

## A BRIEF HISTORICAL SKETCH ON ECO FEMINISM

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**ABSTRACT:** The term ecofeminism is used to describe a feminist approach to understanding ecology. Eco-feminist thinkers draw on the concept of gender to theorize on the relationship between humans and the natural world. Today, there are many interpretations of ecofeminism and how it might be applied to social thought, including: eco-feminist art, eco-feminist theory, social justice and political philosophy, religion, contemporary feminism and poetry. As there are several different types of feminism and different beliefs held by feminists, there are different versions of ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is widely referred to as the third wave of feminism, it adds to the former feminist theory that an environmental perspective is a necessary part of feminism. Ecofeminism uses the parallels between the oppression of nature and the oppression of women as a way to highlight the idea that both must be understood in order to properly recognize how they are connected. These parallels include but are not limited to seeing women and nature as property, seeing men as the curators of culture and women as the curators of nature, and how men dominate women and humans dominate nature. Women tend to take a secondary place in society and also tend to be equated with nature, thus being on the losing end on both fronts, and fighting the same battle against oppression. In an Indian context the picture seems to be different, as spiritual ecofeminism seems to be more closely aligned with “traditional” Hinduism. Vandana Shiva, the most famous Indian eco-feminist writer, faces a massive critique from numerous scholars. Her work is seen as essentialist and as romanticizing history, where a gender analysis perspective would focus on, among others, unequal power relations in society.

**KEYWORDS:** Ecofeminism, spirituality, India, gender analysis.

**INTRODUCTION:** The term “ecofeminism” was born of the last three decades, which intersects two critical perspectives - ecology and feminism. It liberates political and social construction for those who abhor the designation of nature and women. The word ‘ecology’

derives from the biological science of natural environmental systems. It is a combined movement of socio-economic and biological study to examine how human use of nature is causing pollution of soil, air and water, and destructions of the natural systems which threatens the base of life. Feminism - a complex movement with multiple layers centralizes on full inclusion of women in both political and economic field against patriarchy, exploitation, oppression and violence against women.

According to Maggie Humm and Rebecca Walker, the history of feminism can be divided into three waves. The first feminist wave was in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the second was in the 1960s and 1970s, and the third extends from the 1990s to the present. Feminist theory emerged from these feminist movements. It is manifest in a variety of disciplines such as feminist geography, feminist history and feminist literary criticism.

Feminism has altered predominant perspectives in a wide range of areas within Western society, ranging from culture to law. Feminist activists have campaigned for women's legal rights (rights of contract, property rights, voting rights); for women's right to bodily integrity and autonomy, for abortion rights, and for reproductive rights (including access to contraception and quality prenatal care); for protection of women and girls from domestic violence, sexual harassment and rape; for workplace rights, including maternity leave and equal pay; against misogyny; and against other forms of gender-specific discrimination against women.

During much of its history, most feminist movements and theories had leaders who were predominantly middle-class white women from Western Europe and North America. However, at least since Sojourner Truth's 1851 speech to American feminists, women of other races have proposed alternative feminisms. This trend accelerated in the 1960s with the Civil Rights movement in the United States and the collapse of European colonialism in Africa, the Caribbean, parts of Latin America and Southeast Asia. Since that time, women in former European colonies and the Third World have proposed "Post-colonial" and "Third World" feminisms. Some Postcolonial Feminists, such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, are critical of Western feminism for being ethnocentric. Black feminists, such as Angela Davis and Alice Walker, share this view.

## HISTORY

Simone de Beauvoir wrote that "the first time we see a woman take up her pen in defense of her sex" was Christine de Pizan who wrote *Epitre au Dieu d'Amour* (Epistle to the God of Love) in the 15th century. Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa and Modesta di Pozzo di Forzi worked in the 16th century. Marie Le Jars de Gournay, Anne Bradstreet and Francois Poullain de la Barre wrote during the 17th.

