

## Capturing Complexity: A Critical Rethinking on Ecofeminism and Gender

Saraswati Raju

*Center for the Study of Regional Development, Jawahar Lal Nehru University, New Delhi 110 067, India  
Fax : 91-11-616-5886, email : Saras@jnuniv.ernet.in*

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Recent debates on environment, sustainability and development make it clear that any ecological understanding of human impact on environment can no longer afford to ignore the crucial role women play in environmental protection in wide-ranging geographical circumstances.<sup>1</sup> However, why women are perceived to be so concerned about the environment is an intriguing question, disturbingly so given a growing tendency to explain this concern in terms of special bond between women and nature, implying that women's interests and those of environment and conservation are necessarily synonymous.

Drawing from various sources, the present paper attempts to answer this question. In doing so, I begin my quest with a critical overview of the rather mystical ideological position taken by ecofeminist scholars in exploring the interlinkages between women and environmental concern, particularly in the context of developing countries. My criticism of ecofeminism is followed by an alternative explanation which places this association between women and nature in ground realities of wider social and economic realm of complex interactions between women and men as well as power structures within families, communities and institutions. The basic argument is that environmental concerns shown by women are intricately related to the division of labor within the household whereby household provisions and the basic means of sustenance are primarily managed by women. They are thus more alert to the depletion of such resources as fuelwood and water. Moreover, women have far less share/control of private property and consequently a greater dependence on common property resources (CPRs).<sup>2</sup> Any reduction in their access to the CPRs then becomes crucial to them.

Also, because of continuous interaction with their surroundings, women often have in-depth knowledge of local species and plants that are too useful to lose to the rulings of governmental agencies.<sup>3</sup>

If, however, their survival demands on it, women may actually exploit nature to their benefit, legally or illegally. Conversely, in case of reversal of traditional role models, their interests in nature may dwindle or disappear. Thus, environmental concern may develop by virtue of their social positioning through gender attributes (Molyneux, 1985). Environmental issues then become issues that are of concern to both sexes rather than remaining women's issues.<sup>4</sup> And they might as well be because ecofeminism in its present articulation assigns women sole responsibility of saving the environment oblivious to whether they are equipped to do so or not (Biehl, 1991; Kelkar and Nathan, 1991 and Leach, 1991).

This ideological position does not negate or undermine the now widespread plea to incorporate women in any environmental planning. In fact, this is precisely the point: environment is everybody's business, it ought to become women's business as well. But this business should not merely begin and end with "clearing up the mess all the time" (Mies quoted in Bhasin, 1990: 5) in the name of "natural affinity," but must extend to women's legitimate claims to resources skill-upgradation, income-generation, decision-making and much more (IDS, 1995).

It is further contended that at the core of some of the so-called environmental movements seen as representing women's attachment to nature lay the struggle for contested domain; nature and environment becoming surrogate variables at best (Jackson, 1993: 28 and Pathak, 1994).

### WHAT IS ECOFEMINISM?

Francoise d'Eaubonne was the first person to coin the word "ecofeminism" in 1974 in her book *Le féminisme ou la mort* (Davies, 1988: 4; also Dobson, 1990; Mellor, 1992 and Cutter, 1994). d'Eaubonne views the environmental crisis as closely interlinked with the subordinate position of women in society. It is argued that in the contemporary patriarchal mode of thinking, there exists important connections between the domination and oppression of women and the domination and exploitation of nature.<sup>5</sup>

Women and nature are intimately related and their domination and liberation similarly linked. The women's and ecology movements are therefore one, and are primarily counter-trends to a patriarchal maldevelopment.

