



ECOFEMINISM: CONNECTING SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

Dr. Shweta Tewari

Assistant Professor

Mangalmay Institute of Management and Technology

Abstract

The concept of social justice and environmental justice are related and should be addressed together because of their similarities in terms of their domination and oppression by the society believed to be still largely patriarchal. Ecofeminism is the new school of thought that employs approaches from Ecology and Feminism both, establishes how we can place women and environment on the same platform and discuss the atrocities inflicted upon them by the more powerful class (males) and draws connections between the two kinds of injustice (one towards nature and one towards women). Ecofeminists claim that women are closer to the nature and they both effect each other in a significant manner. This has been the basis of all the theories purported by various Ecofeminists who argue on these lines with an empirical, epistemological, ethical, political approach establishing these strong connections between nature and women. Degradation of the environment has affected the women more than the men and deprived a huge section of the women population across the globe of their local resources of food and fodder, about which the Ecofeminists have provided ample evidence. Ecofeminism as a movement to bring justice to women and nature had its existence in India even before it became a global topic and its philosophy reflects in the struggles of its major movements like the Chipko movement and also strongly felt in the writings of some notable Indian authors who have glorified both nature and women and their interdependence in their writings. The efforts of women in the success of Ecofeminist struggle (which still continues) has been explicit. The Ecofeminists call upon the Educators to adopt an Ecofeminist pedagogy to acquaint the learners about connections social justice and environmental justice has from an early stage of schooling. The paper also includes a brief discussion on the Ecofeminist view about how in the name of modernisation, patenting, increasing national income, the local resources are being exploited and how commodification of local resources is affecting the women and nature in the most dreadful ways.

Keywords : Ecofeminism, Ecology, Feminism, Women, Nature, Power, Domination, Modernisation

Introduction : While studying the environment and the issues related to the activities that endanger it or cause potential harm to it, one has to address to the concept of gender as the two have been related and this view (that gender and nature are related) is what forms the basis of the theories purported by those known as 'The Ecofeminists'. (Thorpe, 2016). As explained in **Figure 1**, we see that there exists a relationship between the environment and women and the two cannot be separated as argued by the believers of the school of thought popularly known as 'Ecofeminism', the term that was first coined by

a French women , Francois d' Eaubonne in the year 1974.In the same year , the first conference on 'Women and Environment' was held as an allied effort of Sandra Marbung and Lisa Watson, who emphasised the need and importance of Ecofeminism in replacing the culture of domination , possession , accumulation and male domination by a culture of equality , mutual independence , reciprocity and harmony (Glazebook, 2002).Gender is inseparable from the discussion of the environment as the damaging effects on the environment has its impact on men and women in different ways.(Thorpe, 2016). As pointed out by (Warren,2000) and Curtin , 1999), the environmental problems pose a greater threat to women (a huge percentage of women in the population still bear responsibilities of fetching food, water from the natural resources for their families and have their occupations embedded in these natural environments). Thus, the trends of modernisation (such as policies by G7 countries and Green revolution) etc not only snatch away their sources of livelihood, but also subject them to domination and exploitation in the name of modernisation. (Glazebook, 2002).

Ecofeminism – what it means and signifies :