Feminists and scholars have divided the movement's history into three "waves". The first wave refers mainly to women's suffrage movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (mainly concerned with women's right to vote). The second wave refers to the ideas and actions associated with the women's liberation movement beginning in the 1960s (which campaigned for legal and social rights for women). The third wave refers to a continuation of, and a reaction to the perceived failures of, second-wave feminism, beginning in the 1990s.

**First wave:** First-wave feminism refers to an extended period of feminist activity during the nineteenth century and early twentieth century in the United Kingdom and the United States. Originally it focused on the promotion of equal contract and property rights for women and the opposition to chattel marriage and ownership of married women (and their children) by their husbands. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, activism focused primarily on gaining political power, particularly the right of women's suffrage. Yet, feminists such as Voltairine de Cleyre and Margaret Sanger were still active in campaigning for women's sexual, reproductive, and economic rights at this time. In 1854, Florence Nightingale established female nurses as adjuncts to the military. In Britain the Suffragettes and, possibly more effectively, the Suffragists campaigned for the women's vote. In 1918 the Representation of the People Act 1918 was passed granting the vote to women over the age of 30 who owned houses. In 1928 this was extended to all women over twenty-one. In the United States, leaders of this movement included Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony, who each campaigned for the abolition of slavery prior to championing women's right to vote; all were strongly influenced by Quaker thought. American first-wave feminism involved a wide range of women. Some, such as Frances Willard, belonged to conservative Christian groups such as the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. Others, such as Matilda Joslyn Gage, were more radical, and expressed themselves within the National Woman Suffrage Association or individually. American first-

wave feminism is considered to have ended with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution (1919), granting women the right to vote in all states. The term first wave was coined retrospectively after the term second-wave feminism began to be used to describe a newer feminist movement that focused as much on fighting social and cultural inequalities as political inequalities.

**Second wave:** Second-wave feminism refers to the period of activity in the early 1960s and lasting through the late 1980s. The scholar Imelda Whelehan suggests that the second wave was a continuation of the earlier phase of feminism involving the suffragettes in the UK and USA. Second-wave feminism has continued to exist since that time and coexists with what is termed third-wave feminism. The scholar Estelle Freedman compares first and second-wave feminism saying that the first wave focused on rights such as suffrage, whereas the second wave was largely concerned with other issues of equality, such as ending discrimination. The feminist activist and author Carol Hanisch coined the slogan "The Personal is Political" which became synonymous with the second wave. Second-wave feminists saw women's cultural and political inequalities as inextricably linked and encouraged women to understand aspects of their personal lives as deeply politicized and as reflecting sexist power structures.

**Third wave:** Third-wave feminism began in the early 1990s, arising as a response to perceived failures of the second wave and also as a response to the backlash against initiatives and movements created by the second wave. Third-wave feminism seeks to challenge or avoid what it deems the second wave's essentialist definitions of femininity, which (according to them) over-emphasize the experiences of upper middle-class white women. A post-structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality is central to much of the third wave's ideology. Third-wave feminists often focus on "micro-politics" and challenge the second wave's paradigm as to what is, or is not, good for females. The third wave has its origins in the mid-1980s. Feminist leaders rooted in the second wave like Gloria Anzaldua, bell hooks, Chela Sandoval, Cherrie Moraga, Audre Lorde, Maxine Hong Kingston, and many other black feminists, sought to negotiate a space within feminist thought for consideration of race-related subjectivities.

Third-wave feminism also contains internal debates between difference feminists such as the psychologist Carol Gilligan (who believes that there are important differences between the sexes)

and those who believe that there are no inherent differences between the sexes and contend that gender roles are due to social conditioning.

