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Ram C. Majhi

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ECOFEMINISM: DEBATES AND DIMENSIONS

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I

While there is no central definition of ecofeminism, it is generally regarded as a feminist approach to ecological ethics. Ecofeminists see the oppression of women and the domination of nature as interconnected. As a movement, ecofeminist use a framework that confronts issues of gender, race, class, and nature. Women must see that there can be no solution to ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. Ecofeminism can be defined and described in many ways. The term „ecofeminism“ was coined in the seventies by the French author Françoise d’Eaubonne. Françoise D’Eaubonne writes, “The reasoning is simple. Practically every one knows that the two most immediate threats of death today are over population and the destruction of natural resources; fewer are aware of the entire responsibility of male system - the system as male/patriarchy - in creating these two dangerous situations; but very few have yet discovered that each one of the two threats is the logical outcome of the one of the two parallel discoveries which gave power to men fifty centuries ago: reproduction and their capacity of sowing the Earth as they do women.”

There are ecofeminists who assert that patriarchy equates women and nature, for which feminist analysis is required to understand environmental problems and feminist analysis of women’s subordination must include ecological/environmental analysis. There is a special relationship between women and nature based on the social construction of gender and history, and contemporary practice of social institutions. Therefore, it is believed that environmental problems are more quickly resolved by women and taking women’s work more seriously. It is also said that women are biologically closer to nature therefore women have greater access to and sympathy with nature and will benefit themselves and the environment by identifying with nature. Feminists are interested in constructing resources because a feminist spirituality needs to draw upon nature-based religions such as paganism, witchcraft and goddess worship. Thus, an ecofeminist perspective is structurally pluralistic, inclusivist and contextualist. Thus, ecofeminism does also have a spiritual side, encompassing many expressions of feminist concern with religion based on nature. Spiritual aspect of ecofeminism may be described,

as ...the resacralization of Nature, of the divine feminine inherent in all living beings.

It is seen as part of a process of reconnection, a reestablishment of ways of knowing and being in the world that have been lost in the history of patriarchal domination. The Goddess, in myriad forms, represents an ultimate vision of connectedness...¹

The idea that women are because of their womanhood, spiritually close to nature is central to the ecofeminists’ thought, and is manifested in many forms of religion. This idea was developed both in the West and the east in the form of worshipping the inner Goddess that resides in women. There are many examples from the West, closely connected to the New Age movement which can be placed under the umbrella of neo-paganism and other forms of proximity.

II

While many feminists agree that ecology is a feminist issue, they differ over the nature and desirability of ecofeminism. Hence, just as there are a variety of feminism, so there are a variety of ecofeminism too. It is widely recognized that Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962, launched the environmental movement that took form by *Earth Day* in 1970. Ecofeminism emerged from the intersections of feminist research and the various movements for social justice and environmental health, explorations that uncovered the linked oppressions of gender, ecology, race, species, and nation through the texts like, Susan Griffin’s *Woman and Nature* in 1978 and Carolyn Merchant’s

¹ Besthorn, F.H. & McMillen D.P. „the oppression of women and nature: Ecofeminism as a framework for a social justice oriented social work“ in *Families in Society: the Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, 83:3, 2002, p. 221-232.

The Death of Nature in 1980.

In the 1980s, feminist movement for human and environmental health took action and created theory that later influenced ecofeminist thought. Indigenous women called attention to the colonialism and environmental racism that legitimates hazardous waste, military bomb tests, coal mining, nuclear storage, hydropower construction, and contamination on reservation lands.

If we go through the history and later developments of ecofeminism, we can find that women have an essential and distinctive connection to nature that men do not have. Women should recognize and celebrate these unique qualities, and we need a culture based on them. This is called essentialist perspective of ecofeminism for whom the earth is essentially or inherently feminine. There are others according to whom the link between women and nature is a social construction. Essentialism for them is not true. Women do not have an essential relationship with nature that men do not. Any positive affirmation of women's essential link to nature ultimately reinforces transcendental dualism that is at the root of oppression. Culture has inculcated the "feminine" qualities in women and the "masculine" qualities in men. In many cases, the socially constructed feminine qualities are superior to masculinism. Let us focus on the common features of ecofeminism as follows.

