

## **Ecofeminism: The Pragmatic Posture of Feminism in 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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**Abstract:** *For centuries, it was thought that the main enemy of women emancipation is gender and hence the androcentricism. Man exploited nature as much as nature-equivalent, the woman. The development of science, technology and philosophy of rational civilization suggested that the feminist aspirations are related to an ecological whole consisting of political, social and cultural constructs. The totality of the struggle is called ecofeminism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Feminism is the struggle to achieve the aim that women should have the same rights, opportunities and dignity as men have in any given place and time. The idea that they are born unequal and hence titled for inequality had been discarded after the French revolution of 1789. Similar thinking gained momentum in the United States of America, after the unification of the country in 1848. England, though leading in many democratic values, could consider the issue only after 1878. Russia took up the gender question in 1848 and China much later in 1911.

The history of feminism (Hartsock, 1983) dates back to a millennium after Christ, when women began to get educated in Athenian society of Greece. In Shakespeare's Othello, the character Emilia speaks to Desdemona in a modern feministic tone: (Othello: Act 4, Scene 3...)

*"But I do think it is their husbands' faults If wives do fall: say that they slack their duties, And pour our treasures into foreign laps, Or else break out in peevish jealousies, Throwing restraint upon us; or say they strike us, Or scant our former having in despite; Why, we have galls, and though we have some grace, Yet have we some revenge. Let husbands know their wives have senses like them: they see and smell and have their palates both for sweet and sour, as husbands have. What is it that they do when they change us for others? Is it sport? I think it is: and doth affection breed it? I think it doth: is't frailty that thus errs? It is so too: and have not we affections, Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have? Then let them use us well: else let them know, the ills we do, their ills instruct us so."*

Initially, the 'Universal' feminism was based on humanist and religious considerations that all 'living' beings are the creation of God and shall be treated with equal dignity. Liberal feminism in Europe is an off-shoot of romantic period in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when freedom, patriotism, pastoral poetry, nature-writing, elegies, and platonic love were considered as values in literature and other art forms. Marxian feminism was based on the faith that 'class' nature in society is responsible for the gender-discrimination. Socialistic feminism believed in the social and economic equality of gender but does not subscribe to the political issues being involved in the movement. Radical feminism gained currency in the post-structural period after the Second

World War, rising to the level of man-hatred to emancipate womankind. Woman, taking up all physiological problems without the help of man, is the core point of the radical feminism. Advancement of science, irrespective of social, political and religious developments proposed cultural feminism more as a need than as an Endeavour. Help, kindness, pity, sympathy and love are considered to be natural qualities of human beings and hence an equal status for woman, giving birth to a man. The indispensability, canvassed by scientific and technological developments, suggested man and woman as friends and cotravellers in the civilizational growth. The kind of 'scientific' and 'rational' thinking was more widespread in Western and American societies (John Stuart Mill) and less so in oriental societies where superstition and tradition haunted to the convenience of man. The ghastly practice of 'Sati' in India, when the wife was forced to immolate herself on the pyre of the husband was discontinued only in the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when reformers like Rajarammohan roy opposed. The practice of 'selling brides' (girl children) was there in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also. The practice of dowry to bridegroom goes unabated till to date. Bigamy and polygamy were legal up to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in India, till the dawn of independent India. Molestation, rape and harassment of women are daily incidents even now. However, "the oppression of women is not unique but diverse, dissented and at times derogatory (Wittingstein...) too..as the problems of women among black, Hispanic, radical, lesbian, Jewish, third world and slave women are not unique, which breed the types of ecofeminism".