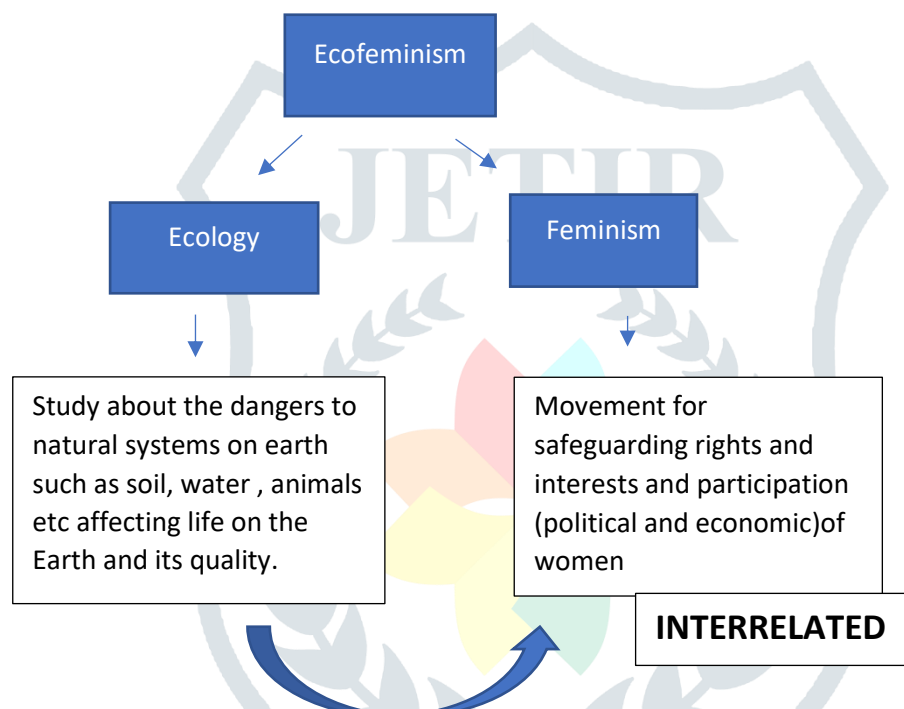


Figure 1: Meaning of Ecofeminism

Thus , ecofeminism stems from the realization of the existence of subjugation and oppression of nature and the women both by the males in a patriarchal society and it views these concerns and problems under the same lens with an intention of bringing about justice and emancipation of both. The approach of Ecofeminism is both diagnostic and futuristic (Glazebook, 2002).

As the **Oxford Dictionary (2010)** defines Ecofeminism as “ A philosophical and political theory and a movement that combines ecological concerns with feminist concerns , regarding both resulting from male domination of society.”

Webster’s Dictionary (2013) states “Ecofeminism is a movement or a theory that applies feminist principles and ideas to ecological issues.”

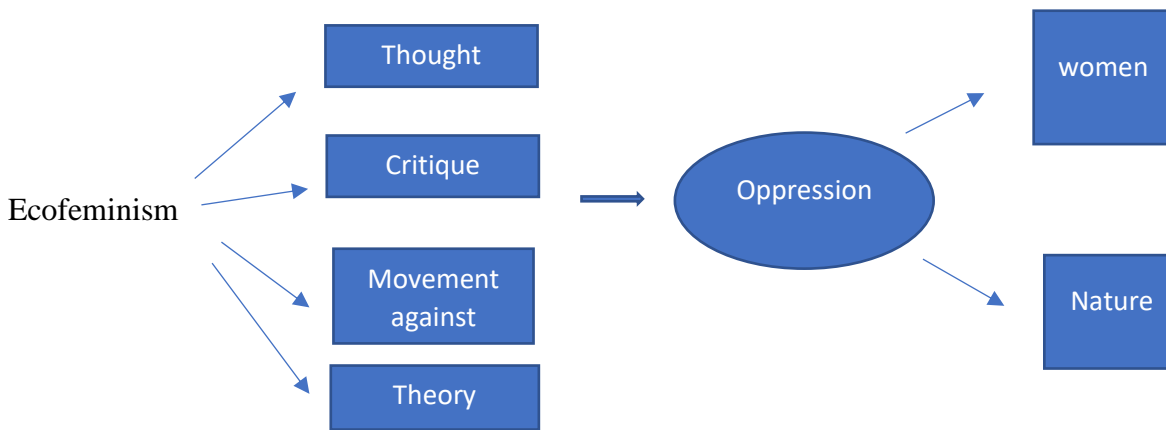


Figure 2: Ecofeminism: Connection between women and nature

Figure 2 sums up the various definitions of Ecofeminism and helps us form links between the philosophy of Ecofeminism that provide a theory, critique and lead a movement against oppression of both nature as well as women.

Logic of domination: Simone de Beauvoir in 1974 had pointed out that women and nature are both subject to domination by men and thus the systems in our culture are governed by the logic that men are superior to women and hence women could act as a resource just as the nature is to meet their selfish needs. The fundamental model of relationships in the society is based on this logic of domination. (Glazebrook, 2002).

