A Revisionary Reading of Ecofeminist Theory

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ABSTRACT

The present article questions the idea of the equation of nature with the woman and its very necessity to base a movement for bringing about a radical transformation in the present socioeconomic system. ‘Woman=Nature’ is a cultural construct which was generated by the pervasive patriarchal biases of our civilization. This patriarchal civilization has ignored women’s efficiency in other fields apart from bringing up their children and degraded those as uncivilized, submissive, sexual objects. It is this civilization that has equated nature(wilderness/uncivilized) with woman to devalue both. Indeed ecofeminist theory is incoherent, amorphous and logically unsound. This theory must needs be replaced by something so logical as to base a whole movement for a radical reshaping of the contemporary society. In fact, there is no necessity of perpetuating the term ecofeminism which may be replaced by the term ecohumanitarianism as it questions any kind of exploitation, be it environmental exploitation or class oppression or gender oppression.

Key words: Ecology, Exploitation, Feminism, Nature, Woman.

‘Ecofeminism’ is a term which has been intriguing to most of the scholars and critics for the past few decades. It is an interdisciplinary movement which questions or rejects previously held patriarchal paradigms and holds that the domination of women by men is intimately linked to the destruction of the environment. Although the term “ecofeminisme” was conceived by d’Eaubonne in 1974 as a connection of ecology and women, the idea was not new altogether. For centuries men have had the notion that some deep rooted instinctive connection exists between nature and women. S.T Coleridge or John Keats comes at once to
mind. Coleridge in his memorable poem “Dejection: An ode” equated Nature with women and wrote:

“And in our life alone does nature live
Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!” (48-49)

In his poem “To Autumn ” John Keats compares autumn to a fair maiden who, being tired, takes a nap on the granary floor. Let us recall such lines as

“Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor” (13-14)

Moreover, nature has often been referred to as a mother indicating the fact that women have somehow a special connection with nature. Ecofeminists took up this age old idea and argued that eco-anarchism might be combined with a strong ideal of feminism. They united the demands of women with those of the ecologists in order to envision a radical reshaping of the present patriarchal and industrial society. In this article I would like to question the idea of the equation of nature with women and its very necessity to base a movement for bringing about a radical transformation in the present socioeconomic system.

Now the term ‘nature’ eludes easy definition. Much ink has been spilt over the question what we should mean by the term ‘nature’. The term ‘nature’ derives from the word ‘natura’ which was a Latin translation of the Greek word ‘Physis’ meaning essential qualities or intrinsic characteristics that animals, plants and other things of the world develop of their own accord. This original notion regarding nature can not be applied to our present concern i.e. the idea of equation of nature with women.

However, there were several expansions of the original notion later on. Pre-Socratic philosophers began to employ the word ‘physics to mean the physical universe. This usage was confirmed in the last few centuries. Today ‘nature’ refers to the general realm of plants, animals and in some cases, to the way in which particular inanimate objects exist and change of their own accord, such as the weather and the geology of the earth, and the matter and energy of which these things are composed. In this sense, nature includes woman as well as man. So nature can not be separated from women and comparison between them is therefore, impossible. In fact, it is ridiculous to equate women with nature which, in modern scientific writing, refers to all directly observable phenomena of the physical or material universe and which is contrasted only with spiritual or supernatural existence.
However, historically and also in casual speech, nature is often taken to mean the wilderness—wild animals, rocks, forests, beaches and in general those things which have not been altered by human intervention or which exist in spite of human intervention. Considering this view of nature, ecofeminists, especially Susan Griffin, have said that women have some intimate connection with nature. In fact images of women representing nature are timeless. Mother nature is a common personification of nature which was widely popular in the middle ages and can be traced back to the Ancient Greece in origin. This personification of nature as a mother is primarily based on the life giving, nurturing features of both of them. And that is why in prehistoric times goddesses (not gods) were worshipped for their association with fertility, fecundity and agricultural bounty. In fact the perceived difference between men and women’s relationships to nature is based on historical socialization and oppression of women as Janis Birkeland writes in the book Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature. ‘Woman = Nature’ is a cultural construct which was generated by the pervasive patriarchal biases of our civilization. This patriarchal civilization has ignored women’s efficiency in other fields apart from bringing up their children and degraded them as uncivilized, submissive sexual objects. And it is this male-centered and male-controlled civilization that has equated nature (wilderness/uncivilized) with women to devalue both.