Annette Kolodny (1975) among others demonstrated that the myth of masculine heroism during historic and prehistoric periods is the primary of source of male arrogance. They successfully kept women 'away' from the heroism, wilderness, nature-travels and adventures as the woman's physiology and psychic structure are nearer to nature than to man, the nature's explorer (Simone de Beauvoir). Fields of geology and geography, Himalayan trekking and tours in wilderness are proscribed for women. When females became necessary for market economy and technical production in the post-colonial period, the women are accepted as 'necessary' intruders into wilderness. The women writers on naturalism turned to topics of wilderness, hitherto a monopoly of male naturalists, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Isabella bird's writings on 'mountains', Mary Austins writings on 'deserts', Rachel Carson's non-fiction on 'Oceans' and 'environment' and Annie Dillard's writings on 'Creeks' bear testimony. These four 'heroines of nature' (Vera L, Norwood) brought the essential differences in masculine and feminine understandings of nature and ethics adopted in exploitation of nature. Rachael Carson in her book 'Silent Spring' remarked that 'it was pleasant to believe that much of the nature was forever beyond the tampering of man...man is only one drop in the stream of God'. This observation reminds us of the earlier famous quote of Havelock Ellis (The dance of life-1923) that "Sun moon and stars would have disappeared long ago...had they happened to be within the reach of predatory human hands". The 'man' in the 'human' can be said to be mainly responsible actor as 'woman' for centuries was not allowed to perform. Roderich Nash noted that more women as nature-writers is a threat to male psyche. "Believing that they are only fit for secondary roles like producing children, writing children stories and following cultural themes and not environmental lead-givers, was disproved by "the four heroines...beginning a new chapter in feminism", Nash remarked when Carson defined nature in an immanent fashion, with a classic nature of immersion of self into nature, a tale not filled with the male's intention of dominance but with humility of how nature acts on them with surety and confidence (Silent Spring...)

Henry David Thoreau, the great naturalist of America was delighted to remark "I love nature partly because she is not man...but a retreat from him". Thoreau's statement concluded two things: a) Nature is identified with 'woman'... (b) Man is an intruder into nature and to be disliked... the two observations had gone a long way, which sowed the seeds of 'eco feminism'.

## **2. ECOLOGY AND WOMEN**

To write about a problem is not necessarily to produce a solution but to kindle consciousness in the reader's mind. Literature or any art form has no power to solve a problem but to suggest solutions to the people facing a problem.

Towards the last quarter of the last century, ecological balance in nature was endangered and the technological advancement resulted in environmental pollution, failure of ecosystems, extinction of species and loss of biodiversity. The very existence of life systems on earth was at stake.

## **Ecofeminism: The pragmatic posture of feminism in 21<sup>st</sup> century**

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Literary persons were deeply moved by this impending apocalypse and decided to reflect and react in their writings. Cheryll Burgess Glotfeltry (1989) in her paper 'Towards an ecological literary criticism' argued that it is the responsibility of critics and teachers to take up environmental implications in literary texts and to engage in eco-criticism. Nature writing is considered as 'a literature of hope' by the ecocritics. However, mere nature-writing as an experiential evidence and a romantic view of pastoral poetry would not suffice. The 'anthropocentric' attitude towards nature must be questioned, the ecocritics resolved.

Ecocritical movement started by Association in Western America (Glotfelty and Fromm.....) during 1985 radicalized the environmental thinking with their resolutions like

- I. Images of nature in the canonical literature with their stereotypes, distortions and omissions must be taken up for study
- II. Theoretical aspects about deep ecology, socio-political implications, relationship between woman and nature (ecofeminism) and limitations of literary texts to be taken as aspects of eco criticism.
- III. Ecocriticism attempts to expand the discussion of metaphors (Annette Kolodny... 'Lay of the land') describing land as 'female body' and the man, the explorer as a rapist, molester or aggressive lover in sexual act.
- IV. Human interest is not the only legitimate interest but human accountability, the culture, towards nature is more important... some sense of environment as a process and not a constant must be developed and try to answer the questions raised by 'feminine' gender about nature.
- V. Men's attitude towards a landscape with a strange combination of ecocriticism and misogyny is questioned by authors like Lousie Westling in her book 'The great breast of the new world'
- VI. Wila Cather in her work 'Oh pioneers' praised the lady farmers of Amazon and American-Indian women in the fields, identifying with the land excessively (like lesbians) but with no violence on nature
- VII. Paul Outka in his 'Race and Nature' observed that the female slaves of Afro-America were raped, identified with animals (treating them equal to 'nature'), which act exists to produce subsistence and joy for man as part of culture
- VIII. Feminists got irritated and announced that nature existed before culture and would exist after culture...the 'feminine' landscape is tortured by masculine explorer who successfully mastered the virgin territories into farms, villages, roads, canals, railways, mines, factories, cities and urban colonies
- IX. Kolodny mentioned that "we have to regress from the cares of adult life and return to primal warmth of womb or breast in a feminine landscape on the bedrock of cultural structures"
- X. The gendering of land conveniently as feminine was started from 16<sup>th</sup> century itself in Indo-European languages and even earlier, the famous example from Hindu mythology that Pakrithi (nature) and Purusha (man) are none other than goddess Parvathi or God Shiva
- XI. American writers like Herbert Marcuse (Eros and civilization, 1955 Random House, Vintage books, New York) remarked "that the images suggest that we have been no more successful in our response to the feminine qualities of nature than we have been to the feminine humans"...which means that 'we' too treated 'nature' and 'woman' with equal failure.
- XII. Woman revolted for the ill treatment meted to her and her image nature...against the sole aggressor...'man'! Hence the ecofeminism.

