

Chapter Six

Feminism and Eco-feminism

Eco-feminism represents the union of the radical ecology movement, or what has been called 'deep ecology', and feminism. The word 'ecology' emerges from the biological science of natural environmental system. It examines how these natural communities function to sustain a healthy web of life and how they become disrupted, causing death to the plant and animal life. Human intervention is obviously one of the main causes of such disruption.¹³⁵ Thus, ecology emerged as a combined socio-economic and biological study in the late sixties to examine how human use of nature is causing pollution of soil, air and water and destruction of the natural system of plants and animals, threatening the base of life on which the human community itself depends. Deep ecology takes this study of social ecology as another step. It examines the symbolic, psychological and ethical patterns of destructive relations of human with nature and how to replace this with a life-affirming culture. Feminism also is a complex movement with many layers. It can be defined only as a movement within the liberal democratic societies for the full inclusion of women in political rights and economic access to employment. It can be defined more radical in a socialist and liberation tradition as a transformation of the patriarchal socio-economic system in which male domination of women is the

¹³⁵ Jim Cheney, "Eco-feminism and Deep Ecology", In *Environmental ethics*, Vo.9, Issue. (2), 1987, PP.115-145.

foundation of all socio-economic hierarchies. Feminism can be also studied in terms of culture and consciousness, the psychological and ethical connections of domination of women and male monopolization of resources and controlling power. This third level of feminist analysis connects closely with deep ecology.¹³⁶ Some would say that feminism is the primary expression of deep ecology yet, although many feminists may take a verbal connection between domination of women and domination of nature, the development of this connection in a broad historical, social, economic and cultural analysis is only just beginning.

Feminist environmentalism begins with noticing similarities and connections between forms and instances of human oppression, including the oppression of women, and the degradation of nature. A central position grounding eco-feminism is the belief that values, notions of reality, and social practices are related, and that forms of oppression and domination, however historically and culturally distinct, are interlocked and enmeshed. It follows that our strategies-both theoretical and practical for resisting oppressions must attend to those connections. Eco-feminism thus has been emerged as a very forceful approach in environmental ethics.

Eco-feminism is a social and political movement, which unities environmentalism and feminism with some current linking deep ecology and feminism. Eco-feminists argue that a relationship exists between the oppression of women and the

¹³⁶ Ariel Kay Salleh, Deeper than deep ecology: The eco-feminist connection, in *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 6 (4), 1984, PP.339-45.

degradation of nature and explore the intersectionality between sexism and the domination of nature, racism, specism and other characteristics of social inequality. Some current work emphasizes that the capitalist and patriarchal system is based on triple domination of the "southern people" (those people who live the Third World, the majority of which are south of the First world), women and nature.¹³⁷

Eco-feminist analysis

Eco-feminist or ecology feminism is a term coined in 1973 by Francoise d' Eaubonne.¹³⁸ It is a philosophy and movement born from the union of feminist and ecological thinking, and the belief that the social mentality that leads to the domination and oppression of women is directly connected to the social mentality that leads to the abuse of the environment. It combines eco-anarchism or bioregional democracy with a strong ideal of feminism. Its advocates often emphasize the importance of interrelationship between humans, non-human others (e.g., animals and insects), and the earth.¹³⁹ A central tenet in eco-feminism states that male ownership of land lead to a dominator culture (patriarchy), manifesting itself in food export, overgrazing, the tragedy of the commons, exploitation of the people, and an abusive land ethic, in which animals and land are valued only as economic resources. Other eco-feminists explain how the degradation of nature contributes to the degradation of women. For example, Thomas-Slayter and

¹³⁷ Karen J. Warren, Jim Cheney, "Ecological feminism and ecosystem ecology", *Hypatia*, Vol. 6 (1), 1991, PP.179-97.

¹³⁸ See d' eaubonne, *Francoise. Le Feminisme ou la Mort*. Paris: Pierre Horay, 1974.

¹³⁹ Carol J. Adams, "Ecofeminism and the eating of animals," *Hypatia*, 1991. 6, PP. 125-145.

