



# Perspectives on Ecofeminism: A Brief Discourse

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## Abstract

Ecofeminism brings together feminism and environmentalism and argues that the subjugation of women and the degradation of environment are consequences of patriarchy and capitalism and proposes that society and environment can benefit only by reversing current values, thereby privileging care and cooperation over aggressive and dominating behaviors. Ecofeminism is perhaps the most complex, interesting and divided school of ecological philosophy. However, while perspectives and approaches differ and create division, ecofeminists are united in their fundamental belief of challenging androcentric and anthropocentric discourses that function to maintain opposition between various categories and uphold faulty conceptual frameworks that associate females with nature and nature with a debased femininity. This paper will dwell on the different perspectives on ecofeminism, its development and the elements that connect women and nature with an aim to understand why the oppression of women and subjugation of nature are interconnected, not only to understand its roots but also to envision a future where women and nature are empowered to thrive.

**Keywords:** ecocriticism, ecofeminism, women, nature, dualism, interconnectedness

Ecofeminism brings together feminism and environmentalism and argues that the subjugation of women and the degradation of environment are consequences of patriarchy and capitalism and proposes that

society and environment can benefit only by reversing current values, thereby privileging care and cooperation over aggressive and dominating behaviors. The central tenet of ecofeminism is that social, cultural, racial and environmental issues are not separate, and that the causes of discriminating women, people of colour and nature etc. stem from the same root and aims at addressing and eliminating all forms of domination, so as to recognize the interdependence and interconnection between the human and natural world.

The term ‘ecofeminisme’ was coined by Françoise d’Eaubonne in 1974 (*Earthcare* 5), who comments how the urbanized and male-driven technological society has reduced the earth’s fertility. A cursory glance at the history of ecofeminism shows that there has been a general agreement among ecofeminists about the interrelatedness of the oppression of women and nature. However, they have conflicting opinions when the discussion turns to the nature of the relationship, and whether or not it might be “potentially liberating or grounds for reinforcing harmful stereotypes about women” (Warren *Ecofeminist Philosophy* 21). Karen Warren notes:

The differences of opinion among ecofeminist theorists, critics and writers reflect the “plurality of positions” one finds in dissimilar variants of feminism including liberal, Marxist, radical, socialist and cultural feminism. The range of disciplinary approaches and philosophical orientations like symbolic and literary, spiritual and religious, epistemological, political, historical, conceptual, empirical, socio-economic, linguistic and ethical interconnections available to dissect or deconstruct the woman/nature analogy and culture/nature oppositions further complicates the debates within ecofeminism (21).

Some methods intersect in their approaches while others remain firmly within their own theoretical boundaries but, again, even individual disciplinary fields are not without their own contentious issues.

According to Kathryn Miles, ecofeminist scholars often assert that the great plurality of beliefs within ecofeminism is one of the movement’s greatest strengths. They note that the myriad definitions and applications, which sometimes complement and sometimes conflict with one another, demonstrate the

liberating and inclusive aspects of the movement while also pointing to the important similarities shared by the different schools of ecofeminism. All ecofeminists, they say, work toward the development of theory and action that acknowledge the role of subjectivity and intuition (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/ecofeminism>).

Ecocriticism has been influenced by insights from philosophy, development studies in sociology, ecology, feminism, Marxism and other disciplines and approaches. Having passed through what Buell has called the first, then a second wave of disciplinary development, ecocriticism has now evolved into a third wave as professed by Scott Slovic and Joni Adamson in their Introduction to the special 2009 issue of *MELUS*. As explained by Serpil Oppermann in its first stage of development in the mid 1990s, labeled as the first wave, ecocriticism showed the importance of developing ethical relationships with the natural world.

The second stage of its evolution is usually associated with ecocritical engagement in cultural studies, to which Buell refers as the second wave ecocriticism (14). As an increasingly heterogeneous movement, Buell argued that the second wave ecocriticism has been more revisionist, tending to question organicist models (22), while also locating fragments of nature within cities to expose crimes of eco-injustice against society's marginal groups (24). Oppermann states that this revisionist new stance expanded the ecocritical scope towards a more critical exploration of environmentally important social issues (14).