1. Nondualistic & Nonhierarchical: The world is fundamentally an interrelated web of relationships as supported by deep ecologists. The world is fundamentally egalitarian rather than hierarchical. Dualities and hierarchies are social constructions of patriarchy, not essential qualities of the world.

2. Holistic Understanding: We are emotional and bodily beings as much as we are rational beings. Emotions are essential to being fully human and they offer us a critical window to the world. The body and the senses are essential for being fully human and they are necessary for realizing our connection with the world. A rationalist approach that cuts itself off from emotions and the body will be distorted.

3. Contextual Knowledge: We are always embedded in specific contexts: social relationships, historical moments, specific cultures, and local environments. The attempt to "transcend" those contexts by achieving an objective, universal view is impossible.

4. Pluralism: There is no single true perspective. That idea and ideal has been historically associated with imperialism and colonialism. We need to recognize the validity of various views and affirm a multiplicity of voices. What we should seek is an open dialogue among these views and voices.

5. Communitarianism: People are essentially not individuals but selves in and of a community, intrinsically related to other people and the mother Earth. We are distinct individuals, but in the sense of having a unique set of relationships, not in being autonomous and independent of others. The ideal is to realize our individuality - as an integral part of the communities we live in.

6. Ethics of Care: Ethics begins with our essential interrelatedness, not autonomy as individuals. Our interrelatedness locates us in a situation of responsibility to others, naturally caring for them. Ethics is developed not by rationally determining justice but by deepening our awareness of our interrelatedness and extending our natural caring.

III

Ecofeminists, from the spiritual perspective do not believe in the Goddess. For them, we connect with her; through the moon, the stars, and the ocean. This shows that some sides of ecofeminism are deeply spiritual, concerned about the sacredness in nature and the holism of humanity and everything living. Especially women's connection to nature is seen as positive and transformational, a source of strength and celebration. If humanity can reaffirm its bond to nature, the hierarchies of difference and degradation can be broken. Feminist position in India possesses a dissimilar indulgence. Indian society has always been highly hierarchical. The feminist movement in India was initiated by man. It was only towards the end of the century that women joined the fray. The list of who champion the cause of women is long like, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Keshav Chandra Sen, Savitri Phule, and Ranade. Their efforts to abolish the practice of *Sati*, the custom of child marriage, custom of distinguishing widows, and the ban on remarriage of the upper caste Hindu widows. Within the early *Vedic* tradition there is evidence that women enjoyed a great deal of equality with men. Women could receive an education in religious doctrine and practice, and could even devote themselves to study and teaching. The myth found in the *Rig Veda* contains a number of important female deities including Ushas and Vak. *Devi* is also a legitimate way of talking about *Saguna Brahman*. The *Rig Veda* provides ample evidence to prove the concept of equality of

woman with men as regards access and capacity to acquire the highest knowledge, even the absolute knowledge.

Ancient texts are rich sources of information and insight on the historical roots of Indian environmentalism. The resources from which the Hindu traditions can draw in approaching environmental problems are several and diverse: there are texts, of course, but also temples and teachers. According to Indian cosmology, the cosmos consists of many worlds called *lokas* and also beings (*bhūtas*) that inhabit such worlds. Women in our culture are an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and in practice. At, one level nature is symbolized as the embodiment of the feminine principle, and at another, she is nurtured by the feminine to produce life and provide sustenance. Nature as *Prakṛti* is inherently active, a powerful productive force in the dialectic of creation, renewal and sustenance of all life. Without *Śakti*, *Śiva*, the symbol for the force of creation and destruction, is as powerless as a dead body. In India eco-feminist thought is generally more concerned with the Hindu tradition, selecting aspects of this tradition as a rationale. Vandana Shiva invokes this kind of notion about women, spirituality and nature as she asserts that „women in India are an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and in practice.

