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Ecofeminism: A New Dimension of Women's Movement

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Abstract

Ecofeminism as a third-wave feminist movement focuses on the interlinkages between nature and women and tries to analyse critically the domination of women and the exploitation of nature. In the early stages, the feminist movement was limited to men and women but later on, after a deep analysis of the issues some feminists find that this problem is associated not only with men and women but also with the environment. The ecofeminists find women's liberation is not possible unless men's immoral treatment of the environment is not resolved. They are against patriarchal domination and value dualism thus, they set their main goal i.e., the 'decentralisation of power'. The main objection of the ecofeminist against patriarchy is that in the patriarchal lens firstly, they apply the same derogatory language against women and nature, and secondly, women and nature both are treated as 'objects' in the hand of patriarchy and in this way the intrinsic value of both women and nature is denied. The reason that ecofeminists find over here is the 'logic of dualism'. So this paper shall try to analyse how ecofeminists address the patriarchal domination over women and nature, and whether they achieve their project at all or is it still elusive.

Key words- Ecofeminism, Third-wave feminism, women-nature relationship.

The word 'ecofeminism' is the amalgamation of two words i.e., 'eco' which refers to ecology or in the perspective of this environment and 'feminism' which stands for a movement associated with the equality of women. So, ecofeminism can be said to be an activism or a movement that focuses on the interlinkages between nature and women and tries to analyse critically the domination of nature the and exploitation of women. As we know, feminism emerged as a movement seeking for justice against all the despise and discrimination that women face in society and wants to establish the values of women. If we analyse this feminist movement, we shall find it can be classified broadly into three parts viz., the first wave feminism; confined to equal rights of women e.g., right to education, right to vote, political equality etc. The second wave of feminism; the movement that wanted to diminish any kind of 'ism' that tries to create discrimination between two being without any relevant ground viz., patriarchy, racism, sexism etc. In other words, a movement confined to gender justice i.e., the establishment of gender neutrality while formulating any theory, policy etc. The third wave of feminism technically called ecofeminism the idea that both women, and nature are the victim of male domination. Now in this project we shall first try to analyse what is ecofeminism and thereafter we shall concentrate on the purpose of ecofeminism, and how they address the patriarchal dominance over women and nature. And finally, did they achieve their project at all or is it still elusive?

The term 'ecofeminism' was first coined by Francoise d'Eaubonne in her 1974 book *Le Feminism Ou La Mort*. This concept was further developed by Ynestra King in her article *What is Feminism*.¹ In her book *Le Feminism Ou La Mort*, d'Eaubonne explains the concept of ecofeminism as "ecofeminism relates the oppression and domination of all marginalised groups (women, people of colour, children, the poor) to the oppression and domination of nature (animals, land, water, air, etc.)."² If we look at our society, we see that both women and nature are victims of the male domination. Although, in the early stages, the feminist movement was limited to men and women, later, after a deep analysis of the issues, some feminists found that this problem was associated not only with men and women but also with the environment. They saw that the unethical behaviour of humans towards the environment is based on male dominance over females, which is embedded in patriarchy. It has been argued that there is a strong interrelation between women and nature, and from this perspective, it can be said that the identity of women is identical to nature. In this context, Vandana Shiva and many more ecofeminists refer to the Chipko movement, from an ecofeminist perspective. The 'Chipko movement' technically called the 'Hugging Movement', originated in the Garhwal region of Uttar Pradesh, in 1973. This movement is initiated against a commercial company and their leaseholders, who wanted to earn huge profits by cutting the forests of that region. To stop them, the villagers, especially the girls and women, hugged the trees. Enraged by their behaviour, the leaseholders asked, 'You foolish village women, do you know what these forests bear? Resin, timber, and therefore foreign exchange. And the village women replied, 'Yes, yes, we know, what do the forests bear soil, water and pure air.'³ This clearly shows how intimate the women are with nature. At this juncture, Vandana Shiva, the Indian ecofeminist, also quoted "women in sustenance economies, producing and reproducing wealth in partnership with nature, have been experts in their own right of holistic and ecological knowledge of nature's processes. But these alternative modes of knowing, which are oriented to the social benefits and sustenance needs, are not recognised by the reductionist paradigm, because it fails to perceive the interconnectedness of nature, or the connection of women's lives, work and knowledge with the creation of wealth."⁴

Apart from this, it has been also said that nature is the form of the mother. Because just as a mother takes care of her children in the form of a woman, nature also protects us in the same way. That's why probably women have been seen taking a leading role in environmental protection. But some new feminists having different lines of thinking saw that in a patriarchal regime, the environment is exploited and dominated by men, just like women. The question can be raised, the male domination over women is understood, but what is the nature of male domination over the environment? If we look carefully very easily it will be seen that the power-greedy male society has indiscriminately destroyed forests to fulfil their interest, since early period. They are continuously looking for urbanization and industrialization. But the question is whether the plan of urbanization and industrialization by cleaning the forest lands and destroying the agricultural land is one-sided. Or in other words, are the men folk only enjoying the benefits of urbanization and industrialization, and are women not enjoying these benefits? Then why only men are offending? We shall concentrate on these questions later on. But whatever the case may be, the main thing that stands out, in this case, is that women's liberation is not possible unless men's immoral treatment of the environment is resolved and those who took a leading role in this movement are identified as the pioneers of ecofeminism and some of the leading ecofeminists are Francoise d'Eaubonne, Val Plumwood, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Karen J. Warren, Vandana Shiva and so on.

