

Variants of Ecofeminism: An Overview

Dr. Himajyoti Doley

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, L.T.K. College, Azad, North Lakhimpur, Assam

Abstract

Ecofeminism is a social and political movement that connects environmental degradation to gender oppression, advocating for social justice and political democracy. It critiques both feminist and ecological movements, emphasizing the exploitation of women alongside environmental destruction, rooted in patriarchal and capitalist systems. Ecofeminists promote the intrinsic value of nature and women, aiming to dismantle hierarchical structures, while highlighting the unique relationship women have with the environment. Historical contributions from thinkers like Françoise d'Eaubonne and Rachel Carson shaped ecofeminist discourse, linking women's subjugation to environmental issues. Core principles include gender equality, respect for nature, and holistic connections, advocating for transformative values for a just society. Ecofeminism has different faces that have developed under different circumstances and in different contexts. The paper is an attempt to make an overview about the different ecofeminist positions.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Women, Nature, Goddess, Culture, Patriarchy

Introduction

Ecofeminism, a social and political movement, links environmental degradation to gender oppression, challenging and transforming power structures that sustain both, highlighting the interconnectedness of both. Eco-feminism is a combination of feminist, peace, and environmental movements are to promote social justice and political democracy. Ecofeminism or ecological feminism is a direct consequence of the combination of ecological movement and feminist movement which calls for social justice and political democracy. It acts simultaneously serving as environmental critique of feminism and a feminist critique of environmentalism (Hobgood-Oster, 2005). In order to critique domination and promote a synthesis of feminist and ecological ideas for political organization and ecologically just lifestyles, ecofeminist theory focuses on the oppression of women and the exploitation of the environment. The text explores the connection between women's subjugation and the exploitation of the natural world. Ecofeminism can be defined as a “value system, a social movement, and a practice which also offers a political analysis that explores the links between androcentrism and environmental destruction (Das, 2022). It argues that patriarchal and capitalist systems are to blame for both the environment's deterioration and women's subjugation. Ecofeminism accepts the intrinsic value of both nature and women and aims to dismantle patriarchal structures through categorical or dualistic hierarchies. It argues that if these dualisms persist, humanity remains divided against itself, highlighting the need for a more inclusive and equitable society. Through an analysis of the relationship between human dominance and women's exploitation, ecofeminism questions traditional feminism. It recognizes the special abilities that only women possess qualities like creativity, sensitivity, and compassion that males are unable to acquire. The framework examines how gender and nature intersect, especially how binary definitions

falsely categorise opposing groups, assigning disproportionate value to one grouping and encouraging hierarchical thinking (Bove, 2021). According to ecofeminists, males profitably exploit nature, but women have a unique relationship with it that gives them a stake in its preservation. Gender inequality has disproportionately affected women in the face of climate crisis due to resource allocation, labor divisions, and power imbalances, rather than their inherent earth-protection role. Climate change, influenced by gender inequality, disproportionately affects women due to poverty, limited access to basic human rights, and escalating violence. The Paris climate agreement includes provisions to support women in coping with climate change hazards, highlighting the need for gender equality.

