culture and women with nature. She noted that because men are unable to create through biological reproduction, theirs is an artificial creation - through human culture (Jackson 1993). She wrote “The support of life became for a man an activity and a project through the invention of the tool; but in maternity woman remained closely bound to her body, like an animal”

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(quoted in Jackson 1993).

Many feminists would assert that challenging this connection with nature, or denying the potency of difference between women and men, will liberate women. This is known as the 'masculinising wave of feminism' and it aims at equality by becoming more like men. However, ecofeminists argue against this, stressing that women are not only different from men but are in some ways better (Zimmerman 1994). They question whether it is progressive to become absorbed into a masculine-defined relationship with the non-human world. A celebration and affirmation of women's distinctive culture offers an avenue out of and away from the dominant male culture (Seager 1993). As Plumwood (1993) notes, one essential feature of all ecological feminist positions is that they give positive value to a connection of women with nature, which was previously, in the West, given negative cultural value. Some authors assert the superiority of the feminine. For example, Brooke Medicine Eagle (1996) writes:

"She said to me that the earth is in trouble. . .the thrusting, aggressive, analytic, intellectual, building, making-it-happen energy has very much overbalanced the feminine, receptive, allowing, surrendering energy. . . what needs to happen is an uplifting and a balancing. . . but not only do women need to become strong in this way; we all need to do this, men and women alike"

Vandana Shiva, a well known non-Western ecofeminist, believes that women are custodians of the feminine principle which represents an organic unity with nature from which men developed. Industrial cultures have become alienated from this and must recover it.

Women have a stronger interest in ending the domination of nature

There are important connections between the domination and oppression of women and the domination and exploitation of nature and therefore women have a stake in ending the domination of nature. It is believed that there is an important

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conceptual link between the symbolic construction of women and nature and the ways they are acted upon. A commonality of goals is assumed to exist between the women's movement and the environmental movement. As Mies and Shiva (1993) write, for example:

“wherever women acted against ecological destruction or/and the threat of atomic annihilation, they immediately became aware of the connection between patriarchal violence against women, other people and nature, and that in defying this patriarchy we are loyal to future generations and to life and this planet itself”.

Another example is provided by Collard, quoted in Seager (1993), who writes:

“The identity and destiny of women and nature are merged. Accordingly, feminist values and principles directed towards ending the oppression of women are inextricably linked to ecological values and principles directed towards ending the oppression of nature. It is ultimately the affirmation of our kinship with nature, of our common life with her, which will prove the source of our mutual well-being”.

Non-hierarchical, egalitarian systems are promoted

Life is an interconnected web, not a hierarchy according to ecofeminists. Human life is regarded to have no greater value than non-human life. This perspective is central to 'deep green' or radical ecological thought. Two examples are provided below.

e.g. King, quoted in Mies and Shiva (1993), wrote that

“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”

Radford Ruther (1996), in Gotlieb writes

“We need to think of human consciousness not as separating us

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as a higher species from the rest of nature but rather as a gift to enable us to learn how to harmonise our needs with the natural system around us, of which we are a dependent part. . . In ecofeminist culture an ethic mutual interdependency replaces the hierarchies of domination as the model of relationship between men and women, between human groups and between humans and other beings”

Popular conceptions of ecofeminism

Mies and Shiva (1993) identify two strands of ecofeminism; ‘the spiritual’ and ‘the political’.

The spiritual strand

The spiritual strand values those aspects of women’s social and natural experience which allow them to sense and value those aspects of their connections to the non-human world. Ecofeminist spirituality tends to celebrate the body and the earth (Gotlieb 1996). It has emerged from the desire to recover, to regenerate an ‘ancient wisdom’ as a means to liberate women and nature from patriarchal destruction (Mies and Shiva 1993). This strand has variants. To some it is a kind of religion. Radford Ruther (1996), for example, writes that basic concepts such as God, soul-body and salvation will be reconceived in ways that may bring us closer to the ethical values of love justice and care for the earth. To others it involves developing a greater appreciation of interconnectedness, community and immanence to transform our relations with non-human nature, generating more harmonious relationships, respect and intrinsic value for nature (Riley 1996). In more extreme spiritual ecofeminism, attempts are made to revive or recreate a goddess-based religion and reference is made to the sacredness of the earth, the earth as a Goddess and the insights of ‘old magic’. Starhawk, for example, notes that “we do not *believe* in the Goddess - we connect with her; through the moon, the stars, the ocean. . .” . Some proponents of ecofeminist spirituality urge women to direct their energies

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inwards, the find “the goddess within”, to nurture their inner strength (Seager 1993). Often spiritual ecofeminists claim legitimacy for their views as they ground them in the thinking of non-Western indigenous cultures such as Native American Indian cultures.

