

Women and the Environment

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Eco feminism is a social and political movement which unites environmentalism and feminism, with some currents linking deep ecology and feminism. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, the eco-feminists argue that a relationship exists between the oppression of women and degradation of nature, and explore the inter-sectionality between sexism, dominance of nature, racism, species and other characteristics of social inequality. There has been considerable interest since the early 1970s in the relationship between women particularly low income rural women in developing countries and the environment that is, the natural base on which development demands. Media pictures of rural women carrying heavy loads of firewood and fodder across infertile landscapes, or balancing pots of water over considerable distance. This view credence that underprivileged women were the most important fatalities of environmental deprivation since they were the main users and providers of household biomass and subsistence needs.

Gradually the debate shifted from seeing women as mere sufferers, to resource management, because of their comprehension and understanding gained from networking as they were closely related with their surroundings. While natural disasters affect women most, inspiring examples from around the world establish that aboriginal women who are conscious about conserving natural world and environmental issues have been able to make considerable difference to the environment in substantial ways, for example in water conservation, waste management, energy efficiency at home and family planning.

Women environmental activists have also confirmed to change the status of women, predominantly in countryside communities, creating empowerment opportunities beyond the environmental reimbursement. Women are more susceptible to the effects of climate change than men primarily as they represent the majority of the world's poor and are more reliant to their source of revenue on natural resources that are vulnerable by drastic climate change.

They, furthermore face social, economic and political barriers that limit their coping competence. Women and men in rustic areas in developing countries are especially vulnerable when they are highly dependent on local natural resources for their employment. Those charged with the responsibility to secure water, food and fuel for cooking and heating visage the greatest

challenges. Secondly, when coupled with unequal access to resources and to decision-making processes, limited mobility places women in a position where they are disproportionately affected by climate change in rural areas.

Eco-feminist writer activists through their writings and activism try to empower women in the conservation and preservation of environment. Wangari Maathai's The Green Belt Movement and Vandana Shiva's Navadanya are some of the accomplishment stories of women empowerment. Women often play a stronger role than men in the management of eco system services and food security. Hence if it is to become successful sustainable adaptation must focus on gender and the role of women. Women's voices, responsibilities and knowledge on environment and the challenges they face will need to be made central part of governments' adaptive response to a rapidly changing climate.

In India, they join 'Chipko' movement (tree-hugging) to protect precious fuel resources for their communities. It has its chronological roots in ancient Indian cultures that worshipped tree as goddesses, sacred trees as images of the cosmos, and sacred forests and groves. Women in 1970s revived these Chipko actions in order to accumulate their forests for fuel wood and their valleys from corrosion in the face of cash cropping for the market. The beginning of the movement lay in a conventional ecological use of forests for food, fuel, fodder, fertilizer, water and medicine. Cash cropping by contrast served forest products from, water, agriculture, and animal husbandry. Out of women's organizational base and with the support by local males, protests to save the trees took place over a wide area from 1972 through 1978, including various actions such as to embrace trees, marches, picketing, singing, and direct confrontations with lumberers and police.

Patriarchal systems, where men own and control land, are seen as responsible for the oppression of women and destruction of the natural environment. Since men in power control the land, they are able to utilize it for their own revenue and accomplishment. Women in this same situation are exploited by men in power for their own profit, success, and pleasure. Women and the environment both are exploited and subjugated in the name of domination. Those people in power are able to take advantage of them noticeably because they are seen as passive and rather powerless. Eco feminism connects the exploitation and domination of women with that of environment.

Eco-feminists as a way of repairing social and ecological injustices feel that women must work towards creating a healthy environment and ending the destruction of the land. Women are by nature more nurturing and therefore more equipped to manage the environment. This eco feminist position does not seek egalitarianism with men as with liberal feminism, but aims for

emancipation of women as women. Shiva believes that women are more fostering, peaceful, cooperative and closer to nature than men. It is an attitude and movement born from the union of feminist and ecological thinking and the conviction that the social mentality which leads to the domination and oppression of women is unswervingly connected to the social mentality that leads to the exploitation of the natural environment.