Rocheleau give detail how in Kenya, the capitalist driven export economy, has caused most of the agriculturally productive land to be used for monoculture cash crops. This leads to intensification of pesticide use, resource depletion and marginalization of the subsistence farmers, especially women, to the hillsides and the less productive land, where their deforestation and cultivation led to soil erosion, furthering the environmental degradation that hurts their own productivity (Thomas-Slayter, B. and D. Rocheleau (1995) *Gender, Environment and Development in Kenya: A grass roots perspective*).

Vandana Shiva makes it clear that one of the missions of eco-feminism is to redefine how societies look at productivity and activity of both women and nature that have mistakenly been deemed passive, allowing for them both to be ill-used. For example, she draws a picture of a stream in a forest.¹⁴⁰ According to her, in our society it is perceived as unproductive if it is simply there, fulfilling the needs for water of women's families and communities, until engineers come along and think with it perhaps damming it and using it for generating hydropower. The same is true of a forest unless it is planted with a monoculture plantation of a commercial species.¹⁴¹ A forest may very well be productive, protecting ground water, creating oxygen, allowing villagers to harvest fruits, fuel and craft materials, and creating a habitat for animals that are also a valuable resource. However, for many, if it isn't for export

¹⁴⁰ See Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, London: Zed Books, 1988.

¹⁴¹ Deborah Slicer, "Your daughter or your dog? A feminist assessment of animal research issues", *Hypatia*, 6(1), 1991, pp.108-24.

or contribution to GDP without a dollar value attached, it cannot be seen as a productive resource.

Some eco-feminist point to the linguistic links between oppression of women and land such as the terms, "rape the land", "tame nature", and etcetera as also express nature as feminine (using the pronoun "she" and the term "mother nature") and women as "wild" and "untamed" (like nature). Eco-feminists also criticize Western lifestyle choices such as consuming food inherently requires ecological destruction.¹⁴²

Feminist and Social ecologist Jant Biehl has criticized eco-feminism as idealist, focusing too much on the idea of a mystical connection with nature and not enough on the actual condition of women. However, this line of criticism may not apply to many eco-feminists who reject mysticism and essentialist ideas about the connection between women and nature. This anti-essentialist eco-feminism has become more prominent since the early 1990s. It has an epistemological analysis of the Enlightenment, places the spirituality in immanent world and then practices modern activism. The materialist eco-feminism discusses economic and political issues and can use metaphorically the link of Great mother earth of Gaia (while the idealistic tendency uses it literally).

¹⁴² Catherine Roach, "Loving Your Mother: On the Woman-nature relation", *Hypatia*, Vol. 6(1), 1991, PP. 46-59.

Many feminists have argued that the goal of “women’s movement” and “the ecology (environmental) movement” are mutually reinforcing. Ultimately they involve the development of worldviews and practices that are not based on male-biased models of domination.¹⁴³ As Rosemary Ruether wrote in her book, *New Women/New Earth*:¹⁴⁴

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 domination. They must
Unite the demands of the women’s movement with those of the
Ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic
Socio-economic relations and the underlying values of this (modern
Industrial) society (204)

Since the early 1974, many feminists, especially ecological feminists (“eco-feminists”), have defended Reuther’s basic point: the environment is a feminist issue.

Eco-feminism is all about to answer the question of what makes the environment (ecology) a feminist issue? What are some of the alleged connect between the domination of women and the domination of nature? How and why is recognition of

¹⁴³ Marti Kheel, “The liberation of nature: A circular affair”, In *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 7 (2) .1985, PP.135-49.