Nature for Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, is inclusive of human beings, is constituted by *padārtha*. The lists of *padārthas* from Vaiśeṣika texts include Substance, Quality, Motion, Universal, Individuator, and Inherence. *Prakṛti* is an equivalent for nature associated with Sāṃkhya and Sāṃkhya-Yoga schools of thought. Both are dualistic systems of thought. According to Sāṃkhya philosophy, *prakṛti* is a part of a dyad, a creation component that functions both for the enjoyment and salvation of *puruṣa*, the conscious principle. But the term *prakṛti* is broader than what we generally understand the term nature. The entire materiality of the cosmos is said to have evolved from a primordial cause often referred to as *mūla-prakṛti*.⁵ The idea that nature as *prakṛti* is the primordial origin brings into focus relatedness between all created entities based on common origin. It is possible to imagine how *prakṛti* comes to be represented as the mother Goddess in later traditions. Goddess *Durgā* is often called *jagatmāta*, the mother of the worlds or *ādiśakti*, the primordial energy.

Prakṛti is „that which precedes“, „first“ that which is in its own form“; therefore, it is used in contexts like natural, archetype, one’s essential character, and normal. *Prakṛti* in plural refers to “components, constituents, and the parts” of a whole such as a human being or the political state. *Prakṛti* also refers to “material cause”, “producer of effects”, and “innate power of transformation and manifestation”; here, *prakṛti* gets associated with the field of production and in later periods is associated with women and Goddesses. Nature as *Prakṛti* is inherently active, a powerful and productive force in the dialectic of creation, renewal and sustenance of all life. Without *Śakti and Śiva*, it is as powerless as a dead body.

The *g Veda* describes *Prṥthivi* as a divinity as well as the one of the *Mahābhuta*. She is the mother and the upholder of all. (*Rig Veda*, Book-10, 18:10 and 1,155:2). *Prṥthivi* also considered and identified with the Goddess *Aditi*; a mother and protector of the holy cosmic law; she is a divine *She*, full of life-sustaining harvest. *ṣi Atharva* in *Prṥthivi-sukta* of *Atharva Veda* depicts this relationship between earth and humans. The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* also considers earth as the mother. She is worshipped as *Adi Śakti*, the primordial power. All forms of nature and life in nature are the forms, the children, of the Mother Nature who is nature itself born of the creative play of her thought. The *Atharva Veda* (1.2:1) describes earth as mother and human beings as the offspring. *Prakṛti* is also called *lalithā*, the Player because *lilā* or play, as a free spontaneous activity, is her nature. The nature of Nature is *Prakṛti* and it is of activity and diversity. Nature symbols from every realm of surroundings are in a sense signed with the image of Nature. *Prakṛti* lives in stone or tree, pool, fruit or animal, and is identified with them.

Kalikā Purāṇa says: Rivers and mountains have a dual nature. A river is but a form of water, yet it has a distinct body. Mountains appear a motionless mass, yet their true form is not such. We cannot know, when looking at a lifeless shell, that it contains a living being. Similarly, within the apparently inanimate rivers and mountains there dwells a hidden consciousness. Rivers and mountains take the forms they wish. As an embodiment and manifestation of the feminine principle

⁵*Sāṃkhya Kārika*, Verse -3, trans. Sinha, 1979, 2nd edition, Reprint, p. 4. Here, „matter“ does not refer to the gross matter alone but encompasses all created „stuff“ of the universe.

Prakṛti is characterised by creativity, activity, productivity, diversity in form and aspect, connectedness and inter-relationship of all beings, includes man, continuity between the human and natural and sanctity of life in nature.

