

Ecofeminist Discourse in Postcolonial India: A Critique of Capitalism, Modernity and Patriarchy

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Abstract

The term ecofeminism in India is not popular in the common parlance. But the kind of connections it has made between the lives of women and nature, between ideas of being a woman and being natural, the responsibilities of women towards their immediate environment (includes family), nature are very much present in discourses of media, NGO projects, corporate welfare schemes, academics, common perceptions, in environmental movements/activism and in writings/literature that deal not only with environment /nature but of all kinds. Therefore, the relevance of ecofeminism is not ecofeminism per se, but how the connections it makes have spread across various discourses in contemporary times in the Indian context. This paper investigates how ecofeminist influence lies in the problem that arises out of the kind of connections ecofeminism makes, the identities it talks about, its emphasis on certain kinds of connections and certain kinds of identities. The paper also intends to problematise the connections and identities that ecofeminism has produced and still produces--and therefore the relevance. And thus, instead of claiming ecofeminism to be passé, it would be more appropriate to say that it continues to enjoy various degrees and kinds of presence in discourses both academic and non-academic.

The origin of ecofeminist theory in India undisputedly remains the Chipko Tree hugging movement of the 1970s. Vandana Shiva in her much acclaimed book Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India, claims that women's environmental action in India precedes the UN's women's decade and the 1972 Stockholm Environment Conference (Staying 67). She notes an event in the recorded history of Rajasthan where some 300 years ago, around 300 members of the Bishnoi community led by a woman called Amrita Devi sacrificed their lives to save their sacred khejri tress by clinging to them. Though Shiva traces the history of Chipko movement to this event in

Rajasthan, the context of how and why this recorded event occurred goes unmentioned.

There are no particular dates that can be fixed for the Chipko movement. The movement is spread across many villages in the Garhwal region of what is now the State of Uttaranchal in Northern India. Shiva traces the history of how several women and some men since India's independence had dedicated themselves to subsistence living, afforestation (not merely planting trees, but planting ecologically appropriate ones) and to cherishing, sharing, producing and maintaining life. This served as the organizational base for the movement that slowly spread in the 1970s. The Chipko initially began as protests to protect land and forest rights for the local people, especially to utilize local forest produce. Later, the Garhwal witnessed organized protests against commercial exploitation of forests by outside contractors. Shiva records how in 1973, 75 year old Shyamala Devi mobilized local women of Kedar Ghati against the contractor who was ready to fell the trees. They threatened to embrace the trees if the trees were being cut and the contractor had to finally withdraw. There are several such incidents which led to tree-hugging by local women and subsequent withdrawal by the contractors. In 1975, women of the hill regions of Uttaranchal organized a 75 day trek and another 30 day trek to mobilize opinion on women's increasing workload due to deforestation, the scarcity of food and water that was a resultant of deforestation.

Through songs and narratives of the time, Shiva weaves the history of Chipko with lives of local women being at its centre stage. The movement inspired Shiva to write about the lives of people who live "close to nature" and at the same time reverentially sustain it. Since the publication of Ecofeminism with Maria Mies and Staying Alive, Shiva has been the most vocal proponent of "third world" ecofeminism. Moreover as mentioned before, her strong involvement in the debates at the Rio Earth conference in 1992 helped launch "Indian"/"third world" ecofeminism in a big way. Since then, Shiva has remained influential in debates and policies concerning women and environment both at the government and at the non-government levels (NGOs) that operate in various places and various levels all across the country. Her discussions and ideas that featured prominently in the newspapers, TV, national and international media, and on the internet have been used to mobilize public opinion and action on a range of issues from women and environmental degradation, the essence of "Indian value system" with regard to nature and to the ill-effects of the corporate capital culture. It is therefore quite important and necessary to look into how Vandana Shiva

theorizes the connections between women and nature in the Indian context and its implications in the present context, whether literature or elsewhere.