Valued dualism : Valued dualism refers to the system where there is a discussion of existence of everything in binary forms such as male /female, white /non white, human /animal etc and where one of the two units (for example male over females) is considered more superior and more powerful and dominates the other. Led by the logic of domination, this kind of valued dualism forms the basis of the discussion that ecofeminists offer and fight against. (Fisher & Martusewicz, 2012)

Kinds of Ecofeminism : The two broad divisions of Ecofeminism that became more visible were 'Radical Ecofeminism' and 'Cultural Ecofeminism'. While the radical Ecofeminists focussed more on campaigning against the commodification of environment and women as resources, their exploitation for monetary gains and using preferably women for cheap labour, the assertions of the ecofeminists strongly have a link with the theories of the early ecofeminists. The cultural Ecofeminists on the other hand discuss more about the relationship of the women with the environments and how women bear similarities with the nature owing to their biological structure and gender roles. These Ecofeminists deeply delve into the socio-cultural aspects of injustice to women and environment borne out of male domination. Miles, K. (2014)

Understanding the interrelation/ connection between the nature and the women :

The common link between the ecofeminist and ecological struggles have been the male domination and subjugation by the male gender for selfish reasons. These connections are of several kinds and have been discussed as follows:

1. **Historical connections:** History has accounts of prevailing culture of male domination of over females as well as over nature and this domination has been related to several historical events like invasions, dictatorship by rulers, changing political regimes etc, thus history establishes a connection between women and the nature in relation to male domination. (Fisher & Martusewicz, 2012)
2. **Conceptual connections :** Fisher & Martusewicz (2012) point out that conceptual connections between nature and women can be seen in existence of valued dualisms and constructed mindsets such as the disjunctive or binary forms e.g male/female, mind/body, white /non-white, human/animal etc which have clear embedded structures of valued dualism (one being more valued than the other) and structures

of hierarchies. All major oppressive 'isms' such as sexism, racism, speciesism etc have this kind of valued dualism (Glazebrook, 2002). Also there has been a difference in the way consciousness of women and men have been perceived keeping men at a superior level than women. Such dualist approaches exist in relation to both gender and nature. (Fisher & Martusewicz, 2012)).

3. **Empirical connections** : The work of many authors and historians have provided us with a mole amount of evidence to the fact that nature and women are interrelated and effect each other. Writings of Vandana Shiva and Karen Warren describe how environmental hazards in the history of the world have affected women and children and how the First World developments have had their impact particularly on the female population. (Fisher & Martusewicz, 2012)
4. **Symbolic connections** : Nature and women have both been subjected to the use of derogatory or sexist language intentionally and also unintentionally. For example, we often come across language such as 'nature is raped' etc and also with regard to women as 'bitches' cats etc. even the most respectful language also involves addressing the nature as mother and addressing the women as nurturing. Often the demonization of and animals (nature) has been seen in the usage of words like eve and snakes in Christianity. (Oster, 2002).
5. **Political connections**: Both feminism and ecological movements have been political in nature considering the involvement of political parties and activists and their efforts to impose ban on activities that harm or oppress nature and women. Thus, political connection between the two are very clear and obvious. (Fisher & Martusewicz, 2012)
6. **Ethical connections** : Ecofeminism and ecology both have ethical principles applied to their concepts and understanding and so as to how they should be treated by the society should. (Cuovo, 2002).

Indian leaders in Ecofeminist struggle:

Ecofeminist had its existence in India even before it gained acceptance and recognition in the outside world and the work of many notable authors is a proof of this. For example, Kalidasa in *Abhigyanashakuntalam* had highlighted the role of women in protecting and nurturing the nature and the character 'Shakuntala' was an example of one such nature loving woman who was extremely fond of plants and trees and always took care of them.

Similarly, another reputed writer from India, Kamala Markandaya in his book *Nectar in a Sleeve* (1954) had a female protagonist 'Rukamani' who portrayed a character who was passionate about taking care of the nature. Arundhati Roy in her work 'God of Small things' (1971) described the plight of a naturally beautiful fictional village named 'Ayemenem' on the banks of the river "Meenachal" that was destroyed in the name of modernisation after a hotel with a beautiful view was constructed on it. Another significant ecofeminist work was by Mahasweta Devi who in her book 'The Hunt' (1994) had portrayed Mary Oraon as a victim of Tehsildar's sexual desires and fantasies who had arrived with the intentions of cutting down the natural forests of the area for monetary gains and was opposed and resisted by Mary Oraon.