Ecofeminists maintain that domination of women and domination of nature have occurred simultaneously, forging a common bond between the two. Women, they argue, therefore have a particular interest in "healing the alienated... non-human nature". Thus, the ecofeminist stand is based on an ideological position that sees both women and nature as historically inferior to men and culture in a hierarchical order.<sup>6</sup>

A certain biological determinism is thus implied in ecofeminism because some of the propositions are rooted in essential feminine principles of procreation, nurturing and caring.<sup>7</sup> In ecofeminist discourses, the fundamentally different attitude of women towards nature is then seen as an extension of their being biologically or metaphysically different from men. While women are perceived to be closer to nature, men are seen as closer to culture. These associations help them in a further formulation whereby nature is seen as inferior to culture (indigenous societies versus civilized societies!) and women inferior to men.<sup>8</sup>

It was Sherry Ortner who first equated woman with nature and man with culture (Ortner, 1974). Her arguments are compelling, but there are a few obvious limitations in her expositions, particularly as translated into contemporary discourses on gender and environment. The following section addresses these limitations in the oriental context.

### CHALLENGING THE ASSUMPTIONS?

The connection between the oppression of both women and nature lies in the conceptual framework of patriarchy since [atriarchy leads to a logic of domination of what has been identified as "male" over what has been identified as "female". This is normative dualism dividing the world in two opposites and placing one over the other, which is in direct contrast to the ecological principle of interconnectedness. This dualism has also been questioned by Cecile Jackson who finds it difficult to accept ecofeminists' attempts to put men and women together with culture and nature in neat dichotomous categories in an unequal position. She maintains that this position is untenable because culture is grounded in the human brain which is part of nature. Because men and women are both part of nature and have mentality, they are part of culture. Another constraint is that this dichotomy cannot be ethnocentrically universalized from Western intellectual history (Jackson, 1993: 14).

Sherry Ortner's essentially Western analogy of women with nature and men with culture has an interesting parallel in Indian philosophy whereby a woman is equated with *Prakriti* (nature) and a man with *Purush* (the seed) but there are some basic differences between the two.<sup>1</sup>

The Indian analogy is essentially based on the procreational capabilities of women, but that does not necessarily imply passivity of the earth and the activity of seed as some argue. In the *Samkhya Karika*, which is at the base of the Indian philosophy and is taken for granted, *Prakriti* (nature [matter]) and *Purush* (spirit [Pure Consciousness]) do exist independently, but the empiric self is explained only by the union of spirit with nature. Despite several problematic formulations, the mutual dependency or interconnections between the two is the fundamental point of the whole *Samkhya* system. It is important to note that in this system, Nature (read women) is primarily an object of enjoyment for the Spirit, (read man), but subsequently it is the Nature (women) which brings about the release of Spirit (man) from suffering (Sastri, 1973:



53-4). If at all, nature (woman) is placed in a superior position.<sup>10</sup>

In Indian philosophy both men and women are seen as part of nature, and humans perceive themselves as another form of nature as life is said to consist of five basic elements (*panchbhut*) of earth, water, fire, air and ether (sky). Interestingly enough, out of these elements, fire and air are male gods while water is a female goddess. Further, the creator of the universe is half male and half female (*ardha nari nateshwar*). The male and female principles are thus seen more as complementary than antagonistic. In hermetic traditions elsewhere, too, nature is not conceptualized as separated from spirit and the two are seen to exist in coitus, the fusion of masculine and feminine (Keller, 1985).

As pointed out by Ortner herself, in the Chinese ideology of Taoism, the female principle (yin) and the male principle (yang) have equal roles to play in giving "rise to all phenomena in the universe" (Ortner, 1974: 68). Thus, the sustaining relationship is one of symbiotic existence with nature rather than a confrontational one (Rao, 1991: 63). Moreover, transgression of one form into another is possible. In the (*Gandharva*) tantric tradition, "the male form, the female form," and, for that matter, any form, is seen as subsumed in "[Goddess's] Supreme Form" (Mookerjee, 1988: 41). Otherwise the underlying principle of feminine is not universal. In some African societies there exists a complete reversal of gender roles.<sup>11</sup>

Elsewhere it also has been pointed out that women have a bridging function between nature and culture because such activities as mothering, healing and farming are as social as they are natural (King, 1989). Similar examples from various sources could be cited ad infinitum.<sup>12</sup>

The ecofeminist discourse is based on some sort of affinity between women and nature. However, the bond may or may not remain eternal and vary over time and space. The term "nature" like "gender" also requires probing. Ecofeminists essentialize nature and instead of seeing nature and environment as culturally relative, they perceive them as biological facts. However, the meaning attributed to nature is historically and culturally specified through symbols (Jackson, 1993: 16).