Ecofeminism was created in the face of the threat of environmental destruction as well as the threat of masculine violence against the natural world and against women. The same things that are harmful to the environment have also been harmful to women (Brisson, 2018). The ideology emphasizes women's significant impact on environmental issues, with studies showing women are more likely to be affected by environmental degradation than men. Ecofeminism opposes the male-dominated system that puts financial gain ahead of environmental preservation and promotes protecting the environment and fostering relationships with it in order to preserve biodiversity globally. Ecofeminism aims to combat the strained relationship between nature's domination and women's subjugation, particularly in patriarchal settings. It asserts self-interest in preserving natural resources and believes in its emancipatory potential. Francoise d'Eaubonne, a French writer, coined ecofeminism in her book "Le Féminisme ou la Mort (1974)" which highlights how women may lead an ecological revolution. The interdependence of humans and environment was first made widely known by Rachel Carson's book "Silent Spring, 1962" highlighted public health concerns about ecosystem damage caused by pesticide use in farming and industrial waste disposal in nature. Her work helped shape the Environmental Movement that culminated in the 1970 Earth Day and the 1972 Stockholm Environment Conference. Other influential ecofeminists include Susan Griffin's "Women and Nature, 1978", Mary Daly's "Gyn/Ecology' 1978", Rosemary Ruether's "New Woman/New Earth, 1975", Carolyn Merchant's "The Death of Nature, 1980", Judith Plant's "Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism, 1989", Maria Mies's and Vandana Shiva's "Ecofeminism, 2014", Ariel Salleh's "Ecofeminism As Politics, 1997" Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein's "Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism, 1990" and Val Plumwood's "Feminism and Mastery of Nature, 1993". Ecofeminist activists conducted campaigns, boycotts, and demonstrations throughout the course of three decades (1970–2000) to draw attention to the connections between environmental justice issues and those pertaining to women. Ecofeminism is a philosophical approach that emphasizes the interplay between the exploitation of women and the dominance of nature. It tackles the concerns of female subjugation, subordination, and domination. It aims to include the human system of domination and recognizes the historical and symbolic association of women with nature. Ecofeminism attributes patriarchy as the root cause of women's and nature's domination, a system where men are privileged and women remain unprivileged. This system has created structures that continue and expand oppression, allowing men to exercise illegitimate power and control culture. Some fundamental principles of ecofeminism are as follows:

1. Gender equality is something that ecofeminism promotes.
2. Non-patriarchal structures: Non-linear or non-patriarchal structures are valued by ecofeminism.
3. Respect for nature: Ecofeminism acknowledges that humans are reliant on nature and regards the planet as sacred.
4. Holistic connections: Collaboration, intuition, organic processes, and holistic connections are valued by ecofeminism.

5. Values should alter in favour of cooperation and caring, according to ecofeminism.

Ecofeminists attribute value dualism to patriarchy, a rational framework in which values connected to the other are viewed as inferior. Australian philosopher Val Plumwood has contributed significantly to ecofeminism by analyzing dualisms such as “culture/nature”, “reason/nature”, “male/female”, “mind/body”, “master/slave”, “reason/matter”, “reason/emotion”, “mind/spirit”, “freedom/necessity”, “universal/particular”, “human/non-human”, “civilized/primitive”, “production/reproduction”, “public/private”, “subject/object”, “self/other”. Ecofeminists argue that the women-nature connections and men's domination under capitalist patriarchy cause ecological destruction and the exploitation of women. They argue that women are subordinated to men and all other inferior others. “Ecofeminism has taken the historical/symbolic association of women with nature as demonstrating a special convergence of interests between feminism and ecology. The convergence is seen to arise in part from the fact that patriarchal culture has located women somewhere between men and the rest of the nature on a conceptual hierarchy of being; God, Man, Women, Nature (Eckersly, 1992).” Caring for co-participants in the natural world, both alive and inanimate, gives women the confidence to question the prevalent notions of supremacy and superiority in patriarchal systems. Although ecofeminism is encouraging links between environmental activism and feminism, it needs to go beyond merely making moral claims in order to reach its full potential. Eco-feminism, like feminism, has various strands expressing different opinions on women-nature connections and environmental destruction. There are various figures like Rosemary Radford Ruether, Ivone Gebara, and others offering diverse perspectives on these issues.

Liberal Ecofeminism: Liberal ecofeminism, a widely held belief, emphasizes the ability of individuals within domestic systems to regulate and control the environment, attributing environmental problems to economic expansion. It makes the claim that women will contribute more to environmental politics and policy as a result of their growing economic and political clout. This is corroborated by empirical research on women and environmental politics. It aims to address ecological concerns by advocating for equal representation of women in government, non-governmental organizations, and scientific research institutions. Liberal ecofeminists, furthermore, trust empirical studies of women and environmental politics to document women's efforts to develop and implement ecologically conscious, gender-sensitive policy both within and between nations (Allison, 2017). They advocate for better science, natural resource conservation, and equal educational opportunities for women scientists. They use traditional lobbying techniques to legitimize women's participation in environmental projects and encourage them to work together with men to prevent environmental degradation.