Adamson and Slovic observe a new third wave of ecocriticism, which recognizes ethnic and national particularities and yet transcends ethnic and national boundaries; this third wave explores all facets of human experience from an environmental viewpoint (6-7). However, Oppermann is of the opinion that Adamson and Slovic's claim that this engagement today includes all facets of human experience from the environmental view point is a sweeping generalization, precisely because no field can cover all facets of human experience. In his more recent article, "The Third wave of Ecocriticism: North American Reflections on the Current Phase of the Discipline" (2010), Slovic uses the wave metaphor more cautiously and states that like Buell, he also prefers "the idea of a palimpsest," or layering of ecocritical trends, but perhaps it is simply more difficult to visualize multiple layers of scholarly habits than it is to imagine continuous waves of

ecocritical ideas appearing on the shore. The wave metaphor, apparently borrowed from the idea of first and second wave feminism, breaks down in the ecocritical context because the waves do not simply end when a new wave begins (5).

The first ecocritic who has eloquently articulated the inaccuracy of the wave metaphor for mapping ecocritical history according to Oppermann, is Greta Gaard. In her essay, “New Directions for Ecofeminism: Toward a More Feminist Ecocriticism” (2010), she emphatically underlines the fact that Buell’s wave model curiously omits ecofeminism and questioned the absence of analytical frameworks for gender, species, and sexuality (644). According to Gaard, Buell’s ‘wave’ narrative of ecocritical history unwittingly appropriates and at the same time erases feminist narratives of feminist theoretical and historical developments (645). Gaard further states that by marginalizing feminist discourse with concern to environmental issues, mainstream ecocritics sideline feminist ecocriticism, particularly the engagement with indigenous, African American, Chicana and Asian-American women writers (646).

Nonetheless, Oppermann agrees that with ecocriticism’s expanding boundaries and inclusiveness of diverse voices from around the world, its topics and interpretive approaches that flourished in the 2000s have evolved into a more interdisciplinary field which refers to a complex set of ideas derived from cultural and literary studies, science and animal studies, ecophilosophy, environmental ethics and history, environmental justice movement, ecofeminism, animal studies, sociology and psychology, and globalism studies, among other academic domains(16).

Ecofeminists share ecocriticism’s desire for a deeper appreciation of nonhuman nature so as to avoid environmental degradation, while at the same time ardently argue that the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and nature must also be recognized. The oppression of women, children, people of color, the poor and the environment is related in myriad ways and therefore must be combated simultaneously. The term was popularized through its use in protest against environmental destruction. According to Charene Spretnak, ecofeminism grew out of radical or cultural feminism, which holds that identifying the dynamics behind the dominance of male over female is key to comprehending every expression of patriarchal culture with its

hierarchical, militaristic, mechanistic and industrialist forms (5). In the introduction to *Reweaving the World: the Emergence of Ecofeminism*(1990), Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman states that ecofeminists began as feminists who sought to create a fundamental shift in consciousness with respect to the domination of women and nature, rather than simply accepting women’s participation in the public sphere (x).

In *The Death of Nature, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1990), Carolyn Merchant states that women and nature share an age-old association - an affiliation that have persisted throughout culture, language, and history. Their ancient interconnections have been dramatized by the simultaneity of two recent social movement with common egalitarian perspectives – women’s liberation and the ecology movement, which built up during the 1960s and finally captured national attention on Earth Day, 1970. Women are struggling to free themselves from cultural and economic constraints that have kept them subordinate to men while environmentalist, warning us of the irreversible consequences of continuing environmental exploitation are developing an ecological ethic emphasizing the interconnectedness between people and nature.

