

A Comprehensive Study of Ecofeminism

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ABSTRACT Cartesian ontological belief has placed man over other beings and has separated humans from nature. This Cartesian hierarchical thinking has led to the destruction of the environment so much that our lives are at stake now. Man's anthropocentric behaviour has impelled him to a perilous situation where his very existence is threatened. Man's anthropocentric attitude is the root cause for this unprecedented climate change because the male supremacy believes that women as well as nature are entities that can be controlled. Ecofeminism, as a theory, challenges the existing patriarchal paradigms and holds that there is a strong connection between women and nature and they are inseparable. The objective of this paper is to present a comprehensive view of ecofeminism as an emerging theory of literary research by focusing on its origin, development, precepts, and proponents.

INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented climate change is a clear indication that the blue planet is in peril. Man's anthropocentric behaviour has pushed him to a critical situation where his very existence is threatened. In his attempt to modify the environment to suit his personal needs, he upsets the equilibrium of mutual dependence leading to sabotage (Filippone 2013: 15). Man's anthropocentric attitude is the root cause for this unprecedented climate change because the male supremacy believes that women as well as nature are entities that can be controlled. The term ecofeminism appeared first in *Feminism or Death* in 1974 by Francoise d'Eaubonne, the French Feminist. From then onwards ecofeminism as a discourse has permeated in all the deliberations that are related to feminism and ecology. As a philosophy, ecofeminism thrived when feminist thinking integrated with ecological thinking. As a theory, ecofeminism challenges the existing patriarchal paradigms and holds that there is a strong connection between women and nature and they are inseparable. The emergence of an earth centered approach to literary studies in the 90's has strongly criticized the conventional outlook towards the environment. Moreover this approach believes that the social disposition of male dominion is the cause for the oppression of women and the abuse of the earth.

Objectives

The objective of this paper is to present a comprehensive study of ecofeminism as an emerging theory of literary research. The paper also explicates the origin and development of ecofeminism. Further it accentuates the precepts and proponents of ecofeminism.

METHODOLOGY

Though there is a copious amount of ecofeminist analysis in various disciplines, a research paper that can give a comprehensive study of ecofeminism per se is scant. Hence, an attempt has been made to give a theoretical and conceptual framework of ecofeminism and its principles by giving a detailed analysis of books and articles related to ecofeminism. This is a review paper and the researcher has analyzed the major primary and secondary sources of ecofeminism. Moreover, in order to understand the emergence of ecofeminism the paper will throw light upon the Environmental Justice Movement and Feminism.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

It is evident from the history that the literature of the early stages was anthropocentric. Marlowe and Shakespeare created all their tragedies keeping men at the center of foci. Milton

showered encomium on the fallen man. But the pre-romantics and the romantics in Britain like Robert Burns, Thomas Gray, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats and Byron started the literary tradition of placing nature at the center. The great trios like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau were inspired by the Romantic Movement. Emerson's "Nature" is a plea for living in harmony with nature. Thoreau demonstrates his affinity to nature through his retreat to Walden. Hawthorne, Melville, Cooper, Mark Twain and others also celebrate the woods and the wilderness. Notwithstanding the contribution of the Native American writers to the genre of American nature writing is incredible.

When the world witnesses a resurgence of environmental concern, writers and artists of Africa, America and that of the Caribbean, have expressed their anxiety about the ecological imbalance of their bioregions. For example, Ken Saro-Wiwa and Wole Soyinka of Nigeria pulled in the attention of the international community through their works on the environment. All these accentuated to the study of environmental literature. Environmental literature pedagogy has rapidly increased and diversified since the teaching of environmental literature first gained its identity in the 1970s. The late 1970s and the early 1980s were the crucial periods in its development but it was further accelerated by the subfields like ecocriticism, environmental justice movement and ecofeminism.

Ecocriticism as the name suggests examines the relationship between humans and the non-humans in a literary text. It aims to restore the environment to its original shape by creating an awareness or consciousness among the reading public. This new form of literary criticism places nature at the center. William Rueckert's through his essay *Literature and Ecology* introduced the term *Ecocriticism*. In their book, *Reading under the Sign of Nature: New Essays in Ecocriticism*, Tallmadge and Harrington (2000: ix) accentuate that ecocriticism is an approach or perspective that has paved way for an interdisciplinary literary investigation. In her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Glotfelty (1996: xix) examines that environmental criticism is based on the fundamental principle that human culture is connected to the natural world either affecting it or affected by it.