Socialist Ecofeminism: Socialist ecofeminism acknowledges the materialist relationship between humans and environment despite biological and cultural distinctions. It makes the case that all dominance structures, including the patriarchal treatment of women by men, need be abolished in order to reverse the detrimental impacts of capitalism on the environment. Socialist ecofeminism sees the natural and human world as active agents, as well as material forces (Mellor, 1997). Socialist ecofeminism sees environmental problems as rooted in the rise of capitalist patriarchy and the ideology that the Earth and nature can be exploited for human progress through technology (Merchant, 1990). To maintain ecological sustainability, institutional and behavioral reforms must be implemented by both men and women. It highlights the relationship between women and nature, as well as the importance of the natural and human worlds in correcting the contemporary societal injustices. It uses a neo-Marxian framework and critical theory to challenge capitalist patriarchy and its oppressive

nature. Socialist ecofeminism criticizes mechanical science and its treatment of nature and the emergence of capitalist patriarchy and its philosophy of using nature for advancement of humankind and blames it for its contribution to environmental problems and the alienation of men and women from each other. Emphasizing nature as the foundation of human life, socialist ecofeminism critiques contemporary capitalist institutions for placing a higher priority on production than reproduction—a role that is exclusively assigned to women. They argue that nature, like women, has been devalued, exploited, and even destroyed by the entwined forces of capitalism and patriarchy (Allison, 2017). It aims to liberate women by overturning economic and social hierarchies, leading to sustainability and a just society.

Social Ecofeminism emphasizes economic and political analysis, proposing solutions based on radical municipalism, small-scale communities, and participatory democracy. It aims to liberate women by overturning social and economic hierarchies, arguing that patriarchy dominates women, others, and nature based on gender, race, and class. Social ecofeminists view subordination of women to men, domination of nature, and gender supremacy as forms of oppression. This strand is represented by various ecofeminists. Social ecofeminism, as it developed, split into two distinct schools of thought by the late 1980s: radical ecofeminism and cultural ecofeminism.

Radical Ecofeminism critiques patriarchy as the root cause of environmental problems and idealizes the feminine. Radical ecofeminists contend that the dominant patriarchal society equates women and nature in order to degrade both (Miles). Radical ecofeminists are critical of the worship of a father god or transcendental god; they worship goddesses, claiming that the replacement of goddesses with a transcendental god was linked to the rise of patriarchy, male dominance, wars, and the devaluation and destruction of nature (Warren, 1997). Radical ecofeminists argue that patriarchal culture in power equates and degrades both women and nature, contributing to their degradation. Radical feminists are concerned with the perception of men as competent to establish order, while women and nature are often associated with negative or commodifiable traits. This form of ecofeminism has largely focused on the sphere of consciousness in relation to nature-spirituality, goddess worship, witchcraft and celebration of women's bodies (Datar, 2011). Radical ecofeminists criticize the worship of father gods and transcendental gods, arguing that the replacement of goddesses with male gods led to the rise of patriarchy, male dominance, wars, and devaluation of nature. They celebrate women's biology and nature as sources of female power.

Cultural Ecofeminism, a strand of ecofeminism, argues that women's intimate relationships with nature due to their gender roles and biology make them more sensitive to environmental degradation. The celebration of ancient rituals centred on goddess worship is seen as a powerful tool for personal and social transformation. Cultural ecofeminists see an essential relationship between women and nature and employ spiritual or poetic modes to explore oppression on a personal and larger scale (Nhanenge, 2011). Ecofeminists criticize patriarchy for creating masculinity by separating women and nature, and seek a caring society without domination and devaluation. Cultural ecofeminists highlight how women's biological traits and gender-related responsibilities, such as caring for the family and preparing food, link them to the environment. Cultural ecofeminists find that the patriarchy created masculinity by separation from control over both women and nature (Nhanenge, 2011). Cultural ecofeminists argue that these relationships help women become more aware of the environment's purity and pollution. Because it creates a stronger connection with nature, which is essential for human cooperation, they argue that society should cherish this sensitivity. Other pillars of cultural

ecofeminism include the worship of nature and goddesses to redeem the spirituality of nature and women's vital role in it. They call for the revival of goddess-worshiping civilizations.