Ecofeminists argue that in the scientific construct of the West, "mother nature" has been transformed into "female nature". Since mother nature conjures nurturing images which act as "cultural constraints on exploitation of nature," this transformation from "mother" to "female" has made it much easier to subjugate nature to masculine form of domination. This straightforward formulation is not applicable in the Indian situation where earth/nature is still identified as mother. These perceptions are articulated in the icon of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) which had during the course of Indian history acquired multiple accretion of meaning. As pointed out by Chowdhury-Sengupta, in the early nationalist ideas and images in Bengal, the emerging "discourse styled its own symbol of resistance in the image of a motherland "greater than heaven itself" (1992: 20). In the glorification of motherland laid distinct male anxiety for national valor and authentication in the face of a culturally better organized order of the (British) rulers (Bagchi, 1990). At the same time, other compensatory heroic and physically courageous images were flashed off (to overcome the "colonial constructed anxiety about the weak and effete Bengali male"). As pointed out by Chowdhury-Sengupta, however, "this ... imaging ... far from being constructed in isolation, was a significant correlate of the image of the *Bharat Mata*— the heroic mother of dauntless sons". There is thus a bond between mother earth and her son both drawing strength from each other. As far as 'the relationship between *Bharat Mata* image and the lived experiences of women' is concerned, "it is complexly layered" (Chowdhury-Sengupta, 1992: 22, 23).

In this context, it is important to point out that at a theoretical level gender-related symbols do not [always] determine the self-awareness of men and women as gendered, nor do they simply reflect cultural assumptions about what is male or female. Gender-related symbols, in their full complexity, may refer to gender in ways that affirm or reverse it, support or question it; or they may, in their basic meaning, have little at all to do with male and female roles (Bynum C.W. quoted in Ramawamy, 1992: 42).

Admittedly, present-day ground realities in these societies are at variance with ideologies.

With their male order, both the Chinese and the Indian cultures may be termed as predominantly archetypal patriarchal societies, but that precisely is the point. If the subordinate position of women is to be equated with nature confronting man in alliance with culture in an overarching theoretical framework, the social, economic and political processes which increasingly lead to the unequal positioning of men and women in these societies need to be historically traced instead of assuming male dominance and female subordination as inherently given and therefore irrefutable.<sup>13</sup> That is, the assumed domination of nature/woman and culture/man cannot be assumed as given and therefore cannot be a starting point.

Further, there is more to a given society than the binomial divisions of male and female segments of population. In the Indian context, the hill-forest regions and their inhabitants, the tribals as a whole, continue to remain (historically as well as contemporarily) in subjugation-dominance syndrome with their "more" civilized non-tribal neighbors in the plains. Within the tribal group, then, the gender division of labor is not as clearly defined as the proponents of ecofeminism would like us to believe, and women often transgress the boundary of nature into cultural domain (Kelkar and Nathan, 1991: 113). Significantly enough, Ortner recognizes the fluidity and/or overlap between nature/culture dichotomy and the intermediate position of women within it. What she argues in defense of her initial position, however, is that women are associated with lower-level conversions from nature to culture. To support her argument she cites the example of early socialization of children and mothers' predominant roles in that socialization and a later transference of that role to fathers, i.e. the initiation of boyhood (mothers' responsibility) into manhood (fathers' responsibility) (Ortner, 1974: 80).

Once again, this association of women with lower-level acculturation is not all pervasive. In the Tamil texts written during the hegemonic colonial discourses and later on in the revivalist text on *Tamilttay* (Tamil language, literally Mother Tamil), the Tamil women perforce became visible and metaphorically intertwined as a surrogate *Tamilttay* responsible at par (with the men) for the revival of Tamil language (higher

form of acculturation) (Ramaswamy, 1992, *passim*).

