

Ecofeminism – A Conspectus

Dr. S. Sushma Raj

*Associate Professor, Department of English, GITAM University, Visakhapatnam -530 045,
s.sushmaraj@gmail.com*

Dr. C.V.Padmaja,

*Associate Professor, Department of English, GITAM University, Visakhapatnam -530 045,
padmamonu@gmail.com*

Dr. P Sreenivasulu Reddy,

*Assistant Professor, Department of English GITAM University, Visakhapatnam -530 045,
sreenupydala@gmail.com*

Abstract

Ecofeminism is the concept that there are important connections between how one treats women on one hand and how one treats non-human nature on the other. It regards the oppression of women and nature as interconnected. However, the movement extended itself to issues of gender, race, domestication and exploitation of nature (which includes non-human creatures) and social inequalities. Consequently it is now better understood as a movement working against the interconnected oppressions of gender, race, class and nature.

Introduction

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, several journals, books and articles have been published on ‘ecological feminism’ or ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is the concept that there are important connections between how one treats women on one hand and how one treats non-human nature on the other. The multidisciplinary perspective on the topic of ecofeminism had developed towards the end of the last century. The patriarchal culture had described women in animal terms like pets, cows, pussy cats, birds and mother hens as part of ‘naturalising women’. Language, which feminizes nature, helps to keep women inferior. ‘Mother nature’, the term in general use is mastered, conquered, occupied and devastated. ‘Virgin’ land is tilled, timber felled

down, ploughed and seeds sown. The exploitation of nature and animals is justified by feminizing them and exploitation of women justified by 'naturalising' them. The terms like 'nuclear virginity' and 'barren lands' have come to stay in literary metaphors.

Ecofeminist scholars like Karen J. Warren, Deane Curtin, Petra Kelley, Judith Plant, G. T. Legler and Val Plumwood clarified the epistemological haziness. They elucidated that feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women from masculine domination. Ecofeminism is defined as the movement to fight the challenge of social domination extending beyond sex to all other kinds of oppression like race, class, economic status, political power and cultural habits. The domination of these factors and the domination of nature are mutually reinforcing. The proponents of ecofeminism argued that all feminists must oppose 'any -isms of domination'.

Environmental conditions and the situation of rural Indian women are worse than the 'first world' people. Researchers like Deane Curtin observed that 'to dismiss feminism and its offshoot ecofeminism as first world perspective is only to deny the Third world feminists their due'. However, international feminism is evolving pluralistic perspective, to include famous Chipko movement of Indian women, feminist journals like *Manushi*, or *Kali* for women and the works of feminist scholars like Vandana Shiva, Arundhati Roy and Shobha Dey. The movements of Dalit and Adivasi women in India have caught international attention. The agricultural habits of women in India (Asia as well) like gathering, processing, storing and cultivating plant foods caught world's attention.

G. T. Legler observed that Ecofeminist literary criticism is a hybrid criticism of environmental criticism and feminist literary criticism, an analysis of cultural construction of nature. It was known that until 1990, environmental concerns have not made their way into the profession of literature. It was as only when global environmental crisis was on the threshold, the literary professionals began to pay attention to issues and addressed how literature influences human behaviour with respect to natural world. The essayists, poets, storytellers, critics, and novelists of the women-nature writing included Gretel Ehrlich, Annie Dillard, Alice Walker, Josephine Johnson, Mary Oliver, Ursula Le Guin, Silko Leslie and Diane Ackermann. They called it 'Postmodern construction of human relationships with nature'. They believed that "not only in literary syntax and metaphor but in action also we are influenced by the material world of rocks, forests, rivers, birds, fishes and insects. The ecofeminist critic, Patrick Murphy suggested that the 'reconstruction of nature' is possible only when literature shifts away from patriarchal thinking. The leading American novelist Alice Walker remarked that 'I was shocked that I had forgotten that human animals and non-human animals can communicate quite well'. When this philosophy touched the academic syllabus for graduates and scholars, researches were initiated on "intimate and intricate relationships between construction of nature and works in poetry, story and novel".