In the introduction to *Undomesticated Ground* (2000), Stacy Alaimo asserts that feminism has long struggled with the historically persistent entanglement of “woman” and “nature” which is vindicated through the use of words such as mother earth, earth mothers, natural women, wild women, fertile fields, barren grounds, virgin lands and raped earth etc. Such insipid portrayal of nature as female and women has inadvertently prompted the prodding and piercing of the natural world and at the same time have also embalmed “woman” as “corporeal passive matter.” She further states that “in a dauntingly impermeable formulation, woman is not only constituted as nature, but nature is invoked to uphold the propriety of this very constitution, as when Rousseau baldly asserts that “the laws of nature” created woman “to please and be subjected to man” (2).

Alaimo continues her argument that a multitude of feminist demands have been met with lofty contention that woman’s inferior role is “natural” and “the dual meanings of nature converge at the site of woman, fixing her in a vortex of circular arguments: woman is closer to nature and is thus inferior; woman is

inferior because nature has made her so. Perhaps it is the misogynist logic of this formulation that obscures the contradictory meanings of the term “nature,” which is subordinate to Man, yet contains Man’s Truths. Since nature has been at the heart of a plethora of misogynist arguments and ideologies, grappling with the concept of nature has been an extraordinarily important component of feminist thought.

On the one hand, feminists have countered the claim of women’s inferiority as “natural” by insisting that women are socially constructed. On the other hand, feminists have identified the pervasive association of woman with nature as itself a root cause of misogyny and have advocated a feminist flight from this troublesome terrain. Simone de Beauvoir, for instance suggests that one of the reasons women are “the second sex” is that they are nearly indistinguishable from the natural world: woman is related to nature; she incarnates it: vale of blood, open rose, siren, the curve of a hill, she represents to man a fertile soil, the sap, the natural beauty and soul of the world. On the other hand, men carve their own superiority by separating themselves from the natural world while women are embodied to nonhuman nature which results in “otherness” (3).

The mistaken belief that ecofeminism is essentialist, and that it promotes the principle of an ontological connection between women and nature has been at the heart of the earliest rejections of the ecofeminist philosophy. Some critics like Susan J. Hekman have homogenized ecofeminism and presumed that they all “define themselves as radical critics” who consider that association between women and nature as “a positive good” (112). While this might be true for ecofeminists who follow a radical feminist philosophy, Barbara T. Gates argues that ecofeminism is a belief in the interconnectedness of all living things and hence it is baseless to claim that a part of it, or for that matter, only women can be closer to ‘nature’ (20). In this way, many ecofeminists challenge the hierarchical concepts of life with images and models that exemplify and advocate non-hierarchical relationships.

In view of the hybrid nature of ecofeminist theory and its philosophical plurality, there are critics who argue that ecofeminism lacks a distinct ideological point of reference rendering it an ineffectual paradigm “for being so diverse as to have no center” (Gates 21). Again, Patrick Murphy argues that as an “interrogative

mode” that embraces a whole host of theoretical viewpoints rather than a more reductive “prescriptive mode,” ecofeminism is capable of igniting difficult questions and “is most formidable in its opposition to power when it challenges its own assumptions”( Murphy 4). The diversity that constitutes ecofeminist literary criticism reflects the fact that the theory is foregrounded upon the interrelated dominations of nature and women in terms of oppression on human and nonhuman nature from the standpoint of sexuality, gender, hegemony and other dynamics of power (King 117). Gaard and Murphy argue that the “healthy diversity” found in ecofeminist theories is the product of a “recognition and positive identification of otherness” (6).

The post modern view that relegates ‘woman’ and ‘nature’ to discursive categories further complicates the ecofeminist theoretical analysis. According to Diana Relke, this gesture confines both to “ink upon paper” and ignores the glaring reality (23). She argues that “actual nonhuman nature is not a text” and that disfigured literary representations have skewed our views of it” (23). Ecofeminism is perhaps the most complex, interesting and divided school of ecological philosophy. While ecofeminists take an explicitly feminist approach to ecological thinking, each ecofeminist has bias toward particular schools of feminism as well as toward the different aspects of ecological philosophies.