¹⁴⁴ See Rose Mary Ruether, *New Woman/New Earth: Sexist ideologies and Human Liberation*, Seabury Press, 1975.

these connections important to feminism, environmentalism and environmental philosophy?¹⁴⁵

Eco-feminism has different kinds of views. "Ecological feminism is the name given to a variety of positions that have roots in different feminist practices and philosophies. These different perspectives reflect not only different feminist perspectives (e.g., traditional, Marxist, radical, socialist, black and Third World). They also reflect different understandings of the nature and solution to pressing environmental problems. So, it is an open question how many, which, and on what grounds any of the various positions in environmental philosophy that acknowledge feminist concerns or claim to be feminist are properly identified as eco-feminist positions. What one takes to be a genuine eco-feminist position will depend largely on how one conceptualizes both feminism and eco-feminism."¹⁴⁶

For instance, if by "feminism" one means "liberal feminism", it builds on a Western liberal political and philosophical framework that idealizes a society in which autonomous individuals are provided maximal freedom to pursue their own interests. There are two main ecological indications of liberal feminism: the first draws the line of normal consider ability at humans, separating humans from nonhumans and basing any claims to moral consideration of nonhumans either on the alleged rights or interests of humans, or on the consequences of such

¹⁴⁵ Ynestra King, "Feminism and the Revolt of Nature," In *Heresies #13 Feminism and Ecology*, vol.4 (1), 1981, PP.12-16.

¹⁴⁶ Patricia Jagentowicz Mills, "Feminism and ecology: on the domination of nature," *Hypatia*, 6 (1), 1991, PP.162-78.

consideration for human well-being .The second extends the line of moral considerably to qualified non-humans on the grounds that they are deserving of moral consideration in their own right. They, too, are rational, sentient, interest-carriers, right-holders. Whether the liberal feminist's ecological implication acceptable from an eco-feminist perspective or not actually depends on what one means by "eco-feminism". Many eco-feminists have argued that in so far as liberal feminism keeps intact oppressive and patriarchal ways of conceptualizing nature, including problematic human-nature dichotomies, it will be inadequate from an eco-feminist perspective.

If another construal of feminism is taken i.e. traditional Marxist feminism, it views the oppression of women as a kind of class oppression, a direct result of the institution of class, society and under capitalism, private property. Since praxis (i.e., conscious physical labour of human directed at transforming the material world to meet human needs) is the distinguishing characteristic of humans, traditional Marxist feminism, following traditional Marxism, would seem to suggest that the primary value of nature is its instrumental value in the production of economic goods to meet human needs .

Whether traditional Marxism fertile soil for eco-feminism or not, again it depends on what one means by eco-feminism. If eco-feminism is a position that recognizes that nature has value in addition to its use value to humans, or if eco-feminism asserts that more than gender-sensitive class analysis are needed to explain the

interwoven dominations of women and nature, then traditional Marxist feminism will be inadequate from an eco-feminist perspective.

Now we can consider the radical feminism. A radical feminist construal of feminism departs from both liberal feminism and traditional Marxist feminism by rooting women's operation in reproductive biology and sex-gender systems. According to radical feminists, patriarchy (i.e., the systematic operation of women by men) subordinates women in sex-specific ways by defining women as beings whose primary functions are either to bear and raise children or to satisfy male sexual desires. The liberation of women requires the dismantling of patriarchy, particularly male control of women's bodies.¹⁴⁷

Now the question arises: what is radical feminism eco-feminist? While radical feminist historically had the most to say about eco-feminism, sometimes claiming that "women are closer to nature than men", some eco-feminists have worried about the extent to which radical feminism both mystifies women's experience by locating women closer to nature than men, and offers a historically essentialist accounts of "women's experiences". Furthermore, some eco-feminists worry that any view that makes any group of humans closer to nature than any other is conceptually flawed and methodologically suspect: it maintains the sort of value dualistic and hierarchical thinking that is critiqued by eco-feminism. Hence the extent to which

¹⁴⁷Val Plumwood, "Ecofeminism: An overview and discussion of positions and arguments," *In Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 64, 1986. PP. 120-37.

radical feminism is an adequate theoretical basis for eco-feminism will depend partly on what one takes to be the defining characteristic of eco-feminism. Despite important differences among eco-feminists and the feminisms from which they gain their inspiration, there is something all eco-feminists agree about; such agreement provides a minimal condition account of eco-feminism: there are important connections between the domination of women and the domination of nature, an understanding of which is crucial to feminism, environmentalism, and environmental philosophy.¹⁴⁸ A main project of eco-feminism is to make visible these “women-nature connections” and, where harmful to women and nature, to dismantle them.