Women's ecofeminist conferences in Greenham Common, Australia and Comiso suggested 'male writer' participation vital for reaching goals. The nagging descriptions like 'why men love

war', 'fight like a man', 'military might of men' suggested that men's participation is vital. They resolved that "women uncorrupted by male power and men wishing to break rigid patriarchy should complement each other, when the study of male ecofeminists was taken up.

Annette Kolodny(1975) among others demonstrated that the myth of masculine heroism during historic and prehistoric periods is the primary source of male arrogance. Isabella Bird's writings on 'mountains', Mary Austins writings on 'deserts', Rachel Carson's non-fiction on 'Oceans' and 'environment' and Annie Dillard's writings on 'Creeks' bear testimony to feminine growth in literature. These four 'heroines of nature' (Vera L, Norwood) brought the essential differences in masculine and feminine understandings of nature and ethics adopted in exploitation of nature. Rachael Carson in her book 'Silent Spring' remarked that 'it was pleasant to believe that much of the nature was forever beyond the tampering of man...man is only one drop in the stream of God'. This observation reminds us of the earlier famous quote of Havelock Ellis (The dance of life-1923) that "Sun moon and stars would have disappeared long ago...had they happened to be within the reach of predatory human hands". The 'man' in the 'human' can be said to be mainly responsible actor as 'woman' for centuries was not allowed to perform.

Henry David Thoreau, the great naturalist of America was delighted to remark "I love nature partly because she is not man...but a retreat from him". Thoreau's statement concluded two things: a) Nature is identified with 'woman'... (b) Man is an intruder into nature and to be disliked... the two observations had gone a long way, which sowed the seeds of 'eco feminism'.

Cheryll Burgess Glotfeltry (1989) in her paper 'Towards an ecological literary criticism' argued that it is the responsibility of critics and teachers to take up environmental implications in literary texts and to engage in eco-criticism. Nature writing is considered as 'a literature of hope' by the ecocritics. However, mere nature-writing as an experiential evidence and a romantic view of pastoral poetry would not suffice. The 'anthropocentric' attitude towards nature must be questioned, the ecocritics resolved.

Ecocritical movement started by Association in Western America (Glotfelty and Fromm.....) during 1985 radicalized the environmental thinking with their resolutions like:

- i) Ecocriticism is the human reaction to exploitation of nature, by androcentric attitudes. Literature reflects, records and revives the spirit to save nature.
- ii) Woman is identified with nature. The productivity, softness, aesthetic landscapes and meek submission to male-selfishness are identical in nature and woman culture of exploitation is a male product.
- iii) Ecocriticism attempts to expand the discussion of metaphors (Annette Kolodny, 'Lay of the land') describing land as 'female body' and the man, the explorer as a rapist, molester or aggressive lover in sexual act.
- iv) human interest is not the only legitimate interest but human accountability, the culture, towards nature is more important... some sense of environment as a process and not a

- constant must be developed and try to answer the questions raised by ‘feminine’ gender about nature.
- v) men’s attitude towards a landscape with a strange combination of ecocriticism and misogyny is questioned by authors like Lousie Westling in her book ‘ The great breast of the new world’
 - vi) Paul Outka in his ‘Race and Nature’ observed that the female slaves of Afro-America were raped, identified with animals (treating them equal to ‘nature’), which act exists to produce subsistence and joy for man as part of culture
 - vii) feminists got irritated and announced that ...the ‘feminine’ landscape is tortured by masculine explorer who successfully mastered the virgin territories into farms, villages, roads, canals, railways, mines, factories, cities and urban colonies.
 - viii) the gendering of land conveniently as feminine was started from 16th century itself in Indo-European languages and even earlier, the famous example from Hindu mythology that Pakrithi (nature) and Purusha (man) are none other than goddess Parvathi and God Shiva
 - ix) woman revolted for the ill-treatment meted to her and her image-nature-against the sole aggressor...man....!
 - x) Ecofeminists treat nature as ‘woman’ and show love for non-human life like trees, rains, rivers, oceans, animals and birds.