The Chipko movement- a famous ecofeminist movement: The Chipko Movement or the 'Tree Hugging Movement' began in Reni district of Uttarakhand in India in the 1970s against deforestation in the area leading to floods, landslides and degradation of their local resources of food and fodder that had always provided for their livelihood. Although led by both the males and female leaders, it had a significant contribution by women who formed the major flag bearers of this movement. The women in this movement organized themselves into groups and protested against the government policies leading to deforestation in their inhabitation non-violently protested by hugging trees or tying them rakhis thus forcing the lumbermen to ultimately retreat. This embracing of trees became a success and the Chipko movement became one of the most successful eco development movements in the world. Gauri Devi, Sudesha Devi, Sunderlal Bahuguna etc were the torchbearer women leaders to contribute to its success.

Ecofeminism and the Principle of Subsistence:

Modernisation or exploitation in guise ? The Ecofeminists have drawn attention to how innovative practices that promise advancement in agriculture by employing technology to existing traditional practices and also a significant increase in the national income and high profits bring much harm (often in disguise) to the local market and affect the local inhabitants and specially the women.

Concept of emancipation :

The concept of emancipation was wrongly interpreted as it did not lead to actual liberation but was about altering nature and natural patterns for deriving monetary gains from nature and thus kind of controlling the nature and its resources through technology . Vandana Shiva argues that this kind of emancipation is hypocritic and is discriminating, imposing and dominating and doesn't bring about actual freedom.(Shiva, Mies & Salleh, 2014).

Green revolution and its impact :

The green revolution led to an increase in ground water consumption because of greater needs of water supply for the hybrid varieties of seed leading to depletion of the ground water in the areas. Depleted water supply affected the women of these areas more as they had to now walk greater miles to fetch water for their families. Green revolution also harmed the soil fertility due to the increased use of fertilizers and urea in the soil and caused soil erosion. Now that the farmers who initially were self-sufficient had to depend on the urban economy for supply of sophisticated equipment leading to capitalism and increased poverty. The green revolution is said to have benefitted only the rich farmers and not the poor ones and harmed specially the women who depended on their own labour than machinery for agriculture. (Rahman & Saidur, 2015).

Biotechnology and medical advancement : Shiva, Mies & Salleh (2014) discuss how biotechnology and advanced forms of medical practices and technology have put more emphasis on the males sperm than the female uterus for child birth and have devised ways of child bearing without the need of a woman. They have also criticized the cesarean methods of delivery calling them unnatural and altering the genetic compositions of humans also a form of exploiting nature and degrading it by patenting seeds and plants has led to commodification and commercialism.(Shiva, Mies & Salleh, 2014).

Global markets: The economists who favour the establishment of a global market claim that it would bring about a common platform for supply of goods across the globe and solve all problems of scarcities and inequalities, but in the real sense that would imply gross exploitation of the local ecology and disruption their natural patterns of existence and survival and affect the local inhabitants in the most extreme ways. This would mean that there would be a few MNCs controlling , patenting the local goods and also making huge profits out of these locally produced products concomitantly harming the local economies and inhabitants. .(Shiva, Mies & Salleh, 2014).

Dominance of the G-7 countries : The advanced economies namely Canada, France , Germany , Japan , UK, US and Italy dictating global market trends and functioning in the name of being world bank donors , commodify the local goods and also the women engaged in making their livelihood out of these local resources. .(Shiva, Mies & Salleh, 2014).

Reductionism : The common belief that “If the producers consume what they produce , then it is not production in the real sense” forms the basis of reductionist view leading to the lowering of status of women in the market and rendering them a as non-productive in the marketplace. The market only understand the language of currency , profits and hence the capitalisation of economy encourages this reductionist view reducing everything to buying and selling , commodifying everything and making the weak vulnerable to more powerful and the developed. Thus, capitalist or reductionist values have led to treating both nature and women as a resource by the patriarchal society.(Shiva, Mies & Salleh, 2014).