Although the spiritual strand prevails in Western writings, some non-Western writers also show how the concept of the earth as female and a living organism exists in other cultures. For example, Mies and Shiva (1993) write;

“For Third World women who fight for the conservation of their survival base . . . , the divorce of the spiritual from the material is incomprehensible to them, the term Mother Earth does not need to be qualified by inverted commas, because they regard the earth as a living being which guarantees their own and their fellow creatures’ survival”.

According to Mies and Shiva (1993) the critique of the ‘spiritual’ strand in ecofeminism is voiced mainly those approaching the subject from the left - they combine their critique of capitalism with a critique of patriarchy and “still cling to some materialist concept of history”, thus implying that they have little congruence with the view that there is a deeper aspect to the relation between women and nature. However, other authors explain how some of these ecofeminist writings are damaging to larger feminist and ecofeminist projects as they perpetuate negative ideas of women and nature (Buege 1994). It is considered by some to be escapist and signifying a withdrawal into some kind of dream world, divorced from reality and thus leaving power in the hands of men. Critics of ecofeminist spirituality argue that women should not be directing their energies inward at the expense of political action to improve their lot and improve the lot of their less fortunate sisters (Seager 1993). Seager (1993) for example, asserts that a heightened primal awareness may be desirable in many ways but it will not solve our environmental crises.

Interest in earth based spiritualities of other cultures has been criticised as simplified, nostalgic romanticisation. As Seager notes, the ecological record does not provide evidence of any

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culture living in non-exploitative harmony with nature. There has been insufficient critique to the idea of predicating a Western and white movement on contemporary interpretations of non-Western, indigenous traditions (Seager 1993).

The political strand

The political strand of ecofeminism takes a much more activist role, yet there is some debate about the extent to which women's environmental activism is stimulated by ecofeminist ideologies. Seguin et al (1998) review the literature and define environmental activists as people who intentionally engage in "the most difficult ecological behaviours". Such behaviours, considered to be representative of activists' behaviour include:

- a. participating in events organised by ecological groups
- b. circulating a petition demanding an improvement of government policies regarding the environment
- c. participating in protests against current environmental conditions
- d. helping to financially support an ecological group
- e. voting for a government proposing environmentally conscious policies
- f. writing letters to companies that manufacture harmful products

Two examples are noted here, one from the West and one from the developing world.

In the West, women's environmental activism is often associated with and stimulated by health concerns associated with environmental problems.

Terry Tempest Williams gives her story in Gottlieb's (1996) book.

"I can't prove that my mother. . . or my grandmothers, . . . along with my aunts developed breast cancer from nuclear fallout in Utah. But I can't prove they didn't. . . ."

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One night I dreamed women from all over the world . . . would reclaim the desert for the sake of their children, for the sake of the land

I crossed the line at Nevada Test Site and was arrested with nine other Utahns for trespassing on military lands. They are still conducting nuclear tests in the desert. Our was an act of civil disobedience. . . .

The officials thought it was a cruel joke to leave us stranded in the desert with no way to get home. What they didn't realise was that we were home, soul centred and strong, women who recognised the sweet smell of sage as fuel for our spirits” (Williams 1996)

In the developing world, Agarwal (1994) draws our attention to ways in which women because of their less powerful position, often protest in more subtle ways. Songs, for example, provide an important basis of a 'subculture of protest'. In order to significantly alter gender relations however, she regards there to be a need to be overt resistance and struggle, and not only by individual women but by women organised and acting as a group. One frequently cited example of women working together as a group for environmental ends is the Chipko movement in India. However the extent to which this can be regarded as an ecofeminist movement has been strongly critiqued. This is discussed below.

The forest of the 'middle Himalaya' provides essential products for the local population - fertiliser (mulch), grazing, fodder, fuel, medicinal herbs, fibres and foodstuffs. The alienating and insensitive encroachments of colonial forestry and the activities of the post-Independence state-managed forest department, which degraded the ecological base on which people depended in this already economically marginalised area, provoked significant resistance. As natural forests were felled to meet industrial needs, women had to walk longer distances to gather these essential products. As Hedge (1988) explained, "These were circumstances which drove poor women to launch a non-violent movement to save the trees on which their lives were so dependent. By the novel idea of

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hugging trees they saved the forests from the tree fellers”.