Woman-nature connections

There are at least eight sorts of connections that eco feminists have identified. These alleged connections provide sometimes competing, sometimes mutually complementary or supportive analysis of the nature of the twin dominations women and nature. A causal, albeit philosophically uncritical, perusal of these eight alleged connections helps to identify the range and variety of eco-feminist positions on women-nature connections.¹⁴⁹

1. The connection between women and nature is historical. When historical data are used to generate theories concerning the sources of the dominations of

¹⁴⁸ Catherine Roach, “*Loving your mother: on the woman-nature relation*,” *Hypatia*, Vol. 6 (1), 1991, PP.46-59.

¹⁴⁹ See Ariel Kay Salleh, “*Living With Nature: Reciprocity or Control?*” In R. and J. Engel, *Ethics of Environmental and Development*, University of Arizona Press, 1990.

women and nature, it is also causal. So pervasive is the historical-causal theme in eco-feminist writing that Ariel Salleh practically defines eco-feminism in terms of it: 'Eco-feminism is a recent development in feminist thought which argues that the current global environmental crisis is a predictable outcome of patriarchal culture'.

Some eco-feminists (e.g., Spretnak 1990, Eisler 1988, 1990) trace these connections to *prototypical patterns of domination* begun with the invasion of Indo-European societies by nomadic tribes from Eurasia about 4500 B.C. Riane Eisler describes the time before this invasion as a "matrifocal, matrilineal, peaceful agrarian era". Others trace historical connection to patriarchal dualisms and conceptions of rationality in classical Greek philosophy and the rationalist tradition.¹⁵⁰

Conceptual connections

Many authors have argued that ultimately historical and causal links between the domination of women and nature are located in conceptual structures of domination that construct women and nature in male-biased ways. Basically such conceptual links have been offered.

One account locates a conceptual basis of the twin dominations of women and nature in value dualisms, i.e., in disjunctive pairs in which the disjuncts are seen as oppositional (rather than as complementary) and as exclusive (rather than as

¹⁵⁰Stephanie Lahar, "Ecofeminist theory and grassroots politics," *Hypatia*, Vol.6 (1), 1991, PP.28-45.

inclusive), and value hierarchies, i.e., perceptions of diversity organized by a spatial Up-Down metaphor, which attributes higher value (status, prestige) to that which is higher ("Up"). Frequently cited examples of these hierarchically organized value dualisms include reason/emotion, mind/body, culture/nature, human/nature, and man/woman dichotomies. These theorists argue that whatever is historically associated with emotion, body, nature, and women is regarded as inferior to that which is (historically) associated with reason, mind, culture, human (i.e., male) and men.¹⁵¹

A second account expands on the first by housing the problematic value dualisms and value hierarchies in larger, oppressive conceptual frameworks—ones that are common to all social "isms of domination" (e.g., sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism as well as "naturism", i.e., the unjustified domination of nonhuman nature). A conceptual framework is a socially constructed set of basic beliefs, values, attitudes and assumptions that shapes and reflects how one views oneself and others. It is oppressive when it explains, justifies, and maintains relationships of domination subordination. An oppressive conceptual framework is patriarchal when it explains, justifies, and maintains the subordination of women by men.

Oppressive and patriarchal conceptual frameworks are characterized not only by value dualisms and hierarchies but also by "power-cover" conceptions of power and

¹⁵¹Ariel Kay Salleh, "Deeper than deep ecology: The eco-feminist connection," In *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 6 (4), 1984, pp. 339-45.

relationships of domination and logic of domination, i.e., a structure of argumentation that provides the moral premise that superiority justifies subordinations. On this view, it is oppressive and patriarchal conceptual frameworks, and the behaviours that they give rise to, that sanction, maintain, and perpetuate the twin dominations of women and nature.¹⁵²