**UNDERSTANDING FEMINIST HISTORY:** Feminist history combines the search for past female scholars with a modern feminist perspective on how history is affected by them. While many mistake it as women's history, feminist history does not solely focus on the retelling of history from a woman's perspective. Rather, it is interpreting history with a feminist frame of mind. It is also not to be confused with the history of feminism, which recounts the history of the feminist movements. Feminist historians, instead, include “cultural and social investigations” in the job description. Feminist history came into being as women began writing accounts of their own and other women's lives. A few of these, such as Susan B. Anthony and Audre Lorde, documented histories of their feminist movements.

Feminist historians collect to analyze and analyze to connect. Rather than just recording women's history, they allow a connection to be made with “public history.” However, problems remain in integrating this improved history into a curriculum appropriate for students. Finally, feminist historians must now be able to understand the digital humanities involved in creating an online database of their primary sources as well as published works done by notable feminist historians. Feminist digital humanists work with feminist historians to reveal an online integration of the two histories. Harvard's Women's Studies Database contain sources, like the Gerritsen Collection, that allow scholarly papers by feminists to be written and publicly convey the fact that there is more than one history and the progress made in combining them.

**RELATIONS TO WOMEN'S HISTORY:** Feminist historians use women's history to explore the different voices of past women. This gathering of information requires the help of experts who have dedicated their lives to this pursuit. It provides historians with primary sources that are vital to the integration of histories. Firsthand accounts, like Fiedler's *And the Walls Come Tumbling Down? (A Feminist View from East Berlin)* recounts the daily lives of past women. It documents how their lives were affected by the laws of their government. Women's historians go on to interpret how the laws changed these women's lives, but feminist historians rely on this information to observe the ‘disappearing woman’. Fieldler even mentioned that “these feminists were disappointed when they meant ordinary eastern women who were good housewives too,

while enjoying outside work." Because these feminists only knew the public history of the German Democratic Republic, they projected themselves into the imaginary.

Upon investigation of eastern women's lives, they found that though the GDR's socialist policies encouraged women in the labor force, there had been no women creating these policies. Once again, the patriarch had created a public history in which women were cut out. The discovery of neglected cultural accounts, similar to Fiedler's, has allowed women's historians to create large databases, available to feminist historians, out of them. These sources are analyzed by the historians to compare them to scholarly works published during the same time period. Finding works that are within the same time period isn't too difficult, but the challenge is in knowing how to combine what they learned from the source with what they know from the works.

### Integrating Histories

**VARIOUS TRENDS AMONG ECO-FEMINISTS:** Ecofeminism in the late 1980s had already introduced itself as a clear cut philosophical theory, which put forward a fusion of modern feminist paradigms. There were various approaches, which focused on themes of interconnection between the domination of women and nature. Rosemary Radford Reuther's "New Woman, New Art- Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation" (1975), Susan Griffin's "Woman and Nature- the Roaring inside Her" (1978), and Carolyn Merchant's "The Death of Nature- Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution" (1980) - all cater to an important historical evidence for the western association of women with nature. However, most of the Eco-feminists were unified in the exploration of the commonalities between gender operation and environmental deliberation caused by the main western dominance.

Hence, as we go through various ecofeminism literature, we have come to know that Eco feminists have been in general adhere to the interrelatedness of the nature and women, but at the same time they also part ways when the discussion turn to the nature of the relationship between the two and whether or not it might be "potentially liberating or grounds for reinforcing harmful stereotypes about women". Karen Warren, an American philosopher, notes that the difference of opinion among ecofeminism theories, critiques and writers reflect the "plurality of positions" one finds in various versions of feminism, including liberal, Marxist, radical and socialist feminisms.