The most important point that runs through the work of Shiva, Maria Mies and a few others who have written about ecology and gender in the Indian context is the rediscovery of interdependence and interconnectedness of everything. This rediscovery is simultaneously attributed to the ancient wisdom of women and to women's involvement in peace, ecology, feminist and health movements in the contemporary world. The discovery and realization of this interconnectedness Shiva and Mies argue has led to the rediscovery of the spiritual dimension of life. This spirituality inhabits and permeates all things and is understood by Shiva as not idealistic. It is constantly stressed that this kind of spirituality is not other-worldly, not the "luxury spirituality" that is being marketed in the western capitalist societies in the form of Yoga, Tai-chi etc. but a spirit that connects everything and which is the life-force of everything and every being and is seen as female, very much a part of the material world. And as said before, this spirituality cannot be separated from the materiality of the daily lives: "We ourselves with our bodies can't separate material from the spiritual in any spiritual/material experience" (Shiva, Staying 219). Shiva categorizes this as the "female principle" which is also termed as shakti or prakriti.

In the world view personified by the Chipko women, nature is prakriti, the creator and the source of wealth, and rural women, peasants and tribals who live in, and derive sustenance from nature, have a systematic and a deep knowledge of nature's processes of reproducing wealth. Nature and women do not acquire value through domination by modern, western man, they lose both through this process of subjugation. (Staying 219) Therefore the task for ecofeminists and others is to recover the lost, subjugated feminine principle as respect for life in nature and society appears to be the only way forward for everyone on earth (Staying 223).

Elaborating on the shakti/prakriti—the female principle in sections of hindu thought, which she categorizes as Indian, Shiva speaks of women in India as an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and in practice. According to her, "nature is symbolized as the embodiment of the feminine principle and also is nurtured by the feminine to produce life and to provide sustenance" (Staying 40). Dwelling into the origin of the female principle within the "Indian"ⁱ thought, Shiva speaks of all existence arising out of a primordial energy that is created in the tension/play between creation and destruction, cohesion and disintegration.

[...] this primordial energy which is the substance of everything pervades everything. The manifestation of this power, this energy is called nature. Nature, both animate and inanimate is thus an expression of shakti, the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos, in conjunction with the masculine principle (purusha), prakriti creates the world. Nature as prakriti is inherently active, a powerful, productive force in the dialectic of creation, renewal and sustenance of all life. (Staying 40)

Shiva further notes that prakriti is worshipped in various forms, “as the primordial vastness, the source of abundance, as adishakti, the primordial power” (39). Unlike the “western” concept of passive/objectified nature, nature in the “Indian” philosophy is active and diverse. “The nature of Nature as prakriti is activity and diversity. Prakriti is everywhere—in the form of stone, tree, pool, fruit or animal” (Shiva, Staying 39). Again, as opposed to the notion of man as separate from nature, which has been discussed by many ecofeminists of the west, Shiva believes that in India, there exists a living, nurturing relationship between the human and nature:

Contemporary western views of nature are fraught with the duality between man and woman, and person and nature. In Indian cosmology, by contrast, person and nature (purusha-prakriti) are a duality in unity. They are inseparable complements of one another, in nature, in women, in men. Every form of creation bears the sign of this dialectical harmony between male and female principles and between nature and man, and this becomes the basis of ecological thought and action in India. Since ontologically there is no dualism between man and nature, and because nature as prakriti sustains life, nature has been treated as integral and inviolable. Prakriti, far from being an esoteric abstraction, is an everyday concept that organizes daily life. There is no separation here between the popular and elite imagery or between sacred and secular traditions. As an embodiment of the female principle, it (nature) is characterized by (a) creativity, activity, productivity, (b) diversity in form and aspect (c) connectedness and inter-relationship of all beings, including man, (d) continuity between the human and the natural and (e) sanctity of life in nature. (Staying 40)

Shiva’s emphasis here is how this Indian view is conceptually different from the Cartesian view that sees nature as a resource to be used. And because of the dualist nature that characterizes western society, man is separated from nature and this has allowed the subjugation of women and nature (by implication—Indian women are not “as subjugated as” western women). The western world view according to Shiva and a few others is that nature

is (a) inert and passive (b) uniform and mechanistic (c) separated and fragmented within itself (d) separate from man (e) inferior to be dominated and exploited by man.ⁱⁱ

