

**ECO- FEMINISM: A Significant World-View towards
Empowering Women and Environment.**

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Abstract: The ‘technology and development ‘obsessed world today unleashes destruction, oppression and death. In its race towards globalization, men have come to view nature as a commodity and a source of profit, crushing and trampling the ecosystem. Men conquer, control and oppress – both nature and women. Women and nature are united through their shared history of oppression by a patriarchal Western Society. Dr Vandana Shiva, an Indian eco-feminist claims that women have a special connection to the environment through their daily interactions with it that has been ignored.¹ She opines that women in subsistence economies who produce “wealth in partnership with nature have been experts in their own right of holistic and ecological knowledge of nature’s processes”. However she points out that “these alternative modes of knowing, which are oriented to social benefits and sustenance needs are not recognized by the capitalist 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.”²This paper attempts to explore the significance of eco feminism as a world view towards creating a harmonious and violence- free world that not only celebrates the interconnectedness of all forms of life as inherently valuable but also seeks possibilities for empowerment of both women and environment.

“The most alarming of all man’s assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials” – Rachel Carson, ‘Silent Spring’.³

In ‘Beginning Theory, Peter Barry brings out the eco-critical belief that nature is “actually present as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally if we mistreat it”.⁴

Both Rachel Carson and Peter Barry caution humankind of the fatal consequences of the reckless plundering of the environment or nature.

The ‘technology and development ‘obsessed world today unleashes destruction, oppression and death. In its race towards globalization, men have come to view nature as a commodity and a source of profit, crushing and trampling the ecosystem. Men conquer, control and oppress – both nature and women. Women and nature are united through their shared history of oppression by a patriarchal Western Society. Dr Vandana Shiva, an Indian eco-feminist claims that women have a special connection to the environment through their daily interactions with it that has been ignored. She opines that women in subsistence economies who produce “wealth in partnership with nature have been experts in their own right of holistic and ecological knowledge of nature’s processes”. However she points out that “these alternative modes of knowing, which are oriented to social benefits and sustenance needs are not recognized by the capitalist 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. This paper attempts to explore the significance of eco feminism as a world view towards creating a harmonious and violence- free world that not only celebrates the interconnectedness of all forms of life as inherently valuable but also seeks possibilities for empowerment of both women and environment.

In a world where environmental concerns assume gigantic proportions, it is an urgency to have a holistic understanding of the human and environment interface - the web of interconnected relationships among all organisms including human beings and the environment. In today’s technology- obsessed world, environmental concerns are gaining a much deserved attention. Various issues across the world highlight the environmental crisis that humankind as a race stares at. Reckless plundering of the environment in the name of development and progress is a threat to our very survival. Through times immemorial,

women have been associated with nature and this has eventually led to the oppression of both women and nature by patriarchal forces, where men have been associated with culture.

Women and nature have often been depicted as chaotic and irrational, in need of control while men are depicted as rational and ordered.⁵Eco-feminism explains and interprets the oppression of women in terms of a parallel oppression and exploitation of the environment. This link between women and environment is fore grounded on one hand through shared values such as nurturing caring, and cooperation common to both,⁶ while on the other hand, both entities share a common history of oppression through patriarchal societies. The patriarchal world view always prides in conquering, possessing and controlling – both women and environment.

Eco-feminism is a movement that emerged in the mid 1970^s alongside second – wave feminism and the green movement. It sees a connection between the exploitation and destruction of the environment or the natural world and the oppression of women. As a movement it challenges and resists both kinds of oppression .It is concerned about the effects of human exploitation of the environment and also of the subordination and exploitation of women thus blending elements from both feminism and the green movements.

Eco-feminism is vital to study the exploitation and invasions over ecology and its resources by the developed countries in the name of globalisation and development. It studies the link between the natural domination and gender domination in order to achieve the liberation of both nature and women from the oppressive patriarchal power structures and includes both the female perspective and the ecological perspective .The feminist perspective focuses on gender discrimination and the oppression of women in society while the ecological perspective focuses on the interdependence of different elements of the ecosystem. The relationship between man and nature needs to be an integrated one rather than one of conflict and confrontation.⁷

One of the early founders of eco-feminism, theologian Rosemary Ruether emphasised that women and environmentalists need to work together to counter and end patriarchal systems that create and control hierarchies.⁸ This led to an integrated approach where in ecological theories looked at the effects of patriarchal systems and feminist theories examined the relationship between women and nature.