Carolyn Merchant an American philosopher and historian describe radical ecology as a response to a growing sense of crisis in the industrialized world: "... It acts on a new perception that domination of nature entails the domination of human beings along the lines of race, class, and gender." (Merchant 1992:1) According to Merchant, this will to domination has been promoted by the mechanistic world view that arose in the 17th century, in the support of early capitalism and which removed the earlier Renaissance model of nature as a living organism - "It entailed an ethic of the control and domination of nature and supplanted the organic world's I - thou ethic of reciprocity between humans and nature. Mechanism and its ethic of domination legitimate the use of nature as commodity, a central tenant of industrial capitalism". Merchant presents varied approaches to ecofeminism: liberal ecofeminism shares the reformist concern of mainstream environmentalism and seeks change through legislative and regulatory means; cultural ecofeminism approaches environmental issues within the context of the critique of patriarchy; socialist ecofeminism identifies the connection between patriarchal domination of women by men, and the capitalist domination of nature by men by pointing to both women and nature as commodity under the system of patriarchal capitalism. Susan Griffin an ecofeminism author in her book "Women and Nature: The Roaring inside Her" represents her ecofeminism thought as: "I know I am made from this earth, as my mother's hand were made from this earth, as her dreams come from this earth and all that I know in this earth... ". Griffin's opinion regarding the bond which that tradition has established between women and nature had to be turned over positively. She also suggests of acquiring full awareness of the interconnected with every single plant, animal and human life on this earth. "Women and nature" touches variety of themes like the relationship between human beings and animals and the accountability of science and technology in the annihilation of the environment. Thus, nature became a feminist issue. As Rosemary Ruether an American feminist scholar states- "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 movements to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socio-economic relation and the undying values of this (modern industrial) society".

Moreover, various movements by women took birth in 1970, which revealed the link between the health and the lives of women and the destruction of nature. Women became more aware regarding the environmental degradation, and therefore, raised their voice in decision-making

process. The destruction of the environment by modern technology was one of the prime protests. Hence, Eco-feminists attention was on the relationship between science, women and nature. Merchant's "The Death of Nature- Women, Ecology and Scientific Revolution"(1980) marked a significant turning point in historical study and for eco-feminist thought. The identity of nature as mother led to the connection between the history of women and that of environment. According to Merchant, environment linked with science and technology had re-conceptualized nature as a machine, rather than a living organism- separates reason from emotion, dissociates men from women, animals and nature. Vandana Shiva, the Indian physicist, through her work "Staying Alive" (1989) unveiled the outcome of what she called 'mal-development' for the lives of women and for nature. Shiva condemns the modern concept of science as a system which claims to be universal, independent of any ethical values, and which restrains the pluralistic expressions of knowledge. According to Shiva, with 'mal-development', forests are separated from rivers, the fields from forests and animals from culture, generating and spreading death. Shiva also connects the "death of the feminine principle" with 'mal-development' to describe the introduction of western intensive agriculture to the "Third World". In her essay, "Development, Ecology and Women" Shiva connects the relationship clearly:

"Mal development' militates against this equality in diversity, and superimposes the ideologically constructed category of western technological man as a uniform measure of the worth of classes, cultures and genders... diversity and unity and harmony in diversity, become epistemologically unattainable in the context of mal development which then becomes synonymous with women's underdevelopment (increasing sexist domination) and nature's depletion (deepening ecological crisis)".

**EMERGENCE OF ECO-FEMINISM:** Movements all over the world that are dedicated to the continuation of life on earth, like the Chipko movement in India, Anti-Militarist movement in Europe and the US, movement against dumping of hazardous wastes in the US, and Green Belt movement in Kenya, are all labeled as "ecofeminist" movements. These movements attempt to demonstrate the "resistance politics" working at the micro-levels of power and point to the connections between women and nature. They also claim to contribute to an understanding of the interconnections between the domination of persons and nature by sex, race and class. Ecofeminism emerged in the West as a product of the peace, feminist and ecology movements of