So what is it that has gone wrong with women and nature of the east which according to the female principle should have worked out well? Why does the need to reclaim and rediscover the feminine principle arise? Ecofeminist analyses worldwide attribute the disappearance of female principle from societies like Indian to the dominant and destructive power of the western culture and thought, its knowledge and economy. Though the age of feminine principle is not located in any point in history by any analysis, most ecofeminists and especially Shiva and Mies point out to colonization and subsequent subjugation of the “third world” people as the reason for change in values regarding nature and women. Colonization, it is argued, undermined the ecological ways of knowing, participatory ways in which nature was understood and revered, the plural and diverse ways of life, beliefs, knowledge and much more. Colonization is also considered a turning point where commercial and industrial forest management principles were transferred to Indian culture and society which unconditionally undermined women’s roles in reproductive and subsistence roles (Leach and Green 347). With colonization also came “western rationality” and “western science”, which scorned human dependence on mother earth. Shiva argues that Western rationality, the West’s paradigm of science and concept of freedom are all based on overcoming and transcending this dependence, on the subordination of nature to the (male) will, and the disenchantment of all her forces. (Ecofeminism 18)

Colonization is therefore held responsible not only for subjugating “third world” people but also for destroying and looting the natural resources which was until then held sacred and preserved by the “third world” society.

Capitalist patriarchy is another system that Shiva and Mies attack for changing the course of lives of the “third world” people and nature towards destruction. Capitalist patriarchy which they also term as modern civilization is said to be based on

[...] a new cosmology and a new anthropology that structurally dichotomizes reality, and hierarchically opposes the two parts to each other, one always considered superior, always thriving and progressing at the expense of the other. Thus nature is subordinated to man, woman to man, consumption to production, and the local to the global and so on. (Ecofeminism 5)

Capitalist patriarchy of the first world is seen as a gift of colonization--to the “third world”, which brought with it new ideas of development and progress that always benefited the first

world. As mentioned earlier, capitalism is rightfully criticized for its skewed development that Shiva and Mies term as maldevelopment. The way the economy is structured so as to procure maximum profit from the “third world”, the use of labour and natural resources from the “third world”, the biased role of the world bank, IMF and other financial giants play in the world economy controlled by the corporate world and a few powerful countries, the irregularities and the unjust practices of the “free trade” market, corporitisation of agriculture and the role of the chemical and fertilizer industry, intrusion of huge corporates into the health sector--all these come under the scrutiny of ecofeminists of the “third world”. For Shiva, the economic growth that the west propagates is an indication of the masculinist model of progress. This model of progress is actually the growth of money and capital based on the destruction of other kinds of wealth such as the wealth produced by women and nature. Capitalist patriarchy is therefore nothing but the domination of women and nature by western industrial culture.

[...] the domination of nature by western industrial culture and domination of women by western industrial man is part of the same process of devaluation and destruction that has been characterized in masculinist history as enlightenment. (Shiva, Staying 219)

Speaking against the expansion of the fast food chains and the food culture of the west into India, she argues that McDonalds and others are harmful not only to public health but also to the Indian farming at large, since they gradually kill the local economies and food markets. The critique of capitalism that emerges from ecofeminism and from other environmental movements against the foreign food giants and capitalism in general is quite strong. But, this is accompanied by rather generalized comments like how these food chains are actually intruding and spoiling the Indian food system which according to Shiva is basically vegetarian. According to her, not only are Indians a non-meat eating culture, but they also worship cows. However, these arguments can very well be disproved statistically, for a large majority of Indians are not vegetariansⁱⁱⁱ. Moreover, these ideas other than being generalized also propagate concepts of eating related to “pure” and “impure” that are in turn related to the non-meat eating upper-castes and meat eating lower-castes respectively. Though there are exceptions, the popular conception of meat eating as impure, (that invariably strengthens the caste structures), are still strong and this creates an image of “India” as the upper-caste wants to create it.

Another area that comes under the purview of ecofeminism is the masculinisation of motherland. In her essay “Masculinisation of Motherland”, Shiva analyses how in recent times most cultures that considered their nation/country as “motherland” have begun to and in a sense completed masculinising their motherland. The analysis points out to the fact that this masculinisation has been a product of gradual militarization of the nation state. Militarization has given rise to an identity where power and values are measured by a nation’s military might. This military might as is noted extends itself to the expansion of capitalist economies and capitalist patriarchies. Big dams, nuclear bombs become the symbol of masculinity. Militarization and subsequent masculinisation are used to get rid of the effeminate nature that in a way characterizes the colonized in the eyes of the colonizer. Tracing the origin of masculinisation of the country to the idea of nation during the colonial period, Shiva comes down heavily on the violence that accompanies various struggles and argues for peaceful struggles. The point for us to note is how colonialism is held responsible for the birth of the idea of the nation as masculine and violent. Citing examples from Sikh/Anti-Sikh riots and LTTE violence in Srilanka, she talks of religious–fundamental nationalisms that are based on the masculinist model of nation and that which are perpetrators of brutal violence and hatred. The question that can arise is how do we resolve the issue of the feudal kingdoms in the pre-colonial India and the huge empires India harboured with elaborate defence system whose only occupation was to expand and protect the kingdom, all this which perfectly fits the masculinist model.