The divisions among ecofeminists are often deep-rooted, following the general trends amongst ecological and feminist philosophies. For example, liberal ecofeminists, believe that equality within the parameters of patriarchal society can lead inevitably to necessary change (Guttman 40-41). For liberal ecofeminists, equal opportunities are particularly necessary within the areas traditionally used to control environmental issues in society. They believe that together with scientists, environmentalists, lawyers, and legislators, women, like men can also contribute to the improvement of the environment for higher quality of human life (Merchant *Earthcare* 9). Other ecofeminists often see this position as not being radical enough to effect sufficient change, and also as a failure to notice “the implicit masculinity of the conception” (Plumwood, *Feminism* 28).

Social ecofeminists, on the other hand, are strongly influenced by socio-political factors, seeing traditional Western capitalist structures as important exploiters of the environment and of nature. Merchant

points out that for some social ecofeminists, implementing Murray Bookchin's decentralization policies are important and necessary goals in their desire to create a more humane society (*Earthcare* 13). She adds that the relationships between production and reproduction emphasized in socialist feminism are as important as the relationship between production and ecology for social ecofeminists (15). Social ecofeminists argue, for example, that capitalism is an expression of male dominance and aggression, although as Huey-li Li points out, both men and women tend to share a common desire for comfortable material life which contributes significantly to the enrichment of capitalism (287). Nonetheless, social ecofeminists blame both capitalism and patriarchy equally for the exploitation of both women and the environment.

The most radical of ecofeminists are called 'cultural ecofeminists' who are of the opinion that women have a natural ability to save the world from ecological crisis because women are closer to nature. For them, men, particularly white western men are largely to be blamed for the environmental problems. Working against science, technology and other forms of 'masculine' progress, cultural ecofeminists often espouse a return to goddess worship and celebrate woman's particular spiritual connections to the natural world (*Earthcare* 11).

For instance, Mary Daly explicitly states in her book, *Gyn/Ecology* that all forms of pollution in "phallo-technic society" are predominantly concerned with "the mind/spirit/body pollution inflicted through patriarchal myth and language" (9). Carol Christ suggests that some kind of "mystical awakening in nature" can provide women "with images of their own power" (119) and promotes a "celebration of women's bodies and their connection to nature and each other, and the drive for wholeness" (126). Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (2016) is an angry, though poetic, expression of how patriarchy has been responsible for associating women with nature in a negative way, despite its celebration of women's connection with nature.

While coming to terms with these debates, questions and concerns pervading the ecofeminist agenda, Gates turned to Janis Birkeland who emphasized "an appreciation of the intrinsic value of everything in nature" which denounces an anthropocentric standpoint in favour of a 'biocentric' outlook. At the same time,

Gates also attempts to end binaries like male/female, thought/action, and spiritual/natural; and a trust in “process not just in product” (Gates 21). Thus, while perspectives and approaches differ and create division, ecofeminists are united in their fundamental belief in the central role that dualism plays in the conceptual construction of the categories of ‘woman’ and ‘nature’; and they recognize the concomitant necessity of challenging androcentric and anthropocentric discourses that function to maintain opposition between various categories and uphold faulty conceptual frameworks that associate females with nature and nature with a debased femininity.

For ecofeminists, the link between women and nature can have both positive and negative connotations. Some ecofeminists validate the idea that women are seen closer to nature than men, while others reject the naturalisation of women and feminisation of landscapes by men. Janis Birkeland claims that ecofeminism “explores the links between androcentrism and environmental destruction” (18), rejecting non-feminist green theories as being “manstream” as much as they are mainstream (24). Greta Gaard argues from a slightly broader perspective than Birkeland and holds that ecofeminism’s “basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature” (“Living” 1). Ecofeminists, for her, are particularly interested in examining the dualisms that have led to the devaluation of both women and nature, and of other groups dominated by masculine Western rationalism (5).