In more recent times, other women who have led environmental causes and movements are Medha Patkar, Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy and C.K Janu. Medha Patkar heads the Narmada Bachao Andolan, a social movement consisting of tribal people, adivasis, farmers, environmentalists and human rights activists against the Sardar Sarovar Dam being built across the Narmada River in Gujarat, India. Mahasweta Devi, both an activist as well as a well-known feminist writer, has dedicated much of her activism and literature to the cause of betterment of tribal people and their environment in India.

Arundhati Roy, best known as the Booker Prize winner of *The God of Small Things*, wields her passionate pen for causes ranging from the Narmada Bachao Andolan, to nuclear testing in India, and to the support of the separatists demand for aazadi (freedom) in Kashmir. The latest woman to come under limelight for fighting for environmental grounds is C.K Janu, as recent as the year 2003 onwards, an adivasi woman occupying the Muthanga forests in North Kerala. This was a remonstrance against the breached agreement between the adivasis and the state government to provide 500 acres of land to each adivasi family. C.K Janu an adivasi woman has given the movement a dimension of subaltern identity politics in addition to societal justice and ecological stability.

Vandana Shiva is a woman whose work focuses on embracing not only the principles of feminism, but also the principles of ecology. As an eco-feminist, she sees the two movements as interrelated and believes that the world view that causes environmental degradation and injustice are same that causes a culture of male domination, exploitation and inequality for women.

Eco feminism depicts the representational relationships between the repression of women and the devastation of the environment. It is indicatively related to one another. Men control and devastate the environment for their own benefit and enchantment; similarly they control and subjugate women too, for the same reason. Women must perceive that there can be no emancipation for them and no resolution to the ecological calamity within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of the domination. They must fuse the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envisage a radical reshaping of the essential socio economic relations and the underlying values of this society.

Hence, women, nature, nurture, development and globalization are not straight-forward and linear categories that either harmonize or challenge each other in entirety. Women are entrenched in the rise of capitalist patriarchy and the philosophy that the Earth and nature can be exploited for human evolution through technology. This proceeds on from the concept that it is men who are responsible for labour in the marketplace and women bear the responsibility of labour in the domestic atmosphere of the home.

By virtue of the fact that the women's main realm of labour is the home, it is amateur labour and therefore subordinate to men's labour in the marketplace. This is in direct contrast to the fact that a large percentage of the world's work and labour (at home, farms, sweatshops, etc) is actually performed by women. Postcolonial ecocriticism merges women with the larger ecological self, erasing women's distinct histories, identities and positions. Ecofeminism, on the other hand, while considering the issue of androcentrism at length, fails to consider postcolonial concerns, in particular issues of neo-colonialism, race, uneven development and globalization.

Indian women authors in the present setting have begun to voice their concerns on globalization in India, and its impact on gender and family relations as well as the environmental issues in its broadest sense. Therefore, while their writings may seem very explicit and confidential, they do make a strong statement of political obligation. Postcolonial women writers from India are equally concerned to forefront the specific textures of their own subsistence. Both as women and postcolonial citizens they contemplate on their own distinct actualities and often this is rather a political commitment. One reason why Indian women writers are often overlooked is because of their seeming interest in the very specific and private worlds of the women they write about.

Women are the ones who get pretentious by the impact of climate change and natural disasters first and at the same time they often play a greater role than men in the management of eco system and food security and sustainable development. The empowerment of women can make considerable contribution in tumbling the impact of ecological degradation. Thus Ecofeminism conceives women as having the potential and prospective to bring about environmental revolution.

Ecofeminism may also be seen as essentialising women by emphasizing their close relationship with nature. Through their writings the writer activists were able to initiate and encourage women to become the agents of change by taking part in Ecosocial movements like The Green Belt Movement, Narmada Bahao Andolan and Navdanya. Thus Ecofeminist writer activists through their writings and activism try to empower women in the preservation and protection of environment.

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