Another movement which defends the cause of environment is the Environmental Justice

Movement. Environmental Justice Movement refers to discriminatory practices in giving environmental protection to the colored people. It was in the early 1980s that environmental justice emerged as a movement. It gained momentum per se when the populace of Warren County, North Carolina staged their protest against the dumping of toxic waste in their bioregion. The Warren County protest, a protest by the people of colour received national attention. Prior to the emergence of Environmental Justice Movement the members of other environmental movements were white. But after the Warren County issue the movement bloomed into a radical, multiracial, grass root environmental and social justice movement.

Environmental Justice can be described as the ultimate stage of environmental movement. This movement questions the types of environmentalism that arose in the sixties and seventies. The environmental consciousness grew as a result of the publication of the most influential book titled *The Silent Spring* (1962) by Rachel Carson. This book is a critique of the environmental and health problems caused by pesticides and demanded a reformation in the treatment of nature. The role of women, especially women of colour, in the Environmental Justice Movement or in protecting the environment cannot be negated. Though men played a crucial role in the early stages of the Environmental Justice Movement it has been the women of color who have been prominent in leading the movement towards its victory (Rainey and Glenn 2009: 146).

The ecological consciousness blended with the feminist conscious paved way for ecofeminism. Since its conception, feminism has grown into a significant, revolutionary influence upon social, political, economic and aesthetic areas. Primarily, as a protest movement against patriarchy, feminism demanded equal rights and status for women. As a social movement, feminism seeks equal rights for women, ensuring them equal status with men and freedom to choose their own careers and decide their life patterns. In its study of the experiences of women, feminism links art to life and explores diverse issues ranging from sexual, social to political and incorporates them into the study of literature. Feminism struck its roots with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of the Woman* (1792), a rev-

olutionary work on a woman's place in the society. *The Vindication* concentrated on the illumination of the woman's mind and challenged patriarchy which sought equal rights for women in all spheres of life. Another major event that geared the growth of feminism is The Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, which was organized by leading ladies like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott and others. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Antony founded the "National Women Suffrage Association" in 1897. From America the movement spread to Europe.

Simon de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxieme Sexe* (1949) heralded the birth of modern feminism. A worldwide bestseller, it inspired the feminist consciousness and propounded the idea that emancipation of women includes liberation for men too. In 1963, the American feminist, Betty Friedan, in her book *The Feminine Mystique* protested against male domination and the passive roles assigned to women in the society. Friedan along with others founded the "National Organization for Women" that campaigned against laws and practices that discriminate women. This broadened women's self-awareness to achieve equality in all spheres. In fact, Feminism became an umbrella term encompassing the whole range of ideas and theories concerned with women.

Feminist Literary Criticism was born as a result of the Women's movement of the 1960s, which promulgated literary ideas through its questioning of the authority of the image of women portrayed by the literature of the day. One woman who made an indelible mark during this time was Virginia Woolf. Woolf was primarily concerned with women's material disadvantages compared to men. Deemed as a classic feminist work, Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* examined women and their struggle as artists, their literary history and the need for freedom. Her *Three Guineas* deals with male power and profession. She identifies the social forces pertaining to the growth of fascism. She is of the opinion that fascism is inextricably linked to patriarchal power which ultimately leads to the disruption of peace.

Showalter in her *A Literature of their own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977) divides the women's literary progress into three different phases. Women writers belonging to the feminine phase just imitated their male counterparts. In the feminist phase women's writing reflected the minority rights and fi-

nally in the female phase the misogyny in male texts is being replaced by female writing and female experience. Among the writers who gave a voice to the colored women were feminists like Gloria Anzaldua, Chela Sandoval, Bell Hooks, and Audre Lorde were voices raised on behalf of the coloured women. Issues like multiculturalism, environmentalism and globalism became the focal point. Queer Theory, Coloured women consciousness, Womanism, Post Modern Feminism, Post-Colonial Feminism and Ecofeminism are offshoots of the Third Phase.

Post-modern feminists have developed their ideas based on the writings of Foucault, Beauvoir, Derrida and Lacan. Helen Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva are some of the postmodern feminists. Cixous criticized the very nature of man's writing, which is filled with binary oppositions like culture/nature, colonizer/ colonized, head/ heart etc. She then relates these oppositions between man and woman. This male/female dualism is the main categorizing force in the society. While Cixous correlates female writing with female sexuality, Luce Irigaray establishes a new feminine language as she found a masculinist philosophy underlying in the language of theorists such as Freud, Derrida and Lacan. While Judith Butler criticizes the works of Michael Foucault through her *Gender Trouble* Donna Haraway attempts to secede traditional Oedipal narratives and Christian doctrines like Genesis. Post-Colonial Feminism today has crossed geographical and intellectual borders. The main contention of postcolonial feminist is that colonization has marginalized women. Gayatri Spivak, Uma Narayan, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Amrita Pritam, Bapsi Sidhwa, Tehmina Durrani and Taslima Nasrin enunciate these issues.