The anti-dualistic stance taken by philosophers such as Plumwood is in many ways an exemplary vision which facilitates to position herself within “critical ecological feminism.” In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (2002), she argues that attempts to undermine dualistic thinking may be particularly suited to women because of “their placement in the sphere of nature and exclusion from an oppositional culture” (36). According to Plumwood, ‘Dualism’ have several characteristics:

In the first place, it makes the other inessential and denies the importance of the other’s contribution or even his or her reality, and through mechanisms of focus and attention. Secondly, it aims to magnify, to emphasize and to maximize the number and importance of differences and to eliminate or treat as

inessential shared qualities, and hence to achieve maximum separation. Thirdly, the underside of a dualistically conceived pair is defined in relation to the upperside as a lack, a negativity. Fourthly, those on the lower side of the dualisms are obliged to put aside their own interests for those of the master or centre...they are conceived of as his instruments, a means to an end. Fifthly, the dominated class must appear suitably homogeneous if it is to be able to conform its 'nature'. In homogenization, differences among the inferiorised group are disregarded (48-53).

Plumwood's suggestion that the problem of duality is to blame for the problems of racism, sexism, classism and the abuse of women and the environment can only be resolved, through the implementation of an attitude which recognizes difference while refusing to inferiorise it because denying difference is as problematic as using difference to justify a hierarchical relationship between Others. For her, it is one's attitude towards the 'Other' that is most important. Vandana Shiva observes that the western world's views of nature is "fraught with the dichotomy or duality between man and woman, and person and nature" (40). She argues that man and nature constitute a "duality in unity." She further states that nature and man, the male and female principles experience a "dialectical harmony" and that this dialectical relationship becomes the basis of ecological thought and action (40).

Carolyn Merchant's partnership ethic is an important addition to Plumwood's understanding of how an ethical or intentional relationship with both other humans and non-human nature becomes possible for the individual. In *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (1996), Merchant lays out her solution to ecological problems and claims that, "constructing nature as a partner allows for the possibility of a personal or intimate relationship with nature and for feelings of compassion for nonhumans as well as for people who are sexually, racially, or culturally different. It avoids gendering nature as a nurturing mother or goddess and avoids the ecocentric dilemma that humans are only one of many equal parts of an ecological web and therefore morally equal to a bacterium or a mosquito" (8).

Merchant here advocates a "partnership ethic" while constraining traditional ethics based on rights, rules, and utilities as different from the "ethic care" which is usually put forward by ecofeminists who claim

that it arises out of women's culturally constructed experiences (7). Her partnership ethic emphasizes humans as equals in personal, household, and political relations and humans as equal partners with nonhuman nature (8). This partnership ethic is an expression of a "mutual relationship" which draws on the principles and advantages of both the homocentric social-interest ethic and the ecocentric environmental ethic, while rejecting the egocentric ethic associated with capitalist exploitation of people and nature (216). Her partnership ethic corresponds closely with Plumwood's elucidation of ideal relationship between others who agrees that "concepts of care, solidarity and friendship present alternatives to the instrumental mode" (154-155).

Feminine principle which is based on inclusiveness views nature as a living entity, women as productive, and men as relocating their activities to create life-enhancing societies. A recovery of this principle is needed for a non-patriarchal, non-gendered, and nonviolent society. Vandana Shiva states that, "ecology movements are political movements for a non-violent world order in which nature is conserved for conserving the options for survival" (37). She emphasizes upon a 'feminine principle' which can serve as the principle for activity and creativity in both women as well as men. Shiva further elaborates that the death of the feminine principle in women and nature takes place through passivity, while the death of the feminine principle in men takes place by a shift in the concept of activity from creation to destruction and empowerment to domination (53). Ecofeminist theory is grounded on people's different experiences and observations. While the voices of ecofeminism are diverse, their common thread, however, is the recognition of the relationship between the domination of nature and the domination of women. The realization for an urgent need to create equal rights which can save the earth urges many environmental activists to embrace ecofeminism so as to unravel the origin of nature's oppression and its foundation in the subjugation of women, not only to understand its roots, but also to envision a future where both women and nature are empowered, not only to survive, but also to thrive.

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