

ECOFEMINIST PRACTICE AND THEORY: A CRITICAL OVERVIEW

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Women and nature have an age-old association—an affiliation that has persisted throughout culture, language, and history. Their ancient interconnections have been dramatized by the simultaneity of two recent social movements—women's liberation, symbolized in its controversial infancy by Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963), and the ecology movement, which built up during the 1960s and finally captured national attention on Earth Day, 1970. Common to both is an egalitarian perspective. Women are struggling to free themselves from cultural and economic constraints that have kept them subordinate to men. Environmentalists, warning us of the irreversible consequences of continuing environmental exploitation, are developing an ecological ethic emphasizing the interconnectedness between people and nature. Juxtaposing the goals of the two movements can suggest new values and social structures, based not on the domination of women and nature as resources but on the full expression of both male and female talent and on the maintenance of environmental integrity. (Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature* xix)

Nowadays, ecofeminism occupies a prominent place in the realm of literary scholarship. Although critical readings of literary texts with regard to themes of environment, gender, nature, climate change, and natural resource depletion have been carried out in the past, in the recent years, these studies have gained unprecedented focus.

The central premise of ecofeminist movement is the endorsement of the ideology that women's oppression and the exploitation of nature have the same origin i.e. patriarchal hegemony. Ecofeminism is a movement that seeks to dismantle all the “isms” of oppression from human society. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva state in their groundbreaking book, *Ecofeminism* that “ecofeminism, 'a new term for an ancient wisdom' grew out of various social movements — the feminist, peace and the ecology movements — in the late 1970s and early 1980s” (Introduction 13). They further reveal that the term was first coined by Francoise D' Eaubonne in 1974 in her book titled *Le féminisme ou la mort (Feminism or Death)*. In their opinion, “The common ground for women's liberation and the preservation of life on earth is to be found in the activities of those women who have become the victims of the development process and who struggle to conserve their subsistence base: for example, the Chipko women in India, women and men who actively oppose mega dam construction, women who fight against nuclear power plants and against the irresponsible dumping of toxic wastes around the world, and many more worldwide” (12). Hence, ecofeminism aims to bring together two movements erstwhile thought of as separate: ecology and feminism. It propounds the belief that in order to enable the sustenance of life on this planet in its fullest sense, it is imperative to emphasise the living interconnectedness or symbioses between nature and the human society. This holistic world view is in sharp contrast to the Eurocentric universalism developed via the Enlightenment and the rise of capitalist patriarchy. The movement gained popularity owing to numerous protests and activities against environmental destruction, sparked-off by recurring ecological disasters. The meltdown at Three Mile Island mobilised large number of women in the USA to join hands to combat the recurrent environmental calamities.

Their coordinated efforts and matchless dedication culminated in the organisation of world's first ecofeminist conference — 'Women and Life on Earth: A Conference on Eco-Feminism in the Eighties' — in March 1980, at Amherst. At this conference, the connections between feminism, militarization, healing and ecology were clearly outlined (13-14). Ever since, this woman-identified movement has continued to expand.

Ecofeminism reiterates the belief that liberation cannot occur in isolation. It advocates the unity and peaceful coexistence of all creations. It vouches for the dignity and integrity of every living being. Ecofeminists want to demolish all oppressive conceptual frameworks responsible for the twin dominations of women and nature. They want to create a world in which hierarchical differences do not amount to subordination and oppression. As Val Plumwood states in her seminal book, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, ecofeminism has made significant contributions “both to activist struggle and to theorising links between women's oppression and the domination of nature over the last two decades” (Introduction 1).

According to Carol J. Adams, “Ecofeminism may have grown out of earlier feminist theory, but it revises this theory by its position that an environmental perspective is necessary for feminism” (Introduction 3). By exposing how patriarchy sanctions the oppression of nature, women, and of marginalized races, ecofeminism can play an important role in connecting feminism with other social movements. As Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva assert in their book, *Ecofeminism*, “An ecofeminist perspective propounds the need for a new cosmology and a new anthropology which recognizes that life in nature (which includes human beings) is maintained by means of co-operation, and mutual care and love” (Introduction 6). Ecofeminists hold the view that the most authentic source of our well-being and happiness is a holistic, all-inclusive world view that extends respect and admiration to all life forms. Mies and Shiva further explain that this entails “rejecting the notion that Man's freedom and happiness depend on an ongoing process of emancipation from nature, on independence from, and dominance over natural processes by the power of reason and rationality” (6).

Spiritual ecofeminism and socialist ecofeminism are the two predominant strains of the ecofeminist movement. At this stage, it is important to point out that the two strands of ecofeminism differ in the way they view the role of patriarchy in structuring the relationship between women and nature.