Perceiving the domination of women and exploitation of the environment, Rosemary Ruether in her book *New Women New Earth* asserts that "Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socio-economic relations and the underlying values of this (modern industrial) society."⁵ That's the ecofeminist set their main goal i.e., 'decentralization of power'. According to them because of the monopoly of power men considers themselves omnipotent, they think that they are superior and all other being, including this environment, are inferior therefore, they have the power to control the inferior. Most ecofeminists believe that male supremacy over women and nature rest on value dualism and in this value dualism, the nature of the domination is the reason over emotion, mind over body, men over women, culture over women, and human over environment. But the ecofeminist objects that human values must be gender neutral, it is completely immoral to have different social standards for men and women. Like men, women must have equal values both have to look from the perspective of humanity and apart from them the ecofeminist claim that our environment is also intrinsically valuable. So, the men influenced by the ideology of patriarchy cannot arbitrarily use or harm the environment at their convenience.

The main objection of ecofeminists against patriarchy is that they apply the same attitude towards women. In careful observation, it is shown that, in the application of our everyday language, they said about women that, 'she conceives' so of nature that 'she bears seeds', along with, the term 'infertility' is applied both for women and nature. Not only this, the most derogatory remarks in case of rape of a girl/woman applied by the patriarchal society is 'her character, deportment etc. are not right', as if she is only responsible for being raped. The ecofeminist further argue that in a patriarchal society, women are often treated as animal term e.g., cows, serpents, bitches, witches and nature is treated as feminine and sexual terms e.g., 'nature is raped', controlled, dominated etc.⁶ Thus, the ecofeminist Carol Adamas narrated "language that feminizes nature and naturalizes women describes, reflects and perpetuates unjustified patriarchal domination by failing to see the extent to which the dominations of women, non-human animals, and nature are culturally (not just metaphorically) analogous and sanctioned."⁷

Another line of the objection of ecofeminists against patriarchy is that in the patriarchal lens, women are treated as an object, they are looked at as machines for child production and fertility. In a patriarchal society, women have been turned into child-producing machines, and both the productive and reproductive capacities of women are controlled and directed by patriarchy. As if it is thought that having children and taking care of them is the main work of women and this is how they become an object in a patriarchal society.⁸ So far, the situation of the environment is observed the same thing has happened with nature also. The environment is looked at only for its productive utility, its value is determined in respect of human values. Thus, in patriarchal domination, the intrinsic value of both women and nature is denied. But the ecofeminist claims that biotic and abiotic entities both are intrinsically valuable. The feminist argues that in a matter of the exploitation of women and domination of nature the theory that plays a significant role is the 'logic of domination' which asserts that, there are certain differences between two entities and that differences are determined based on superiority and therefore, it claims that 'superiority justifies subordination.'⁹

So, it seems clear that, the ecological problem is closely related to the women's problem as ecofeminism is concerned. Now let's have a look at our previous query i.e., if men and women both enjoy the benefits of urbanization and industrialization, then why men are only blamed for the destruction of the environment? Or in other words, the question can be raised, when ecofeminist protest against the destruction of the environment, is their opposition only against the patriarchy or against the entire human race? If we accept the former one in that case the aforementioned question needs to be clarified by the ecofeminist. If we accept the latter, a moral dilemma arises i.e., as per as environmental ethics is concerned, like a human being, nonhuman entities are also intrinsically valuable, so it is immoral to utilize environmental resources to self-convenience. But without the utilization of environmental resources, how can human beings sustain themselves? At this juncture, another moral dilemma arises regarding urbanization and industrialization i.e., the ecofeminists object that as a result of urbanization and industrialization, multiple natural hazards like deforestation, flood, soil erosion etc. often occur, which has a direct impact on nature as well as other animals living in nature. But at the same time, it is also true that without urbanization and industrialization social progress can not possible. Thus, the question is which alternative should be taken? If we accept the former, social progress may stop and if we accept the latter, ecological problem remains unsolved.

Thus, analysing the issue cited above it can be said that, the position of the ecofeminist is very much unique, it is unique not because they equated the problems of women and nature, but because they have shown it very clear that, the main reason behind these problems is 'logic of domination' and, unless and until this domination is ended the issue of women, as well as nature is not resolved. So, the question arises how exactly the ecofeminists will seek to end this domination? Does ecofeminist oppose industrialisation? If yes, what alternative do they suggest for social progress? If not, then what will be their position? Last but not the least, in this 21st century, the exploitation of women and the domination of nature are still burning issues, and global warming has become a major concern. So, does the ecofeminist have to go on a long journey to achieve their goal? These are some of the questions that are asked frequently in this context and need further research.

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