“Embracing metaphors that associate women with non human nature, far from being ecological, are actually mystifications of oppressive patriarchal stereotypes” as Janet Biehl has put it in her book Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics (7). She quotes Simone de Beauvoir who flatly repudiates ecofeminism and criticizes its return to an enhanced status for traditional feminine values such as woman and her rapport with nature, woman and her maternal instinct, woman and her physical being. This renewed attempt to pin women down to their traditional role… that’s the formula used to try and keep women quiet. Even women who call themselves feminists don’t always see through it. Once again, women are being defined in terms of “the other” once again, they are being made into the “second sex”…. Equating ecology with feminism is something that irritates me. They are not automatically one and the same thing at all (16).

Some ecofeminists who clearly say that the association of women with nature is done in order to make both inferior to man continue to refer to nature as ‘she’. In fact the patriarchal
notions are so deeply rooted that even some of the so called ecofeminists can’t help
derogating women and cooperating in their subordination, though unconsciously. Now, my
question is: why should we stick to this age old idea of “nature= woman” and begin a new
movement based on a false notion of both nature and women? What is the necessity of
perpetuating the term ‘ecofeminism’?

One important thing is to be noticed here. Whereas women and nature (obviously
nature in the sense of natural environment, excluding human beings) are oppressed in the
prevailing power structure men too are oppressed in certain cases. Domination of the Global
South (people who live in the Third world) or the minorities comes at once to mind. In such
cases men too can be equated with nature. Moreover, why should we look upon nature only
as oppressed and not oppressor? Should we forget the destructive power of nature? Isn’t the
oppression of nature by human beings the root cause of their own destruction? Nature as a
creator-preserve-destroyer can be associated with the whole human race. So the question
naturally crops up: why shouldn’t we replace the term ‘ecofeminism’ by the term
‘ecohumanitarianism’? In deed ecoeminist theory is, to all intents and purposes, incoherent,
amorphous and logically unsound. I think this theory must needs be replaced by something
logical so as to base a whole movement for a radical reshaping of the contemporary society.
It is ecohumanitarianism which questions any kind of exploitation or oppression, be it
environmental exploitation or class oppression or gender oppression. We may do well to cite
the closing lines of S.T. Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”.

He prayeth well who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast
He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small,
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all (612-17)

In the above mentioned lines, Coleridge intends to aware mankind of the evil consequences
of destroying nature with all its components. In fact “everything has a life of its own and
that we are all One Life” (Coleridge wrote in a letter to Sotheby, September 10,1802 ). We
should recognize this principle of unification of everything on earth and love nature with all
its creatures and stop exploitation of any sort. But the task is not easy to carry out. The first
step is individual; man should change his own way of thinking, but the next step involves going beyond oneself. Direct action is necessary. Our society should operate on the basis of equal value for all living things. There should be no dominator or dominated. While the present world allows justice only for those who are in power, we should build a world where not only women, but all living creatures of nature and their needs are equally valued. Instead of exploiting the ecosystem of the earth for our own needs, we should change our lives within the system. This is what is known as ‘bioregionalism’ that means learning to become native to the place. We have to fit ourselves to a particular place, not to fit that place to our predetermined tastes. It is basically a personal action, but it can, however, be a united effort through networking with others. This bioregionalism can promote an entirely new way of life which can result in an egalitarian society-a society in which there will be no dominator or dominated, no exploiter or exploited. Ecofeminism which is founded on the age old false notion of ‘nature= woman’ should give way to ecohumanitarianism that is badly needed in our present society to rebel against exploitation at all levels.

Notes:


2. The lines of “To Autumn ”cited in this article are quoted from The Golden Treasury ed , John Press, OUP.1994.
Works Cited