the late 1970s and the early 1980s. The term “Ecofeminism” was coined by the French writer Francoise d’Eaubonne in 1974. It was further developed by Ynestra King in about 1976 and became a movement in 1980, with the organization, in the same year, of the first ecofeminism conference – “Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 80s”, at Amherst, Massachusetts, US. The conference explored the connections between feminism, militarism, health and ecology. It was followed by the formation of the Women’s Pentagon Action, a feminist, anti-militarist, anti-nuclear war weapons group. According to ecofeminism Ynestra King: “Ecofeminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice...(it sees) the devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors, and the threat of nuclear annihilation by the military warriors as feminist concerns. It is the same masculinity mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies and our own sexuality and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its way”. Whenever women protested against ecological destruction, threat of atomic destruction of life on earth, new developments in biotechnology, genetic engineering and reproductive technology, they discovered the connections between patriarchal domination and violence against women, the colonized non-western, non-White peoples and nature. It led to the realization that the liberation of women cannot be achieved in isolation from the larger struggle for preserving nature and life on this earth. As philosopher Karen Warren (1987) puts it: “Ecofeminism builds on the multiple perspectives of those whose perspectives are typically omitted or undervalued in dominant discourses, for example – Chipko women – in developing a global perspective on the role of male domination in the exploitation of women and nature (Datar 2011). An ecofeminism perspective is thereby...structurally pluralistic, inclusivism and contextualize, emphasizing through concrete example the crucial role context plays in understanding sexist and naturist practice”.

**CRITICISM:** Ecofeminism has not been without critics, from eco-feminists themselves as well as from others. Because of the strong woman-nature connection assumed and developed in some eco-feminist positions, various feminists distance themselves from ecofeminism and suggest that it is essentialist in nature. Essentialism claims that cross-culturally and cross-historically those of a particular race, gender or other category share the same traits. Many expressions of feminism and ecofeminism argue against all such essentialist constructions, while others expressions seem to maintain essentialism. Kate Nash, in her 1994 essay “The Feminist Production of Knowledge: Is Deconstruction a Practice for Women?” published in *Feminist Review*, clarifies the “tension”

between the “deconstructive politics of feminism and the assertions, or constructions of unified identity that feminists are frequently called on to make on behalf of the category ‘women’ which gives the project its political specificity”. Deep ecology and ecofeminism also engage in ideological debates. Many eco-feminists count themselves as deep ecologists and many deep ecologists count themselves as eco-feminists, while others might designate themselves as one but not the other. The background to the differences between some deep ecologists and some eco-feminists grew from the feminist critique of the androcentric (male-centered) tendency of deep ecology in its earliest, and often militaristic or violent, expressions.

**ECO-FEMINISM & ITS CRITICS IN INDIA:** In India, the most visible advocate of eco-feminism is Vandana Shiva. One would tend to categorize her work with the eco-feminists of the radical mode, but her critique of the entire development model and its effects on the environment, places her more among the eco-feminists of the socialist framework. Vandana Shiva (1988) critiques modern science and technology as a western, patriarchal and colonial project, which is inherently violent and perpetuates this violence against women and nature. Pursuing this model of development has meant a shift away from traditional Indian philosophy, which sees prakriti 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, however, 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 1970s in the Garhwal Himalayas – where women struggled for the protection and regeneration of the forests. Through her analysis, Shiva points out the critical links between the different development perspectives, the process of change brought about by the development and its impact on the environment and the people dependent on it for their subsistence. Further, she argues with Maria Mies<sup>10</sup> that whenever women have protested against ecological destruction or nuclear annihilation, they were “aware of the connections between patriarchal violence against women, other people and nature”. These movements were informed by the eco-feminist principles of connectedness, wholeness, inter-

dependence and spirituality, in opposition to capitalist patriarchal science that is engaged in disconnecting and dissecting. It is argued that the eco-feminist position, i.e., a subsistence perspective, is rooted in the material base of everyday subsistence production of women the world over. This struggle of women and men to conserve their subsistence base can become the common ground for women's liberation and preservation of life on earth.