Interestingly, in popular imagery women are associated with hearth and home, which in turn are linked with settled life, while men are seen as mediators with the wild, the open and the untamed.

### TOWARDS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING

To understand the nexus between women and environment, a more subtle approach is thus needed to replace ecofeminists' rather essentialist arguments predominantly based on ideological premises with a complete negation of material context— an approach that recognizes the complex interactions between women and men located in a wider economic and socio-political institutional realm. The complexities arise on the following counts.

Differences among women and among men based on gender division of labor within the household and their background and other factors.<sup>14</sup>

Although there is no denial that female subordination "is a cultural universal" (Ortner, 1974: 71), the essentialist view of women, i.e. clubbing all women as women in a homogeneous category and equating them in an undifferentiated way with nature undermines class, caste, ethnic, location and racial variations which cut across gendered categories quite considerably. On one hand, for example, the environment is perceived very differently by tribal/non-tribal rural women, rural men and forest (men) officers and elite urban women (Jackson, 1994: 72 and Poffenberger, 1995). Several permutations and combinations of these may increase the categories much further. On the other hand, in some cultures there are no significant differences in knowledge and concerns regarding forest use between males and females (Flaherty and Filipchuk, 1993, and Mohai, 1992). It may be because of the existing gender division of labor whereby females continue to perform the traditional role of water collection whereas firewood collection remains a male responsibility, and both men and women bear the brunt of forest degradation (Flaherty and Filipchuk, 1993: 263, 268)



In certain rural Rajput communities of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, men indeed collect water because of the prevailing rigid purdah system; and their women show no particular concern for environment.<sup>15</sup>

*The Conventions and Hierarchies of Gender Positioning in the Family and Community including State Bodies*

In 1972, a male member of India's Planning Commission publicly admitted that if men were to fetch the water, all the villages in India would have had drinking water available in the next twenty-five years (quoted in Rao, page 57). Incidentally, it is altogether a different story that even after the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (1981-1991), only 62 per cent of the households in India have access to safe drinking water. In rural India, this is still lower with 56 percent (Census of India, 1994: 67).

A more pertinent question would have been "which men?" Commenting upon the nexus between the State, its institutions and the affluent peasantry and the "... intensification of capitalist relations of production" which has enhanced the process of environmental degradation at the expense of poor peasants in the Jodhpur area of Rajasthan, Goldman has outlined the difficulties faced by both men and women belonging to the lower rung of the peasantry (Goldman, 1994 : 27-29). Still more significant is the fact that prevailing land relations do not allow women to explicitly translate their concern/awareness regarding environment into action (Oniang'o., 1994: 36-3).

Existing case studies bring out little information on women's reaction to environmental change, except that women have tended to suffer a great deal the negative impact environment requiring additional resources and energies. Research has recorded very few specific cases in which women were actively involved in the rehabilitation of degraded land, tree planting or forest protection through protests and collective initiatives.<sup>16</sup> In fact several Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMC) in India are male-dominated institutions, and women have a very limited role in decision making. As Kelkar and

Nathan observe, the "job of [forest management remains] essentially a male one" (1991: 16). It is possible that in the absence of their say in an official forum dealing with forest issues women feel a high degree of helplessness (Ghirmire, 1994: 34).<sup>17</sup>

*Differences Between Women's and Men's Interests and How These are Played Out*

There is no ecological consciousness among women that is naturally acquired. No doubt, it is much easier to mobilize women for action if parallels between their subordinate position in society (which get reflected in the way their activities are perceived) and the given environmental issues can be drawn, but the fact remains that awareness comes through the impact of environmental degradation and who reels the most under that impact. For example, in the Pacific villages in Costa Rica, depletion of water resources, in part as a result of deforestation in upland areas, required women to queue for longer periods for water in the dry season. In a community forestry program through eco-development camps in India, voluntary organizations could observe how firewood crisis had become a feminist issue and how women were demanding fuel and fodder trees, whereas men were in favor of fruit and timber trees. A similar observation has been made by Schenk-Sandbergen in the hill districts of Uttar Pradesh in India where women identified the link between their hardship and the depleting forest covers and the negative role played by commercial interests in their struggle for survival. In contrast, men of the village council thought of provision of infrastructure facilities as more viable exchange option than axing a few odd trees (Schenk-Sandbergen, 1991: 85, also 1985).

