

INTERPRETING OFFENCES AGAINST NATURE AS OFFENCES AGAINST WOMEN AND VICE VERSA: AN ANALYSIS OF ECOFEMINIST ARGUMENTS AGAINST CAPITALIST PATRIARCHY

JAYANTA BORUAH

NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY, SHILLONG

Abstract:

Ecofeminists view women as a symbol of Nature. They argue for preserving the creativity and the living spirit of both woman and Nature. But human history has witnessed a dominance of patriarchal nature where right from the invention of material resources to the development of technological innovations, humanity has always exploited both Nature and women. The manner humanity shaped its theories, as well as philosophies, were in most cases targeted for subjugating Nature as well as women. Mother Earth had been treated as a dead and spiritless entity meant only for utilization ignoring the creative abilities that brought lives in existence on this Planet. As a consequence, to which humanity is now left with only two options, either to extinct or to escape to another Planet. However, ecofeminists provide another alternative that favors respecting the capabilities of the woman in protecting Nature from being depleted at the hands of the so-called competitive world featured by Capitalist Patriarchy. They believe that for ages women were known as healers and they are the best caretakers of our mother Nature. Any offenses committed against Nature lead to severe consequences on the woman and the impact of such consequences are more on women than men. This article will therefore try to understand the basic principles of ecofeminism and how they view offenses against Nature as offenses against women.

Keywords: Capitalist Patriarchy, Ecofeminism, Nature, Offences and Women

Introduction

WORDS SPEAK

Ecofeminism has developed as a revolution against the patriarchal notions that humanity has been following for ages whereby it has not only dominated women folks but has also exploited the Natural ecosystem for achieving the over-ambitious goals of economic growth. Eco-feminists argue that both Mother Nature and Females have an interlinking relation and they both represent each other. This relationship was first advocated by Sherry B. Ortner who in her contribution- "*Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?*",

highlighted that both Nature and women are related to some sort of cultural symbols.¹ They are of the view that both Nature and women had suffered devaluation and abuses due to the dominating patriarchal nature of human society. The Ecological Feminist ideologies demonstrate the logics that how the capitalist patriarchy based on gender-biased and oppressing anti-ecological power structures has led to a growth-oriented economic paradigm.² It has been witnessed that right from Plato's Theory of Communism of Wives to Kantian's beliefs that humans are superior to all other sentient beings and therefore such other non-human sentient beings are subject of human utilization, have shown that how Nature including non-human sentient beings and women have always been subjugated for satisfying patriarchal lust within every human civilization. It shows that how both women and Nature have been treated as property not only in practice but also in theories of those who are regarded as eminent scholars in the contemporary world. Ecofeminists thus in one sense tries to establish the relation between Nature and human where women and Nature are viewed from the angles of being subjugated and harassed by the patriarchal society following a notion of development that has almost made this Earth incapable of producing lives since such developments had impeded the basic creativity of Nature which has resulted in the loss of natural diversity, the influence of which is much higher amongst the woman folk. Researches have shown that loss to Nature has vehemently resulted in the loss of bargaining power of the females as well as loss of political, economical, and several other dimensions of powers that have resulted in gross gender-biased violence against women at the hands of the menfolk. All these have resulted in the demise of the Natural ecosystem in general and the reproductive capacity of women in particular across the globe which is now creating a serious threat to the existence of the human species on this planet.

Now the humanity has reached a juncture where only two options are available that are- either to face absolute extinction or to escape to one another planet. While Ecofeminist provides for a third alternative whereby adopting certain radical changes might bring a new life to this Earth. The contemporary world is striving towards achieving the ambitious goals of Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) by 2030 where Goal 5 specifically provides for the distribution of power and resources among the female gender in a manner that avoids gender inequalities. By adopting such a Goal, it can be expected to have a slight development in the process of renovation and innovation in the minds as well as practices of the human civilization that will,

¹ Chen Ling, "Ecological Criticisms Based on Social Gender: The Basic Principles of Ecofeminism, 7, Higher Education of Social Science, 67 (2014).