A third account locates a conceptual basis in sex-gender differences, particularly in differentiated personality formation or consciousness. The claim is that female bodily experiences (e.g., of reproduction and child bearing), not female biology situate women differently with respect to nature than men. This sex gender difference is allegedly revealed in a different consciousness in women than men toward nature; it is rooted conceptually in “paradigm” that are uncritically oriented to the dominant western masculine forms experiencing the world: The analytic, non-related, delightfully called ‘objective’ or ‘scientific’ approaches-just those value dualisms that are embedded in different conceptualization structures and strategies (“different ways of knowing”), coping strategies and ways of relating to nature for women and men. A goal of eco-feminism then, is to develop gender-sensitive language, theory, and practices that do not further the exploitative experiences and habits of dissociated, male gender identified culture toward women and nature.¹⁵³

¹⁵²Karen J Warren, “The power and the promise of ecological feminism”, In *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 12 (2), 1990, PP.125-46.

¹⁵³Karen J. Warren, “Toward a feminist peace politics”, *Journal of Peace and Justice Studies*, vol. 3(1) 1991b, PP.87-102.

One project of eco-feminism is to expose and dismantle the conceptual structures of domination which have kept various "isms of domination", particularly the dominations of women and nature, in place. If eco-feminism who alleges various conceptual woman -nature connections are correct, this will involve reconceiving those mainstay philosophical notions which rely on them (e.g., notions of reason and rationality, knowledge, objectivity, ethics and the knowing, moral self).

Empirical and experimental connections

Many eco-feminists have focused on uncovering empirical evidence linking women (and children, people of colour, the underclass) with environmental destruction. Some point to various health and risk factors borne disproportionately by women children, racial minorities and the poor caused by the presence of low-level radiation, pesticides, toxins, and other pollutants. Others provide data to show that First World development policies result in policies and practices regarding food, forest, and water, which directly contribute to the inability of women to provide adequately for themselves and their families. Feminist animal rights scholars argue that factory farming, animal experimentation, hunting, and meat eating are tied to patriarchal concepts and practices. Some connect rape and pornography with male-gender identified abuse of both women and nature. Appeal to such empirical data is intended to document the very real, felt, lived "experimental" connections between

the dominations of women and nature and to motivate the need for joining together feminist critical analysis and environmental concerns.¹⁵⁴

Sometimes, however, the empirical and experimental connections between women and nature are intended to reveal important cultural and spiritual ties to the earth honoured and celebrated by women and indigenous people. This suggests that some women-nature connections are features of important symbol systems.

Symbolic connections

Some eco-feminists have explored the symbolic association and devaluation of women and nature that appears in religion, theology, art, and literature. Documenting such connections and making them integral to the project of eco-feminism is often heralded as eco-feminism's most promising contribution to the creation of liberating, life-affirming and post patriarchal world wives and earth-based spiritualities or theologies. Eco-feminism is then presented as offering alternative spiritual symbols, spiritualities or theologies, and even utopian societies. Appreciating such symbolic woman-nature connections involves understanding "the politics of women's spirituality".

Some theorists focus on language, particularly the symbolic connections between sexist and naturist language, i.e., language that interiorizes women and nonhuman nature by naturalizing women and feminizing nature. For example, there are

¹⁵⁴Karen J. Warren, "The power and the promise of ecological feminism", In *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 12 (2), 1990, pp.125-46.

concerns about whether sex-gendered language used to describe "Mother Nature" or simply a rationale for the continued subordination of women. There are concerns about connections between the language used to describe women, nature, and nuclear weaponry. Women are often describing in animal terms (e.g., as cows, foxes, chicks, serpents, bitches, beavers, old bats, pussycats, cats, bird-brains, hare-brains). Nature is often described in female and sexual terms: nature is raped, mastered, conquered, controlled, and mined. Her "secrets" are "penetrated" and her "womb" is put into the services of the "man of science", "Virgim timber" is felled, cut down. "Fertile soil" is tilled and land that lies "fallow" is "barren", useless. The claim is that language that so feminizes nature and naturalizes women describes, reflects, and perpetuates the domination and inferiorization of both by failing to see the extent to which the twin dominations of women and nature (including animals) are, in fact, culturally analogous.¹⁵⁵