What is noteworthy to mention here that the feminine principle is based on inclusiveness and its recovery in men, women, and nature, is the recovery of „creative forms of being and perceiving“. Vandana Shiva proposes that the feminine principle is killed in Western women by the association of passivity as a category with the feminine. In men, this principle is squashed by the notion that „activity“ is destruction rather than creation, and „power“ is domination rather than empowerment. The land, the forests, the rivers, the oceans, the atmosphere have all been colonised, eroded and polluted. Capital now has to look for new colonies to invade and exploit for its further accumulation. These new colonies are, in Shiva’s view, the interior spaces of the bodies of women, plants and animals.⁶

V

If we go through the status of feminism in the 21st century, we can find that although the feminist movement is already over 100 years old, there are still a lot to be done. The status of women is still very low in some countries in the world. Even in the West, gender equality is still only apparent. There are controversies between feminists today. An inquiry is posed to the feminists themselves; what is the place of feminism in the world today? Does feminism have a place in our country? Do women in our country call themselves feminists? Is feminism “a bad word” in our country? Can feminism become a truly global ideology? How should feminists respond to globalization? Are feminist ideas universally applicable? There are some of the reservations feminists need to answer although some are responded in the contemporary discussion on feminists’ position in India. It is no wonder that feminist scholars and activists eager to receive the acceptance and respect accorded to rigorous scholarship and committed to sparking consciousness-change that result in real actions.

Bell Hooks in *Ain’t I a Woman* in 1981 says that feminist writings have mainly reflected the needs and interests of white middle-class women. Feminists need to emphasize the ambiguous and variable nature of „womanhood“ and „femininity“. Feminists need to conceive of „woman“ or „the feminine“ to engage in an inherently sexist approach to understanding gender. Gender is a performance, and is thus indefinitely variable. There must be a link in gender norms to language. Because language both creates and reinforces gender norms. We need to believe that a culture against nature is a culture against women. We know we must get out from under the feet of men as they go about their projects of violence. In pursuing these projects men deny and dominate women and nature. It is time to reconstitute our culture in the name of that nature, and of peace and freedom, and it is women who can show the way. We have to be the voice of the invisible, of nature who cannot speak for herself in the political arenas of our society, of the children yet to be born and of the women who are forcibly silenced in our mental institutions and our prisons.

In 1997, Noel Sturgeon advocated that retaining the word “„ecofeminism“ as a term indicates a double political intervention, of environmentalism into feminism and feminism into environmentalism” but a decade later, Sturgeon in 2009 had also renamed her approach as “global feminist environmental justice.” Similarly, working as an ecofeminist theorist throughout the 1990s, Mortimer-Sandilands’s most recent work advances her earlier work on ecofeminism, *Democracy, and Sexuality* through the term Queer Ecologies. Similarly, the ecofeminist corrective distinction between essentialism and an acknowledgment of embodied, material connections with the environment, first articulated in Slicer’s *Toward an Ecofeminist Standpoint Theory* in 1998. They noted that predominant feminist theories, from Simone de Beauvoir to Gayle Rubin and Monique Wittig, have pursued a „flight from nature,“ relentlessly disentangling „woman“ from the supposed ground of essentialism, reductionism. The problem with these approaches is that the more feminist theories distance themselves from “nature,“ the more that very nature is implicitly or explicitly reconfirmed as treacherous and of misogyny.

The debate starts with questions like, is this silence considered as a form of anti-feminism. Is this silence a form of anti-feminism that simultaneously appropriates and erases feminist scholarship?

⁶ Shiva, V., *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, World Books, 1988.

Is it intellectual dishonesty? Is it simple ignorance of the work that has been done? Or is it a clear example of dissemination? While the critical tensions in these questions deserve to be addressed, for the moment a few certainties are clear.

In 2011, there is no lack of eco-justice issues to interrogate, theorize, organize around, and transform using the analyses of an ecological feminism: Global gender justice; climate justice; sustainable agriculture; healthy and affordable housing; universal and reliable health care, particularly maternal and infant health care; safe, reliable, and free or low-cost reproductive technologies; food security; sexual self-determination; energy justice; interspecies justice; ecological, diverse, and inclusive educational curricula; religious freedom from fundamentalisms; indigenous rights; the production and disposal of hazardous wastes; and more. An intersectional ecological-feminist approach frames these issues in such a way that people can recognize common cause across the boundaries of race, class, gender, sexuality, species, age, ability, nation - and affords a basis for engaged theory, education, and activism. What shall we name this approach, so that future generations of feminists can find its history, its conceptual tools and activist strategies, its critique of economic imperialism, cultural and ecological colonialism, and gender and species oppression? If there is to be a future for Ecofeminism, it will need to be more cognizant of its rich and prescient history.