Carolyn Merchant's work, "The Death of Nature", presents a **Marxist view of ecofeminism**, focusing on the historical context of environmental change and the subjugation of nature. She critiques capitalism, mechanistic science, and environmental injustice, arguing that the historical domination of nature has been a significant issue intertwined with the oppression of women and labour classes. Merchant's work connects ecological thought with ecological changes, highlighting the complex interplay between material, social, and economic relations.

Spiritual Ecofeminism: The growth of ecofeminism as a political movement has been greatly impacted by spiritual ecofeminism, which has the ability to overthrow patriarchal oppressive structures. Spiritual ecofeminism tries to highlight the important connections between women, others and nature which has been the central themes of ecofeminism. It tends to combine a celebration of women-centred values like mothering, nurturing and caring with a celebration of women's bodies (Mellor, 1997). It is inspired by Native American, Australian, and New Zealand tribal religions and earth-based religions, celebrates women-centred values and women's bodies. It revives nature-based spirituality and urges women to call upon the power of the Goddess. Ecofeminists like Charlene Spretnak and Carol Christ support spirituality is a potent tool for women who are fighting for change. Judith Plaskow's anthology "Women Spirit Rising" reclaim spiritual experiences of women and history, creating new theology and earth-based feminist spirituality. Spiritual ecofeminists believe it is vital to resurrect old religions and encourage goddess worship, as well as see women and nature as sacred religious beliefs (Ottuh, 2021).

Affinity Ecofeminism emphasizes on between women-nature relationship focusing on their position in western societies. They believe women are closer to nature due to their biological and social differences, while men have moved away from nature. Andree Collard and Ynestra King's versions of ecofeminism share this view, as they do not see a fundamental conflict between men and women. Affinity ecofeminism emphasizes upon the combined celebration of women-centred values with a celebration of women's bodies and wants to revalue the experiences of women in patriarchal society (Mellor, 1997).

Animal Rights-Oriented Ecofeminism emerged in the late 1990s, based on work "The Sexual Politics of Meat" by Carol Adams. It links patriarchal treatment of non-human animals and women's exploitation, particularly in the meat-producing industries. The collection by Greta Gaard explores the ways in which patriarchal systems oppress both women and animals in tandem. Andree Collard and Joyce Contrucci's work explores masculinized violence against animals and the natural world. Marti Kheel is a prominent ecofeminist in animal rights. An ecofeminist ethic of care must include as Marti Kheel states:-(i) a narrative, contextual approach that investigates the roots of environmental problem with a view to removing the external and internal factors that block the growth of empathy, (ii) acts of attention that promotes moral imagination and enhance empathy. (iii) a focus on individual beings as well as larger whole, (iv) an embodied response that expresses our feelings for others through concrete actions excluding the practice of veganism (Kheel).

Activist Ecofeminism seeks to analyze historical and cultural phenomena, reforming patriarchal structures, and shifting political alliances. "Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory and Political Action" by Noel Sturgeon aims to create an inclusive, politically engaged ecofeminist movement. Activist ecofeminists usually see their position as an analysis of a particular historical and cultural phenomenon (Hobgood-Oster, 2005).

Third World Ecofeminism aims to challenge the exploitative paradigm perpetuated by patriarchy by focusing on the impact of global economic shifts on indigenous women's lives. Ecofeminists like Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva, Claudia Von Werholf, and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen emphasize practical experiences and materialist understanding of society, addressing marginalization and alternative survival strategies. The perspective is rooted in material reality and sees the relation between women and nature as structured by gender and class organization of production, reproduction and distribution (Rao, 2012). They criticize mainstream women's movements for their exclusivity of women's experiences and demand equal rights for men in terms of money and power. They also challenge the distorted connections between humans and nature and the distorted connections between other creations. Vandana Shiva's endeavour to create seed collectives, in order to share and (re-)create seeds for farmers to gain independence from the power of multinational companies imposing genetically modified seeds, chemical fertilisers and pesticides, among other products, has gained worldwide recognition (Joshi, 2023).

Maria Mies emphasizes the importance of women's labour in subsistence work, particularly in rural India, where they respect and celebrate the earth's sacredness through rituals. Bina Agarwal advocates feminist environmentalism, which recognizes the interconnections between women, nature, and others. She highlights the impact of environmental degradation on women in poor peasants and tribal households, who are both victims and active agents of environmental regeneration.