The ecofeminists juxtaposed questions like who is exploiting virgins....and virgin lands...? Is men’s gratification a rule of nature or anthropocentric culture...? Who is treating other people as machines and nature as a source of wealth to be enjoyed....? (Kolodny, 1975) Does any mother teach the child how to pluck a plant, kill a bird or crush an insect....? Is it not the exclusive privilege of man to hunt in the deep forests or poach in the polar regions? In the anxiety to commit the culprit, the ecofeminists referred to religions (New Testament Psalm 148) scriptures also, where the importance of nature is detailed. Carol Christ, the feminist ecotheologian remarked the need to restructure the world.

Karen J. Warren (1993) took up the major project of establishing women-nature connections, where she enlisted the elements as trees, forests, water, food, military service, wars, racism, sexism and classism as factors for an ecofeministic analysis. Anti –colonialism coloured women, American – Indian women, working conditions, inclusion of children, rape of weaker sex, war-rhetoric, sexual aggression, use of science and technology, deep ecology, androcentricism, and cross-cultural experiences are the “ingredients of ecofeminism’ as finalized(Karen, 1997) in the early hours of 21st century.

Creative writer and the English scholar Gretcher T.Legler suggested that the ecofeminist literary theory, with poetry, novel, essay and non fiction , is a critical tool to (a) reinterpret the values of nature-literature (b) revisioning the human relationships with the natural world (c) by raising awareness with alternative stories about landscapes, hitherto ignored as nature-writing and (d) reevaluate the male-authorships of nature believed to be absolute truths. Leglar enlisted the

writings of Gretal Ehrlich, Annie Dillard, Linda Hassels, Sue Herbbel, Alice Walker, Josephine Johnson, Lucille Clifton, Leslie Silk, Joy Harjo, Mary Oliver, Ursula Leguin and Diane Ackerman as the main ecofeminist literary critics of the times. “We, the women are supposed to abhor war because, our procreative abilities make us close to nature and since men cannot give birth to another human being, they are said to be closer to culture...their culture includes munition, war and technology and such ‘developmental’ things..!”(Murphy Patrick)

Patrick Murphy envisages an emancipatory strategy in ecofeminist literature where ‘French Feminist efforts to revision phallic representation of female desire and sexuality would help develop a theory of dynamic objectivity, away from patriarchal philosophy.

It was Vandana Shiva (1979, 1989) who said “the agricultural background of women in Indian culture was smashed in steps by masculine development projects. The reductionist mind of experts brought imported seeds, polythene bags and bank loans, bringing down the lives of women as useless and irrelevant. It is an ecological disaster, affecting women”. The suffering of village women in India is going unknown. (Butalia, 1985). Looking at the Chipko movement of saving the trees, there is no scope to dismiss ecofeminism as a “first world perspective. It is the third world that is waging a war to defend the women and deny masculine heroes destroying forests, herbal plants and mini-agricultural practices by women and women alone(Dankleman and Davidson, 1988). Women are solely responsible for acts like saving ecology, food gathering and conserve water resources (Stanley, 1982). Holyn Wilson stated categorically that “ecofeminists like Karen Warren and Vandana Shiva cannot reach the perspectives of feminism unless they extend the calculus of exploitation of women into the environmental problems, connecting nature and women”.

Rural poverty, ignorance, lack of education and patriarchal order in the third world and war crimes, technological alienation, coercion of women employees and masculine arrogance are some of the issues provoking a comprehensive ecofeministic struggle.

Conclusion

The ecofeminist perspective is not singularly defined. It is comprised of a plethora of standpoints which continually cross check and evaluate each other. It is a dynamic and developing perspective which, akin to women, should not be confined to one single definition. The many threads of the ecofeminist movement are woven together by the concept of reproduction and the continence of life on earth. In this sense, there is more unity than diversity in ecofeminist's common goal of restoring the quality of the natural environment and for people and other living and non-living inhabitants of the planet.

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