² Sarah Louise Ruder and Sophia Rose Sanniti, "Transcending the Learned Ignorance of Predatory Ontologies: A Research Agenda for an Ecofeminist-Informed Ecological Economics" School of Environment, Resource and Sustainability, University of Waterloo, Canada (2019), pdf.

fortunately, revive the Nature Earth and will lead to sustainable development in contradiction to the traditional notions of exploitative economic growth model where factors of production were meant for exploitation rather than making sustainable utilization. John Rawls once rightly stated that economic growth shall not be the end of society rather it shall be meant to achieve a much broader aim of survival for as long as possible. It is therefore required to adopt new parameters of development for achieving both inter-generational as well as intragenerational equity along with a gender-neutral model of development to preserve the creativity of Nature and the well-being of the females. This paper will therefore analyze the basic philosophy of eco-feminism to understand that how offenses against Nature can result in offenses against women and vice versa and to what extent such offenses are a product of capitalist-oriented patriarchal notions of development.

Conceptualizing Patriarchy

The concept of patriarchy was mainly found in the writings of anthropologists and sociologists who used this term to refer to the family pattern where a man holds rights for dominating the other members of his family. However, it was Kae Millet who introduced the concept of patriarchy into feminist theories. According to feminists, patriarchy is interpreted mainly from two angles where- one is the weak correlation that holds that a culture opposed to Nature is also opposed to female and the other is a strong correlation which provides similar characteristics to both gender and Nature and then goes for systematized depreciation of both. Patriarchy has also been divided into Public patriarchy and private patriarchy. It provides a right to the husband to dominate his wife and to the father to dominate his children. In such a hierarchy of rights, female is linked to blood, bloody and flesh in private fields while male culture speaks about intelligence, spirit, culture and public fields. Thus, the male has now the right to conquer females like they used to treat Nature.³ Ecofeminist holds that patriarchy is the root cause for gender as well as natural domination based on the concept of rationality that shaped women's political identity providing for a contrast definition of Nature like the definitions of wives in the opinion of the husbands and the definitions of slaves in the opinion of the owners.⁴

Basic Philosophy of Ecofeminism

Franchise de bonne, a French woman coined the term 'Ecofeminism' which immediately developed across North America, Europe, and Australia. It took several forms like Cultural ecofeminism who argued that

³ Carolyn Merchant, "The Scientific Revolution and the Death of Nature", 97, Focus, 513 (2006).

⁴ V. Plumwood, Feminism and the Mastery of Nature, 4 (Chongqing Press, 2007).

women are in close touch with Nature due to their reproductive attributes or potentials; while socio-ecofeminists denies the arguments of cultural ecofeminists and holds that since women and Nature are both subjugated in the same manner by the male-dominated society and also since women are more susceptible towards environmental hazards, such factors will likely make women more close to Nature than men. However, all such arguments were against the dualism of maleness versus femaleness and favored ethics of partnership with Nature.⁵

Ecofeminism revolves around the notion that Nature is the key consideration for protection and preservation demanding efficient utilization of natural resources. It further advocates for consideration of community growth, nurturing, giving importance to development as well as success indicators and criticizes the conventional economic GDP measures that lack considerations for constructive outputs and impacts at the national level.⁶ Ecofeminism also applied the analyses of intersectionality of class, race as well as gender oppression in the contexts of environmental activists where its movements included feminist academicians along with first as well as third world environmental activists. There arises a diversity in the thoughts of the ecofeminists as regards the relations between Nature and women but most importantly almost all ecofeminist do agree that healthy ecological conditions are necessary for a healthy life of a woman and thereby it argues for bringing revolutions in the patriarchal patterns of production and consumptions since such factors are alleged by them to have led to oppression of poor, marginalized and indigenous people and had also treated Nature as a commodity.⁷ Vandana Shiva in an attempt to distinguish between material poverty and spiritual poverty highlighted that the third world countries had shifted their notions of industrial development from small-scale eco-friendly industries to large scale industries that are causing massive environmental degradation, to adopt the illusionary and ambitious developmental models of the western developed world, where the material poverty of the Third World countries gets visible but the spiritual poverty of the Developed countries for which instances like high rates of psychological disorders, drugs addictions, etc. are invisible but they exists in real.⁸ Ecofeminism, environmental feminism, or political ecology, all not only links Nature with gender but also relates culture with both, and such relations were even extended to include militarism, nuclear

⁵ Infra, n 5.

⁶ Tehmina Khan, "Feminism, Environmental Economics and Accountability", in Vikash Ramiah and Greg N (eds) Handbook on Environmental and Sustainable Finance 207-237 (2016).

⁷ Lynne M. Woehrle and Donna Engelmann, "Ecofeminism and Peace", in Lester Kurtz (ed) Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace & Conflict (2nd ed. 2008).