In the modern urbanised society of today, it is important to re-connect with nature since the development obsessed mechanised world of today constantly moves away from it. Environment degradation in the name of progress is a global concern today. Eco-feminism offers a much needed perspective integrating issues of environment, women and all marginalized peoples. The central tenet of eco-feminism is that social and environmental issues are not separate, that the causes for the mistreatment of women, people of colour and the environment stem from the same place. Therefore the eco-feminist perspective views all these issues collectively. Two important themes are always focussed on by eco-feminists. Firstly, the link between social dominance, oppression and feminism. Secondly, the notion of interconnectedness between human and nature. Eco-feminists, firstly examine power structures that are oppressive and assert that oppression, inequality, power and powerlessness are the result of male dominated social structures which in turn are the root cause of degradation of environment both natural and manmade disasters. Through the second theme, the eco-feminists propose that every organism on earth and the entire environment are one wholesome unit connected to each other. It is actually a web of interconnected lives and human beings are one small part of this large web and are not a separate entity.¹⁰ The human race is neither away from nature nor above nature. As Rachel Carson says “in nature nothing exists alone”.

Women, as nurturers, creators and sustainers of life are vulnerable to problems arising out of environment degradation. Toxins in the soil, air and water adversely affect women, child-bearing and children. Men folk in their role as providers move out of the rural environment seeking jobs or work. Women and children stay back amidst their agrarian or rural environment. The terrible consequence of environmental abuse and the ill – effects on women and children cannot be more obviously seen than in the Endosulfan – tragedy. The dreaded pesticide resulted in the death of several species, the women in the vicinity of Endosulfan – sprayed lands continue to bear terrible aftermaths (child – bearing) and even to this day continue to give birth to abnormal babies, while children too continue to stare at lives abused, deformed and crippled by the dreadful pesticide. Bhopal – gas tragedy victims too suffer the same plight of victimization. Sand mining, timber thefts, mono culture, commercial cropping, land mafia, toxic pesticide usage, tribal - tourism – all these are a direct result of man’s greed and arrogance to control both human and non-human world and the worst victims are largely

women and children. Man's intense desire to dominate and oppress led to the domestication of animals. Encroaching forests to make dwellings and these moved on to slavery and war. In the Indian scenario, eco-feminism associates to one revolutionary and landmark movement – the 'Chipko Movement'.¹¹ This movement in India is accepted as one of the most successful environmental activism in the entire world. Women literally hugged trees and resisted industrial forestry and logging. The novel protest saved a huge number of trees from being felled for commercial gains. One name in India stands apart with regard to eco-feminism and the 'Chipko movement' – Dr. Vandana Shiva. Dr Vandana Shiva and other eco-feminists are anti-war and anti – capitalist because both war and capitalism are patriarchal structures.¹²For her, there is a close connection between war, 'musclemen – culture', rape and other forms of violence against women. Both women and environment pass through the same stages of oppression as in a relationship – aggression, conquest, possession and control.¹³ Green Revolution, monoculture farming, globalization, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) are thrust upon third world countries which shift from subsistence farming to cash crop monoculture. According to Dr. Shiva the GATT gives giant western corporations the licence to patent seeds (even indigenously grown seeds like Basmati Rice) and as a result the farmers cannot keep seeds or save them, they need to pay the corporations to buy seeds every year. Corporations hold the patents and hence the complete biological control over them world over.¹⁴To the women in the third world countries, the patenting of seeds, globalisation, monoculture etc hamper their daily lives through the degeneration of nature. The women and children live in proximity with nature (the forests). The link between environmental decay and women's suffering is very close in third world nations. To the Western World view, this link is strange because everything is divided into opposites and arranged in hierarchy – Humans are separate from and superior to environment / nature, technology is superior to indigenous wisdom, the symbiotic bond of the indigenous peoples are inferior to the cultured, civilized and technology driven urban world, men are superior to women and humans being superior to animals- such a world view and hierarchy does not accept the link between women's oppression and the degeneration of environment as having the same root cause. The feminine principle is based on inclusiveness. In western women the feminine principle is destroyed by the association of passivity as character with the feminine. In men, feminine principle is crushed and ignored because 'activity' is

associated with destruction rather than creation and 'power' is associated with domination rather than empowerment .¹⁵

In the race to be developed and to be technologically superior, man plunders the limited resources of the earth. The concept of women being nurturers and saviours of environment as a fundamental eco-feminist thought foregrounds the deep bond between women and nature. Both are nurturers, symbols of fertility and both are caught in the oppressive patriarchal, capitalistic societies. The current priority is the need to have a bio- centric vision where in both the non human world and the environment has equal importance as the human world has and man co-exists with the non human world. As a movement, Eco-feminism addresses the combined issues of the oppression of both women and nature and is significant as a worldview to achieve sustainability and our own place as a species. In the larger fragile web of life, man must realize that he is only a partner and not a controller. Humanity as entire specie is only a small speak on the huge and splendid canvas of nature where every form of life has its fixed place and identity and exists in all its glory and splendour.

References:

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³<<www.google.co.in>>

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⁵<<www.wikipedia.org>>

⁶ Ibid

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¹⁰Ibid

¹¹ Conference on Earth Democracy: Women, Justice and Ecology Dr. Vandana Shiva and feminist theory <<www.womenjusticeecology.wordpress.com>>

¹²Ibid

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¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Shiva, Vandana. Staying Alive: Women Ecology and Development. London: Zed Books, 1989.