VI

Various feminist scholars, such as Cecile Jackson, Janet Biehl, Meera Nanda and Bina Agarwal have pointed out, the ecofeminist perspective is ethnocentric, essentialist, blind to class, ethnicity and other differentiating cleavages, ahistorical and neglects the material sphere. As an academic discourse ecofeminism has been conceptualised as part of the field of Environmental Ethics along with *deep ecology* and *social ecology*. Beyond this there has been a curious lack of engagement with ecofeminism from feminist academics. It is very rare to find mention of ecofeminism in Women's Studies texts. This absence is particularly true in the UK, and only slightly less so in Australia and the US. There is some evidence that ecofeminism has not just been ignored but also silenced.

Noël Sturgeon in *Ecofeminist Natures - Race, Gender, Feminist Theory and Political Action* in 1997 writes, "Such is the prejudice against ecofeminists among many academic feminist theorists that I was once advised, by a prominent feminist theorist who wanted to support my work, to remove the word „ecofeminism“ from the title of one of my papers about the movement, because she said she would never choose to read an article about ecofeminism. I have been advised by a feminist mentor to leave my editorship of *The Ecofeminist Newsletter* off my vita when applying for grants and jobs."

Cameron in *First Mother and the Rainbow Children* has stated that "The term ecofeminism is an insult to the women who put themselves on the line, risked public disapproval, risked even violence and jail... Feminism has always been actively involved in the peace movement, in the antinuclear movement, and in the environmental protection movement". Ecofeminist claim that environmental issues are feminist issues should be stronger than the insight that Western environmentally destructive practices have always taken place in the context of patriarchy. That may be true, but women also participate in patriarchy and its oppressive practices. The cosmetics industry is an excellent example. The testing of cosmetics on animals is a barbaric and cruel, generally unnecessary practice, and though the issue is complicated by questions of women's bodily disciplines and image in the context of patriarchy, women cannot deny their support of such practices through their buying power.

Deep ecology provides a counterexample, when considered according to the ecofeminist critique. Ecofeminists have charged deep ecology with androcentrism and sexism in both theory and practice. Deep ecologists by distinguishing shallow ecology have been argued to reproduce a patriarchal logic of exclusion, of oppressive theory over liberating practice. Yet deep ecologists can hardly be charged with naturism, since their central point concerning the intrinsic value of nature is intended precisely to combat anthropocentrism. If the ecofeminist charge that deep ecology is sexist holds true, and sexism is inherently patriarchal, then it is the case that there is at least once conceptual framework that is patriarchal but not naturist. Ecofeminist literature portrays the historical exploitation and domination of women and nature as going hand in hand, and both are seen as victims of development. It is taken as self-evident that any harm to nature harms women equally, since women are seen as closer to nature than men. None of the ecofeminist literature attempts to establish

this linkage through concrete evidence or strong argument.

It is very subjective and takes its position as self-evident. It locates the domination of women and nature mainly in ideology, thereby neglecting the “interrelated material sources of dominance based on economic advantage and political power” as well as the gender division of labor and distribution of opportunity. These ecofeminists’ images of women, in fact “retain the patriarchal stereotypes of what men expect women to be. They freeze women as merely caring and nurturing beings instead of expanding the full range of women’s human potentialities and abilities. The use of metaphors of women as „nurturing“ - like the earth, and of the earth as female abound are regressive rather than liberating women. They only reinforce stereotypes.