⁸ Ibid.

warfare, waste pollution along deforestation to understand how all these activities are causing loss to the ecosystem as a result of which women are suffering the most.⁹

In simple terms, feminist environmental philosophy, in general, refers to the diversity of interconnections among women, Nature, and non-human animals where it establishes that how oppressions of Nature including non-human animals cause direct negative impacts on women. Ecofeminism grew up as a reaction against Canonical Western Philosophy. The basic features of this Canonical Western Philosophy are- first that due to rationality humans are superior to non-human animals and nature: human beings with the capacity of abstract reasoning are capable of justifying the consequences of their actions; believing in fundamental dualisms like- mind versus body, culture versus nature, objectivity versus subjectivity, etc.; assuming that there exists an ontological divide between human and nature as well as between human and non-human animals; etc.¹⁰

Ecofeminism provides the view that capitalism only represents patriarchal and paternalistic values which have caused severe harm to women by splitting Nature and culture.¹¹ It was initially believed by such ecofeminists that such a split can only be recovered through feminine instinct that portrays nurture and knowledge about the processes of Nature. It was also argued that females relate to Nature not because of both having feminine attributes but because they both were oppressed by the same man folk in more or less in the same manner.¹² Even women are linked to Nature in their behavioral aspects since women are traditionally and socially known for their roles of nurturing or caregiving.¹³ It was even argued that women possess the ability to produce wealth in association with Nature through their holistic knowledge about the processes of Nature but such knowledge is not recognized by the capitalist reductionist paradigm.¹⁴ Further, it is argued that such capitalist patriarchy has labeled women, Nature, and non-human animals as unproductive for economic growth.¹⁵

⁹ L . Jarosz, “Feminist Political Ecology”, Nail J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (eds) International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences (2001).

¹⁰ “Feminist Environmental Philosophy”, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-environmental/> (Last visited on July 12, 2020, 01:11 AM).

¹¹ Johanna Oksala, “Feminism, Capitalism and Ecology”, 33 Hypatia, 216-234 (2018).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Mark C.J. Stoddart, “Ecofeminism, Hegemonic Masculinity, and Environmental Movement Participation in British Columbia, Canada, 1998-2007: Women always clean up the Mess, 31 Sociological Spectrum 342-368 (2011) available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02732.2011.557065>. (Last viewed on July 12, 2020, 01:11 AM).

¹⁴ Vandana Shiva, *Staying alive women, ecology and development* (London Zed Books, London, 1988).

¹⁵ Vandana Shiva, *Development as a new project of Western Patriarchy*, in Irene Diamond and Gloria Steinem, *Revising the World: The emergence of Feminism* 189-200 (Sierra Club Books , 1990).

It is even argued by them that modern science is not an objective science rather it represents western man's values. To highlight this, instances of medicalizing childbirth, as well as the industrialization of plants, were provided by Bondi and Miles. By such processes, the knowledge of midwives and the natural process of childbirth was converted into procedures dependent on advanced technologies and similarly, the natural processes of plant reproduction are now converted to commercial means of reproduction.¹⁶ Even certain ecofeminists relate to power, labor, and property with the dominance over woman and Nature-based on their values of production and reproduction. Under this belief, it is argued that even the womb of a woman has been marketized by the dominating man folk for which social hierarchies establishing such dominations shall be eliminated.¹⁷

Impact of Offences against Nature on Women

Till now it is clear that the ideology of ecofeminism relates exploitation of Nature with the oppression of women. Therefore, in this section, it will be analyzed from scientific and practical interpretations whether such exploitation of Nature harms women more than men or not.

The 2011 Report of World Health Organization (WHO) on the relationship between gender and health stated that the major factor leading to gender differences in the cultural norms that dictate the roles of males and females within a particular community, family, or society. Moreover, norms that favor one group more than the other group which creates a disadvantageous position for such other groups are also the cause for gender differences, like a norm that restricts women from going to health clinics for regular check-ups, while men are free to go, is likely to cause serious harm to the health of the women concerned.¹⁸

Now the major ecological crisis that the contemporary world is facing due to unprecedented developmental-oriented anthropogenic activities is Climate Change. Climate change has now resulted in several health hazards which along with the pre-existing physiological, cultural, and social conditions of gender biases have made women the most vulnerable section of human society. Cecilia Soresen and others in an Article titled 'Climate Change and Women's Health: Impacts and Policy Direction'¹⁹ beautifully demonstrated the relations between situations within a society that leads to gender differences and climate change vulnerabilities and

¹⁶ Maria Mills and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism*, 24 (Halifax N.S. : Firewood Publications, 1992).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ World Health Organization "Gender Climate Change and Health", (2011) available at: <https://www.who.int/globalchange/Gender-Climate-Change-and-Health.pdf> (Last Visited on July 10, 2020, 03:11 AM).