### 3. PRAGMATISM

The so called 'Emerson-Thoreau' line in American literary thought in the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century, revealed nature's prominence, material conditions of nature and the cultural adjustment of humans to non-human nature gained importance in the geographical descriptions. Colonial and early national writings in many countries contained details of exploring, mapping and celebrating the land. The romantic naturism is full of pastoral and wilderness themes of an unsettled condition with cultural-nationalism in the hearts, which after industrial revolution gave rise to modern 'democratic' feelings. The ethnic and feminine renaissance came in USA just before the Second World War. The writings of men are full of misogynistic elements, racist culture equated to feminine nature, euphemization of slavery and manipulation of masculine romantic scenery. The patriarchal forms in their writings are 'free' of feminized entanglements of the civil society.

The development of technological civilization with anthropocentric attitude resulted in androgenous activity, having banished non-human nature from the critique. Nature and consequently 'feminine' group are oppressed and silent groups, in need of spoken persons. (Sherry Ortner, 1974; is female to male as nature is to culture..? Women culture and society...ed. Rosaldo and Lamphere, Stanford Univ Press., p-67-68). The angry young women activists, writers and environmental workers opted to be the spokespersons. Recruitment to eco feminism is accomplished.

The new recruits encountered the problem of persistent tendency, from the early literature itself, to perceive land not merely a mother, but also a mistress, and virgin attending to men's gratification (Kolodny). The feminist raised simple questions like...In the web of life, who is treating other people as machines?...who are trained to treat plants and animals as fellow beings and who looks at them as convenient resources.. does any mother teach the child how to pluck a plant, kill a bird or crush an insect..Or is it the exclusive privilege of man to hunt in the deep forests and poach in the Polar Regions too..?

In the anxiety to prove the culprit, feminists referred to scriptures and religious (New Testament Psalm 148), Psalms also. The feminist ecotheologian, Carol Christ (1990) remarked that there is every need to rethink and restructure the world based on scriptural warrants

It was Charles Dickens and E.M.Forster (Hill of Devi – Passage to India) who suggested "that all facets of human history are implicated in natural history and the environment is not merely a framing device".

After the case is dismissed in favour of women as nature friendly, writers like Karen J. Warren (1993) took up the major project of "establishing the nature of the 'women-nature' connections, which are potentially liberating for both women and non-human nature", the results of the project comprising the elements of ecofeminist philosophy.

Having made deeper enquiries on the subject, Karen (1997) enlisted the elements as trees and forests, water, food, military service-wars, racism, classism and ageism and language as factors of an ecofeministic analysis of environmental problems. Anti-colonialism, coloured women, indigenous technical and cultural knowledge, women and political power, American-Indian women, social fabric, working conditions, inclusion of children, rape and rhetoric in wars, sexual aggression, use of science and technology, scientific ecology, androcentricism, anthropomorphism and cross-cultural and experiential evidences for unitive dimensions of being are the "ingredients of ecofeminism" as finalized by the early hours of 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Creative writer and the English scholar Gretcher T.Legler suggested that the ecofeminist literary theory, with poetry, novel, essay and non fiction, is a critical tool to (a) reinterpret the values of nature-literature (b) revisioning the human relationships with the natural world (c) by raising awareness with alternative stories about landscapes, hitherto ignored as nature-writing and (d) reevaluate the male-authorships of nature believed to be absolute truths. Leglar enlisted the writings of Gretal Ehrlich, Annie Dillard, Linda Hassels, Sue Herbbel, Alice Walker, Josephine Johnson, Lucille Clifton, Leslie Silk, Joy Harjo, Mary Oliver, Ursula Leguin and Diane Ackerman as the main ecofeminist literary critics of the times. "We, the women are supposed to abhor war

because, our procreative abilities make us close to nature and since men cannot give birth to another human being, they are said to be closer to culture...their culture includes munition, war and technology and such 'developmental' things..!'"(Murphy Patrick)