A number of authors' analysis of the Chipko movement stems from an ecofeminist perspective. Vandana Shiva, for example, argues that women and nature are intimately related and their domination and liberation are intimately linked - women's and ecological movements are primarily counter-trends to a patriarchal maldevelopment. She noted that indigenous forest management in India has traditionally been in the realm of women, who embody *prakriti*, the feminine principle, which seeks to nurture and maintain the harmony and diversity of forests as a life source. Commercial forestry, introduced by the colonists and perpetuated by the Indian state had drawn local men into this way of thinking, Shiva argues (Mawdsley 1998). Mawdsley, however, notes that men were genuinely committed to the Chipko movement. Initial action was instigated by a small industrial corporation (with strong Gandhian overtones) that manufactured agricultural implements and organised demonstrations against liquor sales, untouchability and against the forest contractor system. They had been refused a few trees by the forest department, which had provided hundreds of trees to a large sports company. There was significant diversity in terms of the circumstances of the various Chipko protests which Mawdsley (1998) argues many Chipko analysts fail to recognise.

Ecofeminist perspectives such as those heralded by Shiva, have been further critiqued on the grounds that they see women as a universal and biologically determined category and that they tend to romanticise about a more harmonious and gender-balanced past. Mawsley accepts that women disproportionately bear the costs of environmental degradation in this area, but this does not mean that women and nature have a 'special relationship'. Environmental concern was not lacking, but women fought to prevent the complete clearance of the forest as a *functional livelihood strategy* not to preserve the environment for its own sake. Mawdsley (1992) quotes one local woman as having said that “we could have sacrificed more forest if we were assured a road to the village, a school, a proper water supply and a primary health centre”. The Chipko

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protests did not yield benefits for women as their rights to forest products were removed in the name of environmental protection. Thus ecocentric/ecofeminist representations of Chipko played a part in the movement's failure to achieve the changes that were desired by many in the hills.

These two strands have often been presented as in competition with each other and mutually incompatible. However, "the supposed antagonism between active political resistance and spiritual passivity does not seem to hold. Indeed, individuals who have been inspired and motivated by their beliefs in Earth-based spirituality have often been some of the most active defenders of this planet" (quoted in Seager 1993).

What is the value of ecofeminism?

Ecofeminism "*offers some of the most important explanations of humanity's current social and ecological problems*" (Zimmerman 1994).

Ecofeminism has the potential to bring feminist insights to environmental ethics. Most accounts of environmental philosophy, including those of many deep ecologists have been inhabited by a heavily masculine presence (Plumwood 1993). Ecofeminism may also sharpen and enrich feminist analyses of social domination (Seager 1993).

Biehl (1991) (cited by Beuge 1994) believed that ecofeminism had the potential to:

"draw upon the best of social theory and meld it with radical concepts in ecology to produce a genuinely anti-hierarchical, enlightened and broadly oppositional movement, one which could oppose sexism and the many forces that are at work in destroying and trammelling human freedom"

Plumwood (1993) argues that ecofeminism has contributed a great deal both to activist struggle and to theorising the links

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between women's oppression and the domination of nature. It can provide a basis for a connected and a co-operative political practice for liberation movements (Plumwood 1993).

Implications of ecofeminism

Feminist writings on 'environment and development' have often portrayed women as victims of environmental degradation, stressing the negative consequences of degradation on women. The ecofeminist position has been termed the 'post-victimology stance' (Shiva 1989) believing that women will mobilise in defence of the environment. Ecofeminists believe that women's affinity with nature leads them to defend and protect it.

The ecofeminist stance has led to the generation of a considerable amount of policy-based international literature stressing the positive relations between women and the environment. It is assumed that what is good for the environment is good for women and advocates interventions that will support the environment for the benefit of women. For example ODA (1991) coined the term 'synergistic interventions' and the 1992 World Bank Development Report stressed the need for 'win-win' programmes (Jackson 1994). These have been strongly critiqued by Jackson (1994) who calls for gender analysis of individual situations. She argues that it may be damaging to assume that women always protect nature because it is in their interest to do so, as clearly women can be the agents of degradation - particularly due to the nature of their multiple and competing roles. She proposes an alternative 'feminist environmentalism' which analyses how the socially constructed nature of gender relations mediates environmental access, change and experience. Such an analytical approach would; see women in relation to men, disaggregate the category of women, understand gender roles as socially and historically constructed.

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