**BASIC PRINCIPLES OF ECOFEMINISM:** Ecofeminism aims to reveal the intrinsic link between the natural domination and gender domination, to achieve the dual goal of the liberation of nature and women. Ecofeminism applies the relationship theory between female and nature into a variety of social structures, emphasizes the analysis of ecology, gender, class, and race, investigates the essential origin of domination system as a whole, and admits the different voices from women of different races, classes, and ages. The emphasis on differences formed the cultural diversity of its theory. In this cultural diversity, the basic feature of ecofeminism has been demonstrated as female principle and ecological principle. Karen (2002) reflected female principle and ecological principle into the core assumption of ecofeminism, and elaborated the core assumption. Specifically, the core assumption of ecofeminism includes the following four aspects,

- (a) Oppression of women and oppression of nature have important links;
- (b) Understanding of essence of these connections are necessary to fully understand the oppression of women and nature;
- (c) Theory and practice of feminism must include the ecological perspective;
- (d) Resolution of ecological problems must contain the feminist perspective.

The above can be concluded as the following principles: Ecofeminism is "female". Ecofeminism has the female perspective and orientation. Ecofeminism emphasizes gender differences, and pays more attention to gender discrimination and unequal treatment suffered by women in social life. Specifically, women's values are ignored, housework devalued, and women are excluded from public domains. Through exploration of the construction of female concept in culture and investigation of differences and diversities between the sexes as well as within women, ecofeminism finds that women are not and cannot be composed of a single category, and all

those theories aiming at reducing female dominance to a single interpretation would like to exclude the experience of most women around the world, and ignore the complexity of the lives of women. That is to say, mechanistic, reductionist, simple way of thinking way will inevitably lead to a common female feature, and will inevitably simplify the cause of female being dominated. Most importantly, this cultural value establishes a social power structure as a “natural” fact. From the perspective of female, Ecofeminism reveals the root behind gender domination, power structure of hierarchy of human society, and the operation mechanism of power inequality. From the gender perspective to examine the relationship between human and nature, homology of natural domination and gender domination can be found, that is to say, gender perspective not only examines the relationship between people, but also reflects the relationship between people and nature, and finds the internal link between the two kinds of domination. Ecofeminism also has to be “ecological”. Ecofeminism has an ecological perspective. Ecology emphasizes the mutual dependence of elements of ecosystem, which should reflect a balance, organism and integration. At the same time, ecology also pays attention to interactions and differences of individuals in the system. Ecofeminism admits all lives in the nature are linked, and the values of lives lie in the diversity and abundance of life forms. Therefore, ecofeminism opposes mechanical, reductionist, and separated dualistic thinking way, encourages related, multi-dimensional, and integrated thinking way. The view of relation means that the relevance between people and nature has been emphasized so as to avoid the confrontation and split between man and nature; the view of multidimensional revives organism tradition and avoids monism and dominance relationship; the view of integration encourages to treat the relationship between the individual and the whole dialectically, and opposes the abstract individual view. Thus, criticizing ecologically from the perspective of social gender, adhering to the link of natural domination and gender domination, and eliminating social and cultural criticism of the patriarchy are the unique theoretical contribution of ecofeminism and the theoretical answer for the issue of “domination – liberation” in ecological movement by ecofeminism.

**CONCLUSION:** The concept of Eco-feminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice. It asserts the special strength and integrity of every living thing. This is expressed by many women who participated in these movements. Feminist history refers to the re-reading of history from a female perspective. It is not the same as the history of feminism, which outlines

the origins and evolution of the feminist movement. It also differs from women's history, which focuses on the role of women in historical events. The goal of feminist history is to explore and illuminate the female viewpoint of history through rediscovery of female writers, artists, philosophers, etc., in order to recover and demonstrate the significance of women's voices and choices in the past. Feminist History seeks to change the nature of history to include gender into all aspects of historical analysis, while also looking through a critical feminist lens. Jill Matthews states “the purpose of that change is political: to challenge the practices of the historical discipline that have belittled and oppressed women, and to create practices that allow women an autonomy and space for self-definition.

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