The task that Shiva lays out is not only to reclaim, go back to the feminine principle to end various kinds of inequalities and violence of the contemporary world, but also to oppose duality in all forms. She also cautions us of cultural relativism that may end up supporting inequalities within particular cultures. Moreover, the slogan for the better world is the most popular and often quoted “from global to local”, “glocal”, which emphasizes localized cultures, localized economies, community based sustainable practices that need to be rejuvenated for a harmonious relation between nature, man and woman. Numerous examples are cited about how various peasant communities in India have been leading sustainable and peaceful lives based on the feminine principle. It is not Shiva’s argument for the feminine principle or for animism that makes her brahmanical. Instead, it is her equating the hindu=India=animism without qualifying these terms and more importantly, without acknowledging the casteist patriarchy that rules the hindu societal structure that makes her

ideas brahmanical. Added to this, her writings about the holiness of cows, of cow dung, of holiness of rivers etc., bear the possibility of being appropriated by the hindu right in India.

Another controversial point that Shiva relates to the western culture's association with dualist philosophy is the religious practices of its people. Arguing that "the patriarchal monotheist religions of Christianity, Judaism or Islam all of which are arguably hostile to women and nature vis-à-vis their basic warrior traditions" (*Ecofeminism* 17)—she puts forth the theory that eastern/animistic religions have always been in peace with earth and other human beings. She also in a way attributes the dualist hierarchies of men/women, nature/culture, to the religious beliefs of the western cultures. The search for a goddess-based religion by ecofeminists and others in the west is seen as a result of the gendered practices of those religions. As pointed out by Chandra Alexandre, the return to the feminine principle of the east through the tantra/goddess based is also seen as liberating from the patriarchal, nature-dominating religions of the west. The dualism that ecofeminism seeks to erase is made prominent here again in ecofeminism's discussion of west and east in the context of religion. Most ecofeminists argue how christianity and islam (which are seen as the religions of the west in comparison to hinduism or buddhism) have in their teachings views that are inherently anti-nature and anti-women, whereas, hinduism and buddhism are seen as having a perfect balance between the feminine principle and the masculine principle of nature. Many others like Rosemary Ruether have also argued that it is not Christianity per se, but the male interpretation of it that has made religion patriarchal and nature dominating. For Ruether therefore, a rereading of religious text from a feminist sensibility would be a possibility to counter the male-religion. For many others like Carol Christ, Starhawk, Charlene Spretnak, and Chandra Alexandre, a goddess-based religion unlike the god-based Christianity would be a better answer to patriarchy and oppression of nature. But, as said above, these would not only polarize but also reinforce the dualism of male-female, west-east etc. Looking for solutions in religion whether god-based or goddess-based also would lead to what Val Plumwood would term "uncritical reversal" of relations, of structures.

This kind of an eco-spirituality is supported by various kinds of intellectuals, institutions, organizations and individuals alike. In an article titled "Earth-Spirituality", Siddhartha argues for an inter-existence with nature and other human beings which rises above the current trends of selfish individualism, which can be attributed to "wrong influences of science, technology and modern development" (I). Quoting examples from Native American tribes and other indigenous peoples, he pleads for a commitment to mother-

earth, to nurture bonds that connect man with nature to put us back together. Attributing poverty, illness, pollution, drought and famine to the misuse of earth he writes,

What is needed is a change in our cosmovision to see the earth as our mother, as indigenous people all over the world have done from the beginning of time. There is no doubt that we have deviated from our nature exclusively worshipping the technological creations that so passionately stir us and pre-occupy us. Science and technology are not inherently wrong but, if we human beings do not encapsulate them in the right vision, we will use them to manipulate and exploit the earth and other fellow beings. We already see an aggressive win-lose mindset, where some are positioned to win and others are fated to lose. We can get away from this malaise through the recovery of the nurturing bonds that connect us to the natural world. (Siddhatha I)