Manisha Rao's text "Rethinking the Ecofeminist Discourse: View from the Western Ghats, India" highlights a community-led movement in Karnataka to save forests for the spice garden economy. The Appiko Movement, which led to collectives and agroforestry activities, highlights the need for feminist political ecology perspectives. Ecofeminism in India highlights women's everyday activities, including collecting forest produce, weeding, planting, weaving, and farming, as essential to economic activity. Women work closely with nature and face migration into low-pay-high-value jobs like nursing and construction. With climate change failures, state intervention is necessary to regulate farming and activists against Land Laws, emphasizing the importance of women's involvement in environmental preservation.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is understood that Ecofeminism is a social and political movement that links environmental degradation to gender oppression and advocates for social justice and political democracy. It critiques feminist and ecological movements, emphasizing the exploitation of women and environmental destruction. Ecofeminists promote the intrinsic value of nature and women, dismantling hierarchical structures and highlighting the unique relationship women have with the environment. Ecofeminist positions vary, with liberal advocating for equal representation, socialist challenging materialist relationships, social focusing on economic and political analysis, radical critiquing patriarchal culture, cultural emphasizing intimate relationships with nature, spiritual celebrating women-centred values, and affinity emphasizing the relationship between women and nature. Animal Rights-Oriented Ecofeminism links patriarchal animal treatment to women's exploitation in meat-producing industries, advocating for contextual environmental solutions and critiques mainstream women's movements. Third World Ecofeminism challenges patriarchal norms by examining global economic changes on indigenous women's lives, emphasizing practical experiences, materialist understanding, marginalization, and alternative survival strategies in India.

References

1. Allison, J.E. (2017, November 30). Ecofeminism and Global Environmental Politics, Oxford Research encyclopaedias International Studies, Retrieved from <https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-158;jsessionid=F64F7D4E169EA08EEB5A2A125213B788?rskey=4achiS&result=10>
DOI <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.158>
2. Bove, T. (2021). Ecofeminism: Where Gender and Climate Change Intersect, *Policy and Economics*, Retrieved from: <https://earth.org/ecofeminism/>
3. Brisson, S. (2017). Mother Nature: The Feminine Natural, Women's Connectedness to Nature: An ecofeminist Exploration, Regis University, ePublications at Regis University, 18
4. Das, R. (2022). Role of Women in Environmental Protection, Management and Development: A Study in North East India, *Society and Culture Development in India*, 2 (1): 149-160, Retrieved from www.arfjournals.com <https://doi.org/10.47509/SCDI.2022.v02i01.10>
5. Datar, C. (2011). Feminist Ecopolitics, *Ecofeminism Revisited: Introduction to the Discourse*, Rawat Publications, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi, 11
6. Eckersly, R. (1992). *Environmentalism and Political Theory* (ed.), State University Press of New York, Albany, 64
7. Hobgood-Oster, L. (2005). Ecofeminism: Historic and International Evolution in B. Taylor (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Nature*, London & New York, Continuum, 533, 537
8. Joshi, M (2023). Ecofeminism in India: Struggles and Perspectives, Retrieved from: <https://publications-prairial.fr/representations/index.php?id=258>
9. Kheel, Marti. Communicating Care: An Ecofeminist Perspective, Retrieved from: <http://www.waccglobal.org/articles/communicating-care-an-ecofeminist-perspective>, Accessed: 06/10/2024
10. Mellor, M. (1997). *Feminism and Ecology*; New York University Press, Washington Square, New York, 1, 56
11. Merchant, C. (1990). Ecofeminism and Feminist Theory in I. Diamond-G. Orenstein (ed.), *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, Random House, California, 103
12. Nhanenge, J. (2011). Ecofeminism, Towards Integrating the Concerns of Women, Poor People and Nature into Development, *University Press of America*, 102, 153.
13. Ottuh, P.O.O (2021) Spiritual Ecofeminism: Towards Deemphasizing Christian Patriarchy, *Abraka Journal of Religion and Philosophy*, 1(1) 51
14. Rao, M. (2012). Ecofeminism at the Crossroads in India: A Review, *DEP n.20/2012*, 32.
15. Warren, K. J. (1997). *Ecofeminism: Women, Nature and Culture* (ed.), Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 66