Epistemological connections

The various alleged historical, causal conceptual, empirical, and symbolic woman-nature connections have also motivated the need for new, eco-feminist epistemologies. Typically these emerging epistemologies build on scholarship currently under way in feminist philosophy, which challenges mainstream views of reason, rationality, knowledge, and the nature of the knower as Val Plumwood suggests that if one mistakenly construes environmental philosophy as only or

¹⁵⁵ See M. Crawford, *Talking Difference: On Gender and Language*, London: Sage, 1995.

primarily concerned with ethics, one will neglect "a key aspect of the overall problem, which is concerned with the definition of the human self as separate from nature, the connection between this and the instrumental view of nature, and broader political aspects of the critique of instrumentalism". For Plumwood, eco-feminist epistemologies must critique rationalism in the Western philosophical tradition and develop views of the ethical, knowing self that do not maintain perpetuate harmful value dualisms and hierarchies, particularly human-nature ones.

Political connections

Francoise d' Eaubonne introduced the term "eco-feminism" in 1974 to bring attention to women's potential for ecological revolution. Eco-feminism has always been a grassroots of political movement motivated by pressing pragmatic concerns. These range from issues of women's and environmental health, to science, development and technology, the treatment of animals, and peace, antinuclear, antimilitarist activism. The varieties of eco-feminist perspectives on the environment are properly seen as an attempt to take seriously such grassroots activism and political concerns by developing analyses of domination that explain, clarify, and guide that praxis.

Ethical connections

To date, most of the philosophical literature on women-nature connections has appeared in the area of environmental philosophy known as “environmental ethics”. The claims are that the interconnections among the conceptualizations and treatment of women, animals, and nature require a feminist ethical analysis and response. Minimally, the goal of eco-feminist environmental ethics is to develop theories and practices concerning humans and the natural environment that are not male-biased and provide a guide to action in the pre-feminist present. This may involve developing an eco-feminist ethic of care and appropriate reciprocity, eco-feminist kinship ethics; eco-feminist animal rights positions, an eco-feminist social ecology or eco-feminist bioregionalism. As Plumwood¹⁵⁶ and Warren claim in their essays that the mainstream environmental ethics is inadequate to the extent that it is problematically anthropocentric or hopelessly andocentric.

Theoretical connections

The varieties of alleged women- nature connections discussed above have generated different, sometimes competing, theoretical positions in all areas of feminist and environmental philosophy. In many respects, contemporary environmental ethics reflects the range of positions in contemporary philosophical ethics. The latter includes traditional consequentialist (e.g., ethical egoist, utilitarian) and non-

¹⁵⁶ Val Plumwood, “*Nature, self, and gender: feminism, environmental philosophy and the critique of rationalism*” In *Hypatia*, Vol. 6 (1), 1991, PP. 3-37.

consequentialist or deontological (e.g., Kantian, rights-based, virtue-based) positions, as well as challenges to them by non-traditional (e.g., some feminist, existentialist, Marxist, Afrocentric, non-Western) approaches. Such is also the case in environmental ethics. There are consequentiality (e.g., ethical egoist, eco-utilitarian, and utilitarian-based animal liberation ethics) and non-consequentialist (e.g., rights-based animal liberation, stewardship ethics) approaches that extend traditional ethical considerations to include animals and the nonhuman environment. There also are nontraditional approaches (e.g., holistic Leopoldian land ethics, social ecology, deep ecology, ecological feminism) that raise considerations underplayed or omitted entirely from mainstream philosophical ethics. Feminists who address environmental issues can be found advocating positions within this broad philosophical range. So, the question rises that where can ecological feminists be fit?

Where one links ecological feminists fit in will depend largely on what one means by "ecological feminism". If ecological feminism is an umbrella term for any feminism that raises feminist concerns about the environment, then presumably eco-feminists can be found along the continuum of feminist-inspired and advocated environmental ethics. If, however, the term "ecological feminism " is used as the name for a variety of positions expressly committed to exploring woman-nature connections and to developing feminist and environmental philosophies based on

these insights, then ecological feminism is best viewed as one of several nontraditional approaches to environmental ethics and philosophy.