Locating ecofeminist politics in the context of cotemporary Kerala, J. Devika outlines the possibilities for ecofeminism. Firstly, she writes that

[t]here is a considerable scope for a feminist intervention into anti-consumerist activism and awareness. This activism should be combined with arguments, actions and protests against the commodification of female bodies in the market world. Secondly, there needs to be radical critique of the medicalisation of the female bodies in Kerala (and elsewhere) where natural processes like child birth are effectively treated as pathological. Thirdly, ecofeminism can be used in peace activism, in “respect-for-life” activism directed against brutality and violence sponsored by both the State and non-state institutions like organized religions. (Devika 272)

Devika further delineates the actions ecofeminism could take up. Criticizing the “over-rationalist” style of feminist activism, she suggests that ecofeminism could be the bridge between over-rational feminist activism and radical theology. She also suggests that ecofeminism can also highlight how women, men and children bear the cost of environmental destruction differentially. According to her, it is also possible to uphold certain ethical values and normative aspects of environmental struggles by drawing on the ecofeminist values of nurture and care. Further, she argues, the alternative value systems that have been suppressed by modernization can be legitimized through ecofeminist action and campaign. Ecofeminist action for her, can be very influential in bringing about a “transformative effect on feminist, radical, theological and environmental activism” (272).

More importantly, Devika emphasizes the positive role femininity can play in such transformative politics of ecofeminism. Re-affirming femininity and favouring a gender-

neutral self for her is different from discussing the notion of femininity and interpreting it in conservative ways. To her, a strategic re-appropriation of femininity seems to be effective, even necessary way of challenging “hard individualism” (274).

With a critical view of Shiva’s understanding of ecology and gender issues, which she feels is more rooted in ideology than on materiality, Bina Agarwal puts forth her theory which she terms as feminist environmentalism (105-106). According to her, “women’s and men’s relationship with nature needs to be understood as rooted in their material reality, in their specific forms of interaction with the environment” (105). Agarwal opines:

In so far as there is gender and class (caste/race)–based division of labour and distribution of property and power, gender and class (caste/race) structure people’s interaction with nature and so structure the effects of environmental change on people and their responses to it. And where knowledge about nature is experiential in its basis, the division of labour, property and power which shape experience also shape the knowledge based on that experience. (105)

Feminist environmentalism for Agarwal is one which conceptualizes relations between women and ecology as structured in a class, caste and gendered structure of production reproduction and distribution. Ideological links for her may exist as a part of the whole link, but not the whole of it and definitely not the most important. What is important in Agarwal’s analysis is that unlike Shiva, she recognizes inherent structured oppressions within the “third world” and within India in particular. For Shiva, it is celebratory to be different from the “west”, but for Agarwal, loopholes in differences cannot be masked by cultural relativisms and generalized ideological connections between women and nature, especially in the case of spirituality. Agarwal’s account when she speaks of poor peasant women and their specific experiential knowledge of nature is problematized by Sandilands who gives a flexible framework from where studies on the links between women and nature can take off from different positions.

In sum, ecofeminist theory from India (other than Bina Agarwal’s feminist environmentalism), has tended towards being a harsh critique of modernity, development, colonialism and with it modern science, technology, capitalism and patriarchy. The general tendency is also to emphasize a set of cherished values that is claimed to have existed prior to colonization. Their arguments for reclaiming the values—ethical, feminine, spiritual, community-based, nature-based—give rise to many questions which I shall look into in the next sub-section. Many of the ecofeminist arguments are made visible in protests against

WTO meetings, against corporate malpractices, against KFC, McDonalds, in certain cultural campaigns like the protests against cow slaughter, against patenting indigenous herbs, plants, food items etc.

ⁱ Henceforth, in this section, by “Indian” I mean certain sections of hindu thought and not an all-encompassing, pan-Indian phenomenon. My intention is to problematise the notion of Indian as used by Shiva.

ⁱⁱ For a detailed understanding of Shiva’s notions of the female principle, see chapters “Women in Nature” and “Women in Forest” in Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India, 38-95.

ⁱⁱⁱ A recent study by The Hindu-CNN-IBN, “The Food Habits of a Nation”, on the food habits of Indians shows that the percentage of Indians who are meat-eating (more than 60%) and vegetarian (less than 40%). The study also shows how the food habits of people are related to caste/region/religion. Among the vegetarians surveyed, around 55% were brahmins and around 28% other upper-castes.

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