What these arguments seem to overlook is that concepts of nature, culture and gender are historically and socially constructed and vary across and within cultures and a time period. This essentialism presents women as a homogeneous category, both within countries and across nations. It fails to differentiate among women by class, race, and ethnicity. Critics like Susan Prentice argue that emphasizing the special relationship of women with nature and politics imply that what men do to the earth is bad, unlike women, thereby ignoring the fact that men too can develop an ethics of caring for nature. Hence, it cannot develop an effective strategy for change, since it ends in polarizing the worlds of men and women while essentializing the two categories. On the other hand, ecofeminists working within the socialist framework look upon nature and human nature as socially constructed rooted in an analysis of race, class and gender. Going beyond the radicals, this ecofeminism puts forward a critique of capitalist patriarchy, focusing on the dialectical relationships between “production and reproduction, and between production and ecology. Pursuing the model of development has meant a shift, away from traditional Indian philosophy, which sees *prakṛti* as a living and creative process, the feminine principle, from which all life arises.

Under the garb of development, nature has been exploited mercilessly and the feminine principle was no longer associated with activity, creativity and sanctity of life, but was considered passive and as a resource. This has led to marginalization, devaluation, displacement and ultimately the dispensability of women. Women’s special knowledge of nature and their dependence on it for “staying alive”, were systematically marginalized under the onslaught of modern science. Shiva notes that Third World women are not simply victims of the development process, but also possess the power for change. She points to the experiences of women in the Chipko movement of the 70s in the Garhwal Himalayas - where women struggled for the protection and regeneration of the forests.

VII

There have been many struggles in the context of modernization of agriculture, indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources, against large, multi-purpose dams and river-valley schemes, against pollution of air and water and so on. Although women participated in these struggles, these were not seen as women’s movements. Women as women have a special relationship with nature as ecofeminists argue, is proved wrong when one analyses the various protest movements. Women’s interaction with nature and their responses to environmental degradation must be analyzed and located within the material reality of gender, caste class and race-based division of labour, property and power. Women are victims of environmental degradation as well as active agents in the regeneration and protection of the environment.

At the individual level, however, there has been much debate and discussion, especially with Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies. On the whole, environmental concerns have not been issues for theoretical debate within the Indian women’s movement. The women’s movement in India has to a large extent been preoccupied with issues of urban-based women. It would, in fact, become more broad-based if the category „women“ was not treated as a homogeneous category and environmental issues relating to women of different regions, classes and castes were taken up.

Protest movements against environmental destruction and struggles for survival highlight the fact that caste, class and gender issues are deeply trapped in it. It is the poor, lower class and lower caste, and within them, the peasant and tribal women, who are worst, affected and hence, they are the most active in the protests. Women, therefore, cannot be homogenized into the category, either within the country or across the globe. Hence, there is growing opposition to such inequality and environmental degradation, as reflected in widespread grassroots resistance movements. The dominant development paradigm and short-term solutions to development problems are implicitly questioned by these movements. This would help to broaden the base of the movement. On the

whole, what is needed is a total change, relating to development, redistribution and institutional structures. Environment and gender issues need to be taken together and the new social movements in India seem to provide the ray of hope for change.

The philosophical significance of ecofeminism is that it challenges feminism to take environmental issues seriously, environmental philosophy to take feminism seriously, and philosophy to take both seriously. 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 ecological thought. Warren says, „If there must be a war, let the weapons be your healing hands, the hands of the world’s women in defense of the environment. Let your call to battle be a song for the Earth.“⁷ From Indian perspective, it can be proposed that we need to take ecofeminism to the people. As an ecological activist, we need to communicate our ideas to the public and to anyone who will listen to us seriously.

It is the human-centered or anthropocentric feminism that has come to dominate feminist thinking in the new millennium, effectively marginalizing feminism’s relevance. The global crises of climate justice, food security, energy justice, vanishing wildlife, maldevelopment, habitat loss, industrial animal food production, and more have simultaneously social and ecological dimensions that require both ecological and feminist analyses. Ecofeminists have listened to their feminist, social ecologist, deep ecological and environmentalist critics - but have their critics been listening to ecofeminists?

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