Ecofeminism and Spirituality :

Spirituality is about faith and belief in gods and goddesses and faith is always said to be connected to the process of healing. Considering what ecofeminists have been doing since years with respect to the healing of wounds inflicted upon women and nature by the domination and oppression by men, this establishes a connection between ecofeminism and spirituality.Issues relating to peace , healing , equality , emancipation etc have been undertaken both by ecofeminism and spirituality . Many studies have been conducted in the past that have explored the impact of spirituality on the health of women and effects on the environment and vice versa. Reference to Mother goddess, Paganism , Feminist Mystique etc in literature indicates the importance of women in major religious beliefs and practices.The advent of the ecofeminist movement could be traced back to the period when hundreds of women were freed from the shackles of witchcraft and execution leading to several protests focussing on equality of women and freedom from anthropogenic attitudes. A lot of these movements were not acceptable for the Church in the beginning and ecofeminism and spiritual claims of equality did not go well with their conservative views and principles with heavy gender biases. The spiritual principles in ecofeminism derived from the

school of thought known as 'divine feminism' that talked about non dominance , connectedness to nature , benevolence , love are principles that ecofeminism had also purported hence establishing the connection between the two. Both divine feminism and Ecofeminism emphasized the need to shatter patriarchal values in order to attain equality and peace. As far as the principles of healing were concerned , Ecofeminism found its connections with psychology and particularly therapeutic practices involving healing , coping based on unleashing gender stereotypes, loving the nature , social transformations , experiences , feelings etc . Frazer, Harding , Jung and his discussion of the mother archetype further glorified the role of women in bring matriarchy into limelight. The researches have shown how health ,spirituality and environmental peace are related concepts, thus rituals, dance forms, music environmental worship etc all that have been largely spiritual in nature have women participating and playing a significant role in them. Poetry, metaphors, hymns etc all have the mention of women. The Psych wellness model was based on humanistic principles that had common elements with spirituality and Ecofeminist line of thoughts. J. (Santamaría-Davila,^{1,*} L.M. Cantera-Espinosa,² M. Blanco-Fernandez,³ and E. Cifre-Gallego(2019).

Problems with Ecofeminism:

Ecofeminism has been criticized by various academicians. Thorpe (2016) had said that Ecofeminism as an ideology was not coherent and the relationship between women and the nature and the description of the same in various Ecofeminist theories seemed absurd to him. Another criticism of Ecofeminism was given by Catherine Roach who was the author of 'Mother Nature' and said that ecofeminism undermines the men's ability to contribute to nature and they are human beings too and also contribute to the child birth process. Thus ecofeminism was regarded by Anne Archambaut as itself a gender biasing and stereotyping philosophy. Dr.Twine also pointed out that the identifying a woman with the nature was ambiguous and irrational and hence there was a clear cultural issue here.Cuovo also called these connections merely symbolic and culture specific and hence not qualifying to be generalised.

Ecofeminism and Education :

The educationists who favour the ecofeminist notions and principles suggest for creation of a framework based on ecofeminist principles and demand that they be adopted in the curriculum at an early stage in order to acquaint the learners about the connections social justice has with environmental justice from the start. Although a great level of awareness has existed about the inequalities prevailing in the society due to several kinds of 'isms' such as casteism, sexism, racism, speciesism etc and much work has already been done in these areas already , gender and environmental inequalities still prevail and have not been given much importance by the education system (Kumarshivo, 2000). Bowers (2004) discusses how we have been facing the 'double bind' wherein our efforts to bring socio economic justice by increased employment , increased monetary gains, higher National income etc , we are continuously simultaneously degrading our environment by cutting down forests and increasing the disparities between the rich and the poor. Ecofeminism in education could address all these issues as it is a philosophy that is compatible with all schools of thoughts such as humanism ,psychology , philosophy , etc and can be integrated with all disciplines easily. Teaching about diversity in culture , diversity in natural forms of life on Earth , sensitizing about this diversity and sensitizing about nature and gender and should become a part of pedagogical practices as they exist already in disciplines such as ecosystem pedagogy , liberation pedagogy , cultural studies etc . Language can be especially used for the purpose of applying ecofeminist principles in learning by play an important role in achieving this . Adopting a more unbiased and gender neutral language and attempt to throw away kinds of language with strong patriarchal embedded structures of domination of male gender over female is an example of how language can be used as a tool into this endeavour. Educators can take up the responsibility of breaking classroom hierarchy , ensuring gender equalities , fostering freedom of expression and speech amongst classrooms and employ democratic ways of teaching and learning by involving students in decision making and enhance natural interdependence in classrooms and institutions (Hooks , B) classrooms and schools can be brought closer to the nature to develop a feeling of benevolence and love among students towards nature and creation of learning village using local resources and handicrafts can be encouraged in schools. The more democratic methods of teaching a teacher uses and more he/she respects the opinions of all, gender biases will shatter gradually and ecofeminist principles can be realised in the true