The difference between feminism and ecofeminism is that ecofeminism particularly includes the nonhuman nature in its discourse. "From ecology it learns to value the interdependence and diversity of all life forms; from feminism, it gains the insights of a social analysis of women's oppression that intersects with other oppressions such as racism, colonialism, classism and heterosexism" (Lahar 1991: 42).

Karen J. Warren defines ecofeminism as:

"Just like feminism there is no single definition for ecofeminism. Ecological feminism is a term that encompasses ideologies from liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, radical and socialist

feminisms. The distinct feature of ecofeminism lies in its assertion that nonhuman nature as well as naturism are feminist issues" (Warren 1997: 4).

Ecofeminists claim that there is a deeper connection between the abuse of natural resources and the abuse of women. They have introduced a feminist perspective quite contradictory to the traditional patriarchal ways of relating things to the environment. Ecofeminism expands the ecocritical theory by stating that "nature and gender issues are closely interwoven and the same strategies of domination are used in the feminization of women and nature" (Hubben 2013: 2). Ecofeminists try to ascertain that there is a deep connection between earth and man because the word human itself is derived from 'humas' which means earth or dirt. But the patriarchal system presumes, wrongly, that "one can lord over others without ultimately debasing oneself, that one can pollute, exploit or dump others, including human and non-human others, without also ultimately polluting, exploiting, or objectifying oneself" (Caputi 2007: 25). Further, ecofeminism's principal contention is that the basis for all the ecological imbalances is dualism and hierarchy proposed by the Western systems (Gross 2011: 18).

In addition Birkeland (1993: 18) in *Ecofeminism: Linking Theory and Practice* describes ecofeminism as a value system and hence calls for a political analysis that can explore the interconnection between androcentrism and ecological obliteration. Ecofeminism insists on "the need and right for women to have the space to explore their own individual relations to various environments" (Diamond 2017: 73). Ecofeminists in particular attack the dualistic thinking like male/female, humans/nonhumans, culture/nature and mind/body and so on. Ecofeminism affirms the need for a new paradigm that can only be reweaved through cooperation, mutual love and care for the world. From the beginning ecofeminism criticizes the social construct, developed by the patriarchal system which considers self, man, human, culture and white as superior and their counterparts like other, woman, animal, nature and non-white as inferior. Dangling with its roots to the social movements like anti-militarism and peace movements of the 60's and 70's and finding its firm roots to the environmental and feminist movements, ecofeminism first found its identity in the conference

titled "Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 1980s" organized by Ynestra King along with Anna Gyorgy and Grace Paley. The conference conducted eighty workshops that dealt with themes that are related to technology, art, theology, feminism, ecology and politics. Over 650 delegates attended the conference. The outcome of it was the emergence of organizations and events that include the famous Women's Pentagon Actions of 1980 and 1981.

One of the early collection of essays on ecofeminism appeared in 1983 titled *Reclaim the Earth: Women Speak Out for Life on Earth*. These essays deal with varied topics like anti-nuclear activism and environment besides women's health, women and land rights etc. Further, ecofeminism gained popularity through the 1987 conference titled "Ecofeminist Perspectives: Culture, Nature Theory". From then on ecofeminism has started addressing issues of worldwide concern resulting in the publication of a plethora of books on environments. Some of the earliest texts that spearheaded the ecofeminist movement are Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring* (1962) and Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (1979) and *Dreaming the Dark* (1982) which challenge all relations of dominations and assay the structure of power. While Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and Scientific Revolution* (1981) appreciates female sexuality, Indian author Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1989) expounds the relations between colonialism and environmental exploitation. In addition Judith Plant's *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* (1989) reveals the abuse that man has done to his environment and presents women as healers. Andree Collard and Joyce Contrucci's *Rape of the Wild: Man's Violence against Animals and the Earth* (1989) presents the viciousness of man towards animals and women.

Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein's *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* (1990) is an anthology that discusses the devaluation of nature and women by the patriarchal society and envisages the restoration of earth to its proper contour. Carol Adams' *Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist Vegetarian Critical Theory* (1990) discusses the interconnection between patriarchy and meat eating. Donna Haraway's *Simians, Cyborgs and Women:*

The Reinvention of Nature (1991) represents the repressed beings like simians, cyborgs and women and the need to review science and technology. Greta Gaard's *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (1993) discusses the relationship between humans and the non-humans.