In Pakistan and Uganda, women needed to spend longer hours to collect firewood and other essential forest products, although men, too, have begun participating in these activities. Water management is another good example (Rao, 1991; World Bank, 1991).

Agarwal draws attention to the Indian hill women's resistance to conversion of a patch of land located in a reserved forest into a potato seed farm. This resistance was not because of any particular concern about preserving the

forest. Instead, the fear was about unequal access to and control over, cash resources in the event of the seed farm getting established (Agarwal, 1992). Another telling example is from village Dhali Gaun in Nepal where no significant difference was noticed between perception and evaluation of different fodder types by men and women. However, when individual categories are subjected to closer examination within the context of village life and in relation to the data collected from survey and inventory, gender-related differences did emerge. About 85.6 per cent women consultants selected *Ficus nemoralis* as their first choice for the best fodder tree whereas only 27 per cent of men consultants selected this particular species. What is still more interesting is the reason for selection of *Ficus nemoralis* as a preferred tree by women. This tree was cited as the best species because i) it is cultivated almost entirely on private land, and ii) its consumption increases milk production in milch animals. The latter point assumes importance since milk production in Dhali Gaun is not commonly for market consumption. In contrast, the tree *Quercus semecarpifolia* favored by men consultants suited for making clarified butter (*Ghui*). *Ghui* is an important cash commodity in the village (Rusten and Gold, 1995: 99-101).

Livelihood strategies differ by gendered interests. In some contrasting cases women may even seek financial autonomy at the expense of environmental cost. For example, in Cameroon the proposal of contour-bunding in order to prevent soil-erosion was extremely unpopular with women, not only because they were difficult to construct, but also because it meant shifting of land under subsistence farming to herding and cash crops which are essentially controlled by men. Similarly, beer brewing in much of South Africa is primarily done by poor women to generate independent cash incomes. Yet beer brewing requires large amounts of fuel involving large-scale deforestation and cutting down of live wood (Jackson, 1993: 21, 27).

Finally, a cautious note is in order against uncritical use of some examples as women's concern for environment and against taking these examples out of their context. One much maligned case is that of Chipko (hug the tree) move-

ments which have been cited ad infinitum as women's movement to stop the cutting of trees. Yet the movement was much more than what it was thought to be and written about. What it was not was an absolutist environmental action by women exemplifying special bond between them and nature.<sup>18</sup> That such a movement should trigger off in these hills was partly because of the region's impressive history of mass movement based on forests. The earliest documented grievances appear in 1906 and 1916. While there was a definite female militancy, the feminist mantle of Chipko is blown out of proportion and the whole episode is so romanticized that the current needs of women in the hills of Uttar Pradesh have been obscured (Tinker, 1994: 370 and also Mehta, 1991). According to Guha's account, women were the activists only in one village, but elsewhere men were in the organizational forefront, and it was in the tradition of popular protest. More importantly, the entire movement was built on a historical under-deprivation of the Kumaun and Garhwal hill people and state efforts to usurp a previously non-existent "right" of the government to forest and wasteland (Guha, 1989 and Aryal, 1994). A worn-out example, but the discrepancies between various accounts of Chipko forcefully bring forth the unenviable task of placing apparently women-oriented environmental struggles and concerns in wider historical, economic, socio-cultural and contextual perspective and of disentangling the realities from the myth.<sup>19</sup>

#### NOTES

1. See *Development* 1994, Volume 1 for the debate.
2. For the kind of household dependence and a predominantly female-oriented workload within that dependence, see Jodha, 1986.
3. This gender-specific environmental stress has been brought out by Wickramasinghe in three villages of Sri Lanka where she notes that out of nine environmental stresses, four, i.e. dwindling forest cover, expanding monoculture of crops, decreasing soil fertility and soil erosion are felt by both men and women whereas reduced access to CPRs, depleting fuelwood and plant resources, reduction in biodiversity and water scarcity are exclusively felt by women only (Wickramasinghe, 1995: 14).
4. A study in the rainforests of Mexico specifically asked whether men, women or everyone should protect the forest. Out of those who thought that the forests should