sense. Community participation should be encouraged in the students and a regular discussion of social issues can be conducted from time to time.

(Fisher & Martusewicz , 2012) discuss how important it is to establish amongst these learners the connections between women and the environment , and this could be done only by the teachers as they are in constant contact with them.

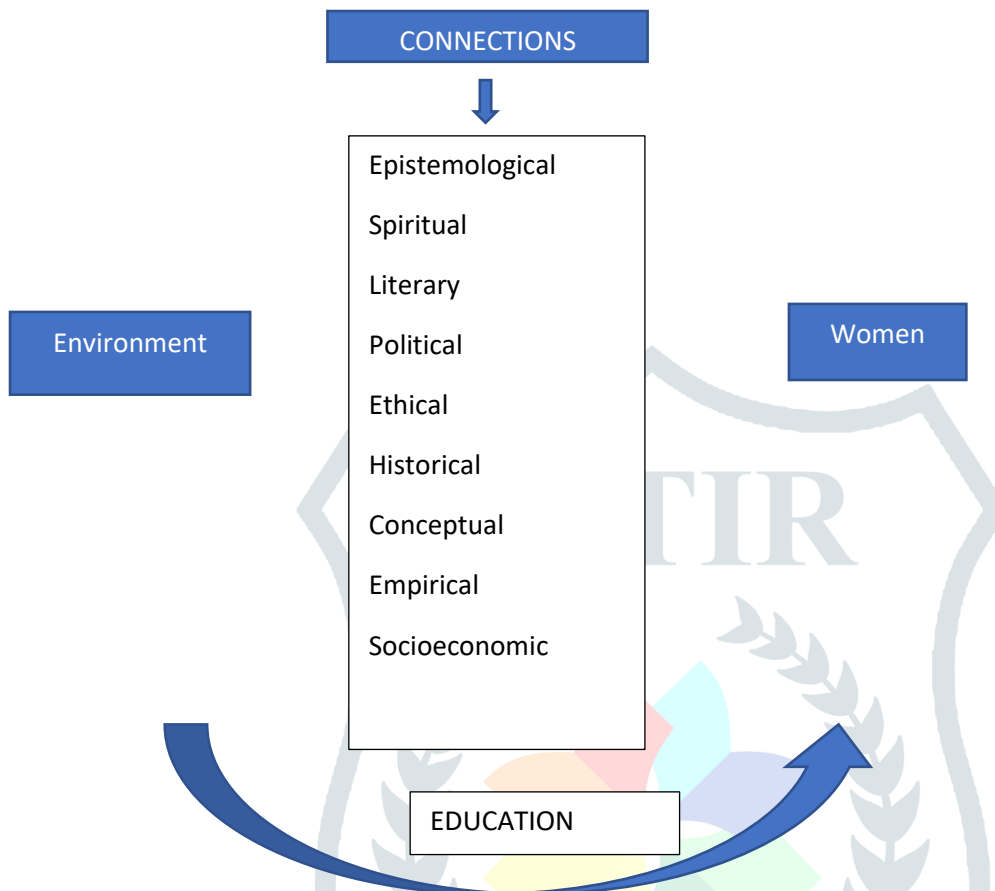


Figure 3: Connections of Ecofeminism

Thus , we can understand and conclude from **Figure 3** that the extent and success of the Ecofeminist movement in disrupting all means of domination over nature and women through education depends upon the teachers and educators and their abilities to adopt ecofeminist feminist approach into their own teaching and help learners establish connections with social justice and environmental justice and develop sensitization towards social and environmental factors in a holistic way. Thus, educators and educationists and education play a great role here in success of Ecofeminism.

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