Ariel Salleh's *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx, and the Postmodern* (1997) offers empirical insights into feminism and environmentalism. Karen Warren's *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature* (1997) deliberates eight sorts of women – nature connections. Greta Gaard and Patrick Murphy's *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy* (1998) examines the literary works of Octavia Butler, Linda Hogan, and Ursula K. Le Guin from an ecofeminist perspective.

Glynis Carr's *New Essays in Ecofeminist Literary Criticism* (2000) is a compendium of essays that delineates diverse topics like multiculturalism, environmental Justice, racism, post colonialism through an ecofeminist lens. Marti Kheel's *Nature Ethics: An Ecofeminist Perspective* (2008) critiques gender development from a psychological and social stance. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2009) examines the relationship between humans and the nonhumans in postcolonial texts. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva's *Ecofeminism* (2010) accounts the different perspectives of women from North and South on environmental deterioration.

If one traces the history of the world, women have always been considered as vanguards of protecting the environment and they are the first, susceptible and most affected victims of environmental destruction. When compared to men women are “more disproportionately disadvantaged in chronic as well as catastrophic environmental hazard situation” (Buckingham 2004:152). Rachel Carson by exposing the hazards of the pesticide DDT has set the stage for the environmental movement. In 1974 at Garhwal in India, forests trees which provided the major source of livelihood for the villagers were slashed and supplanted by commercial trees like eucalyptus and pine. This action of the government deprived the villagers of their livelihood. The local people knew that deforestation will lead to a landslide, soil erosion and floods. In response to this act, the women of the Garhwal opposed by embracing the trees *and thus pre-*

vented the initiative by the government. This accomplishment by women was later inscribed in the history of India as “Chipko Movement”. This alertness prevented not only soil erosion but also the loss of biodiversity in indigenous forests. Similarly after few years, in 1977, Prof. Wangari Maathai of Kenya also accentuated the significance of planting trees. She launched “The Kenyan Green Belt Movement” which may prevent fuel shortage and desertification.

Likewise in the U.S. Ms. Lois Gibbs protested against the government to save the Love Canal from becoming a chemical landfill. These chemical wastes created insurmountable health hazards especially to women and children. It not until the angry women started ravaging the public property the local government discerned the situation and passed an Act that penalized the polluters who were responsible for the obliteration of the environment.

It is evident from the mentioned success stories that through their innovative and daring acts women have always enjoyed and are good at creating a positive and protective relationship with the environment. Whether it be the “Chipko Movement”, “The Green Belt Movement” or “The Love Canal” there is one common strand that runs through these movement and that is women are the first one to articulate their concern towards the protection of the environment. These movements have demonstrated how both women and nature have suffered. Cynthia Hamilton points out that “Women often play a primary role in community action because it is about things they know best... Women are more likely to take on these issues than men precisely because the home has been defined as a woman's domain” (Quoted in Warren 1997: 11). Ecofeminist Greta Gaard (1993:1) in *Living Interconnections with Animals and Nature* insists that “Ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature.”

In *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, Diamond and Orenstein (1990) evince three important stances of ecofeminism. Firstly, social justice encompasses environmental justice as human life is primarily reliant on the eudaimonic condition of the earth. Secondly, since the earth is considered as sacred ecofeminism is spiritual. Finally, while the earth pro-

vides us plenty we should revere and respect its needs thereby maintaining a sustainable living. Noel Sturgeon an active exponent of ecofeminist theory in *The Nature of Race Discourses of Racial difference in Ecofeminism* outlines five ways or positions of the theory.

1. Patriarchy perceives women and nature on the same plane hence, environmental issues need a feminist analysis.
2. An efficacious study on women's subordination necessitates an environmental investigation since women and nature are interconnected.
3. Due to their close association with nature like farm duties, household duties, and childcare women quickly perceive and foresee environmental problems moreover they are the ones who are more susceptible to the environmental hazards.
4. Women are closer to nature biologically because their menstrual cycles coincide with nature's seasonal and cyclic patterns.
5. Nature based religions like paganism and witchcraft provide ample resources for feminist spiritual analysis as these religions are based on the power of female and values female deities on par with male deities (Sturgeon 1997: 263-264).

Karen J. Warren the acknowledged ecofeminist carefully exemplified ecofeminist oppressive theoretical framework based on eight connections that are established between women and nature.