Patrick Murphy envisages an emancipatory strategy in ecofeminist literature where 'French Feminist efforts to revision phallic representation of female desire and sexuality would help develop a theory of dynamic objectivity, away from patriarchal philosophy.

### **4. UNIFIED POSTURE**

Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the population of the world reached 6 billion mark, thanks to modern medicine, surgery, gynaecology and woman's education in 'third world' countries. In addition to the historical jaundice haunting the man-woman relations, the population explosion added new problems like ecological imbalance, environmental pollution, reduction of biodiversity and ozone hole in stratosphere. The growing philosophical attitude that "human interest in nature is not considered to be the only legitimate interest Walt Whitman...(out of the cradle endlessly rocking., P.B.Shelly's "To a skylark", John Keat's.. "Ode to a Nightingale) and human accountability to environment is part of the text's ethical orientation. Women reacted more as they are identified with the victim-nature, than the victor-aggressor. They realized that the nature-women identity is neither metaphorical nor sentimental but a sheer necessity to counter the androcentric aggression. Women began to understand that the gender inequality and biocentric injustice is not just masculine but socio-political, politico-economical and universal in operation. The techno-economic growth after 1945 on a global scale envisaged bad effects on ecology and equally set negative impacts on womankind. Technological growth enhanced male-hedonistic systems and enslaved female masses. Colored women and women of third world are more affected with poverty, discrimination and superstition than their white counterparts who are subjected to limited factors like male sexuality and egoism. Black women of developed countries faced (Alice Walker ...) multiple oppressions like discrimination, injury, slavish working systems, inferior social status, illiteracy and marginalization. Even the scientific aspects like deep ecology and environmental sustenance did not affect the genders equally. Nature-heroes are not identical with nature-heroines. Conception of nature by women as a tender gift of God is different from that of males as a treasure to advance, exploit and enjoy. Anthropocentrism is another name for male-centricism, and the ill effects of exploitation, of course, are gender neutral. Feminine indignation was roused at this juncture, when the whole environmental misdeeds are male-products and the 'feminine' nature is endowed with virginity, maturity, penetration and violation. Intellectuality developed in the other gender (Chrystas...1991) suggested that the male superiority, the huge devil cannot be countered by either sexism or religious spiritualism. The gender-aggression cannot be contained by this continent or that country. Environmental justice is linked with socio-physical justice to females. They have realized that the 'woman is not born...she is made' (Simon de Beauvoir). They formed themselves into feminist groups, ecofeminist literary critics, trying to battle with oppressive forces in unity of action, sense of underlying purpose, in different forms of feminism towards universal emancipation of the nature-equivalent gender.

### **5. CONCLUSION**

The new thinking of feminists towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is that 'woman is not born...she is made'. The corollary follows that sex is a biological category and gender is a social construct. The male-centered world view on topics relating to women is to include all problems into 'genetic female' and hence culturally prescribed behaviors' into that limited circle. This philosophical attitude of male class is partly an intellectual exercise and mostly an arrogant masculine-self-centered attitude. This was realized by intellectual 'content' of the feminism, when they are considered as universally – inferior second-class citizens not just because of their 'weaker' sex-belonging but due to the larger drama of social order with various repressive stereotypes like color, race, workmanship, technical skills, military abilities and environmental management. As she is identified with nature, ecofeministic literature deals mainly with the male-exploitation of environment as much as that of exploitation of 'finer' sex with no feeling of guilt or remorse, with a formidable sense of philosophical sanctions. Ecofeminism, thus, took to a multi pronged approach, a comprehensive attack with a pragmatic posture.

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