¹⁹ Cecilia Soresen, et al. "Climate Change and women's health: Impacts and Policy Directions", 15 PLOS (February 12, 2019, 12:54 AM) available at: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal>.

how these factors together cause serious threat to the women health. Climate Change causes extreme heat conditions and woman has a very less dissipation as a result of decreased effective radiative cooling and thus such extreme heat conditions might lead to mortality or morbidity as well as several defective reproductive results like gestational hypertension, pre-delivery congenital, pre-eclampsia, etc. women's sensitivity to toxicological exposure is much higher compared to men which might make them suffer from secondary anemia since they are more exposed to the dispositions of inhaled substances within their lungs and their risk of suffering from respiratory and cardiovascular diseases is also very high since they are continuously exposed to low-quality air which consists of increased O₃ at ground level because of rising in temperature and also due to combustion of fossil fuels used for cooking purposes. In cases of disasters also women are the ones who stands at the receiving end. Even those who manage to escape such disasters undergo severe sexual violence. Ecological crises also result into food crises due to which woman suffers from both macro as well as micro nutritional deficiencies along with suffering from congenital impairments like- poor attention, impaired recovery perception, poor memory strength, etc. Teen-aged girls, aged and women with disabilities are left in a vulnerable position due to their low access to education and health care facilities along with very low family supports which ultimately makes them face a huge amount of abuse. Water pollution and inadequate supply of pure drinking water may lead to severe contamination resulting in viral, bacterial, and protozoan infections that may further include toxic exposures and also due to increased exposure to heat as they are needed to travel long distances for accessing water that may again cause uterine blood flow leading to prolong labor during pregnancy. Pregnant women may even suffer from vector-borne diseases due to an increase in temperature and other ecological changes. Pregnant women are 3 times more vulnerable to malaria than non-pregnant women. Diseases such as CNS, microcephaly, impaired cognitive development, and malformations can be caused due to the Zika virus while complications like eclampsia, cesarean delivery, and growth retractions might be caused by the dengue virus.²⁰

The Inter-Governmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) in one of its documents held that human anthropogenic activities like deforestation, greenhouse gas emissions, pollution of air, water and soil, etc. are the sole causes of climate change. And it has been already discussed that how existing cultural norms lead to gender discrimination making women more vulnerable. Thus, there remains no doubt that the traditional notions of human development have caused severe damages to the health of both woman and nature simultaneously. The Western developed world is the architect of this type of developmental model which has

²⁰ Ibid.

been proved by several ecofeminists whereby the arguments that capitalist patriarchy is the causal factor for deterioration of the health and well-being of both the natural ecosystem as well as the women hold to a significant aspect not only theoretically but also scientifically and practically.

Thus, any activity that is carried in detrimental to the Natural ecosystem, be it for development shall be held as illegal since it amounts to violence against women. At the contemporary phase of sustainable development, it is essential to consider intra-generational equity which will include the welfare of the women folks. It was rightly held by Amartya Sen that securing gender equality is most important not only for securing the future of women rather for securing the future of the entire world. At the same time, it is also important that offenses against Nature shall be curtailed and the traditional notions of development shall be reduced to a minimum for protecting the health of the women. Instances like the Chipko movement in India and the Kenyan Greenbelt movement showed the world that how women and Nature are connected and also demonstrated the validity of the arguments of the ecofeminist philosophy.

Conclusion

Ecofeminism developed as an argument against the western intellectual thoughts that favored the traditional ideologies of economic development whereby humanity has exploited a major portion of the Earth's Natural Resources which has led to severe impacts on women. Such exploitation led to unequal distributions of resources based on gender-biased notions and also killed the very living spirit of creativity of Mother Nature. Ecofeminist termed this exploitation as Capitalist Patriarchy and connected such exploitation with the oppressions against women to reflect that how both Nature and women are related to each other. However, it will not be correct enough to ascertain both women and Nature on the same footing merely just because, according to ecofeminist ideologies, they share certain common attributes. But it must be acknowledged that the degradation of the natural ecosystem that is taking place mostly because of human anthropogenic activities that are held as products of Capitalist Patriarchy by the ecofeminist are causing severe health hazards to the women and simultaneously improper growth of such women are causing loss to the creative spirit of the Natural ecosystem. Thus, any activities against the sustenance of Nature will become directly an offence against the women and vice versa.