1. Historical, Typically Casual Connections

Before the invasion of Indo-European societies about 4500 B.C the society was considered to be a matrifocal and there existed a strong bond between humans and nature. The advent of the scientific revolution in the sixteenth and seventeenth century which perpetuated commercialization and industrial expansion paved the way for the exploitation of nature and the subordination of women.

2. Conceptual Connections

The oppressive and patriarchal conceptual framework holds logic of domination characterized by power over the powerless and that perceives women and nature in male-biased ways.

3. Empirical and Experiential Connections

Focuses on uncovering empirical evidence linking the ways in which women and environment are affected.

4. Symbolic Connections

Few ecofeminists have investigated the signs, symbols and the language that is used in the devaluation of women and nature.

5. Epistemological Connections

These are attempts to give a detailed analysis and assessment of the rationalism behind the Western philosophical tradition which perpetuates value dualisms.

6. Political (Praxis) Connections

Basically, ecofeminism is a grass root political movement inspired by a wide range of women and environment issue that includes the treatment of animals as well. It also focuses on anti-nuclear and anti-militarist activism.

7. Ethical Connections

The interconnection among female, animals and the rest of the nonhumans need a feminist ethical analysis.

8. Theoretical Connections

This connection extends the conventional ethical concerns to encompass animals and the rest of nature (Warren 1997: 13-14).

So, it is concluded that "ecological feminism" embraces all of these connections that exist between women and nature hence comprehending these connections is a mandate for any feminist and environmental exploration.

Ecofeminists scholars have identified three types of ecofeminism namely Radical, Social and Cultural that emerge from feminist philosophy. Radical ecofeminism affirms that nature is not gendered as gender is a social construct. Moreover gender differences are instituted by patriarchy that devaluates women and nature. Radical ecofeminists also believe that there is a strong connection existing among racism, sexism and the dominance over nature. Socialist

ecofeminists claim that sexism, racism, and classism are intertwined with naturism. Twine (2001: 3) remarks that “Social ecofeminism romanticizes neither hegemonic ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ identities, instead it takes both a historical and sociological view of mutually reinforcing dualisms”. Biehl (1991: 6-7) in the introduction to *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* states that social ecology necessitates a complete eradication of all hierarchies that afflict women who are considered as god mothers, priestess and highest of all the guardians of morality.

Cultural ecofeminists contend that women are entirely different from their male counterparts because of their nurturing characteristics thereby making them associate with nature more easily than men. In addition cultural ecofeminism believes in goddess based spirituality.

In prehistoric period, women were worshiped as a goddess and they were held in high esteem as a giver of life but due to the emergence of patriarchal culture “mother goddesses was dethroned and replaced by male gods and subsequently female deities became subservient” (Merchant 1990: 100).

To sum up, some of the basic precepts of ecofeminism according to Birkeland (1993: 20) are

1. Basic social transformation is indispensable.
 2. Everything in nature has inherent value. Veneration and compassion for all life forms (human and non-humans) are crucial for societal transformation.
 3. Replace anthropocentric view by biocentric perception.
 4. Managing or controlling non-human nature is offensive. Working with the land leads to the preservation of natural diversity.
 5. Changes in power based relationship and hierarchy are mandatory. Foster an ethic of reciprocity
 6. Since the dualistic concept of patriarchy fosters an ethic of dominance, integrate dualisms like male/ female, thought/ action, culture/ nature, etc.
 7. Change the ideology of power based relations that have an effect on the personal relationship between men and women and give due importance to values.
 8. Establish a balance between the genders
 9. Withdraw power and energy from patriarchy.
- Moreover as Klein suggests that this earth is our mother and the need of the hour is a world-

view that is based on regeneration and renewal rather than domination and depletion. (Quoted in Evans 2015: 223) As rightly pointed out by Diamond (2017: 73) “a biocentric view would displace both anthropocentric and androcentric dominance”. Finally women should be included in important decision making at local, national and international levels (Gaard 2015: 30).

CONCLUSION

As a value system, ecofeminism aims to explore the links between androcentrism and environmental exploitation and calls for an end to all kinds of oppression. Its exponents assert that there is not one ecofeminism as it embraces wider category of natural elements and articulates varied social practices. Ecofeminist philosophy highlights the sacredness of the earth and emphasizes that social justice includes a justice for the earth. Eventually ecofeminists try to create awareness among the public and necessitate on living in harmony with the natural world. By dismantling domination and the structures of power and by regenerating and reviving the natural world and returning to the original unpolluted state should be mankind’s supreme responsibility. To conclude ecofeminism seek to reconstitute our living by resurrecting a sense of oneness with nature. Balancing the ancient feminine principle with male principles dismantling the dualistic concepts we can establish a symbiotic living.

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