- be protected, about 58 per cent were of the opinion that "it was everyone's responsibility".
5. This concept of ecofeminism has been termed as "cultural ecofeminism," which is significantly different from other forms. (see Dobson, 1990; also Hombergh, 1993).
  6. Contrast this with the cultural geographical position on nature/culture dualism whereby all nature is reduced to "cultural text" written by humans with former occupying a passive position. It is a different story altogether though that "human" is essentially masculine (Demeritt, 1994).
  7. The biological determinism is aptly stated in the following statement by Suzan Griffin: "Those of us who are born female are often less severely alienated from nature than most men," quoted in Hombergh, 1993:50.
  8. There is an alternative proposition. Being equated with nature or indigenous society may in fact put women in a more moral and righteous position *vis-a-vis* than men— which goes again the grain of ecofeminists' position.
  9. This ideology gets reflected in widespread prohibition of women in India in handling agricultural equipment—plough— which is used prior to putting seeds in the fields because of its symbolic association with the act of impregnation.
  10. In tantric cosmology also the whole universe is seen being built up from and sustained by dual forces, *Sakti* and *Siva*, the feminine and masculine principles, but sometimes the feminine form may dissolve as the Goddess admits in the *Devibhagavat*, 'at the time of final dissolution I am neither male, nor female, nor neutral.' Quoted in Mookerjee, 1988: 23.
  11. A film entitled "Our God is Female" shown during the International Geographic Union's Meet in August 1992 at Washington, D.C. USA depicted the life of living African tribals where the male roles were exactly like female roles and responsibilities elsewhere. Even the use of language and expressions were the same.
  12. See Homebergh (1993: 47-53) for extensive bibliographic material; also, Mellor (1991: 50-81).
  13. Ecofeminism has been criticized for obscuring much earlier roots of patriarchy and Indian culture as well as for dramatizing and restructuring history into pre-ordained concepts (Sethi 1989, also, Hombergh, 1993: 30-31).
  - 14] I borrow these points with some modification from IDS Policy Briefing, Issue number 5: August 1995.
  15. Based on Field survey and observation by the Author.
  16. It is altogether a different story that even after the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (1981-1991), only 62 per cent of the households in India have access to safe drinking water. In rural India, this is still lower with 56 per cent (Census of India, 1994: 67).
  17. Interestingly, however, women in Jamtoli (Bihar) were found resilient about their traditional lack of participation in community-based forest management. First because they found it difficult to spare time from their busy household schedule to attend committee meetings management and second because they could always get to know the happenings at the meetings and convey their viewpoints to their household committee member or to their leader 'who listens to them.' Personal communication with Sarah Jewitt who spent a year and a half in Jharkhand probing agro-ecological knowledges and forest issues for her Ph.D. degree at the University of Cambridge. This is in direct contrast with the observation made in Nepal where the male members of the household who attended the meetings of the forestry committee did not inform the womenfolk at home about decisions made at the meetings (King et al., 1989).
  18. Several scholars have pointed out that Chipko as a popular resistance movement in the western Himalayas, was aimed at immediate survival issues much more than at promoting ecological philosophy (Peritore, 1993: 809). The ecological tag was brought in subsequently so as to impart the movement legitimacy and wider mobilization of interest groups (see Pathak, 1994).
  19. For example, a question is often posed by the Western audience in informal discussions and discourses on gender and environment, particularly in the Indian context: why it is that the ecofeminists' point of view (for all practical purposes they mean Shiva's point of view!) is so well received and the alternative ideas do not come to the fore? One of the important reasons for this may be because of the essentialist argument of the ecofeminists who find the bond between women and environment rooted in the feminine psyche finding a parallel between the overwhelmingly Western concern towards environment interlinked with aesthetics.

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