Spiritual ecofeminism or ecofeminist spirituality espouses the belief that women share a special bond with the natural world owing to their biological role. It is the “exemplar of affinity ecofeminism, which tends to combine a celebration of women-centered values (mothering, nurturing, caring) with a celebration of women's bodies” (Mellor 56). It is a women-centric movement that celebrates women's deep, intrinsic ties with the natural world. In other words, spiritual ecofeminists claim that there is a “strong affinity between women and nature” (57). This biological affinity or cosmological link with nature equips women with a unique form of thinking which is all-inclusive, all-embracing, holistic, and intuitive at the same time. It promotes solidarity, equality, peace, and harmony in human society. On the contrary, men have retained a form of thinking which is cerebral, mechanistic, rational, and highly linear. It results in a dualistic world view that sanctions human oppression and environmental abuse. Spiritual ecofeminists envision a non-hierarchical world in which there is no masculine domination or environmental exploitation. They espouse a non-instrumental view of both women and nature as an empowering response to the current ecological morass.

According to Mary Mellor, “Spiritual ecofeminists draw their inspiration from pre-history

and from surviving tribal religions, particularly those of the Native Americans and the original peoples of Australia and New Zealand” (55). In short, these were pre-patriarchal religions that swiveled around celebrating women's age-old esoteric connections with the natural world which were believed to be inherent, sacrosanct, and inviolable. Mellor is of the view that reclaiming women's bodies and sexuality is of utmost importance to spiritual ecofeminists. Hence, rituals pertaining to women's monthly menstrual flow, childbirth, and mothering are celebrated with much fanfare and gusto (54). Spiritual ecofeminists are of the view that it is important to celebrate the various phases related to women's lives in order to make them realize their own hitherto denied potential.

Socialist ecofeminism, on the other hand, locates the source of the dual oppression of women and nature in patriarchal capitalism. It espouses the belief that the interconnections between women and nature are entrenched in social constructivism as well as their biological propensities. This particular precept makes socialist ecofeminism a fine fusion of the material as well as the spiritual aspects of the ecofeminist movement. Socialist ecofeminism rejects the assertion that women are naturally aligned with nature (Mellor 61). Hence, it offers a more thorough critique of domination. Carolyn Merchant was one of the earliest advocates of the compatibility of socialism and ecofeminism to deal with the twin oppression of women and nature. Her most popular work, *The Death of Nature*, is a feminist critique of the idea of nature propounded by the pioneers of the scientific revolution. In this work, she only briefly touches upon socialism in reference to its ecological implications. However, in her book, *Radical Ecology*, she does argue for socialist ecofeminism as a vital part of the entire ecological movement. In Merchant's view, socialist ecofeminism sees environmental crises as embedded in the rise of capitalism and the pernicious ideology that both Mother Earth and nature can be ruthlessly exploited in the name of development. She further explains that the basic source of the problem lies in the sexual division of labour which facilitates male predominance in the realm of commodified production whereas women remain confined to the domestic sphere. This leads to men and women becoming increasingly alienated from each other and from their labour. Nature is, in turn, manipulated, exploited, eroded, polluted, and transformed in the course of producing things to gain maximum profit. As we can see from the above lines, nature is the product of historical and social forces. Hence, it is both a natural and a social construct. The same holds true for gender. Therefore, socialist ecofeminism views both the natural world and the human world as active agents, as material forces. Merchant asserts that what is required is a multipronged structural analysis that establishes a dialectical relationship between production and reproduction as well as between society and nature (62-63).

Merchant says that socialist ecofeminism “steers a course between a natural conception of 'nature' and the idea of social construction as well as between patriarchy and capitalism as systems of exploitation” (Mellor 63). Hence, socialist ecofeminists assert that a materialist analysis of women's social positioning is imperative for ecofeminist activism. Merchant further explains that socialist ecofeminism provides an alternative vision of the world wherein differences pertaining to sex, class, race, and age have been eradicated and basic human aspirations have been successfully fulfilled. This particular school of the ecofeminist movement intends to raise public consciousness regarding the dangers of maintaining the status quo along with pushing human society toward greater equality and social justice (63). In other words, it focuses more on the social inequalities existing within our society as compared to spiritual ecofeminism (58).

According to Mary Mellor, “Whichever perspective is taken – strong or weak affinity, or purely social constructionist – ecofeminism necessarily engages with women's embodiment as

sexed beings” (68). She further explains that the ecofeminist movement rests on the belief that women symbolize the dilemma of human embodiment in a sexed and gendered society. Human embodiment, in turn, suggests that human beings live not only in an historical and social context, but also an ecological and biological one. In the opinion of Mellor, the overarching needs of human embodiment have to be addressed with an ecosystem.

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