

## INTRODUCTION TO ECOFEMINISM: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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### **Abstract:**

*Ecofeminism as a critical theory emerged in the West. The term Ecofeminism is coined by a prominent French critic and the proponent of the theory of western ecofeminism Francoise d' Eaubonne. In western thought the ideas of environment and gender and how they are connected is explored on rather ideological terms. But when it comes to India the connections between Women and Ecology can be explained on practical terms as we have a rich history of women's struggle against environmental degradation and exploitation. Chipko movement, Narmada Bachao andolan and in numerous other events we see women playing a significant role. Women take a central position in these struggles as their lives are intimately connected to nature. In Indian context theorists as well as literary figures explore many shades of this nature/women connection. In theory we find spiritual ecofeminism and material ecofeminism: one (spiritual) focuses on regenerating the idea of nature as Goddess and the other (material) stresses on the fact that women's material reality is such that when nature is harmed their lives also are altered. These strands of ecofeminist theory help to create an outline on Indian ecofeminism. In literature specially by the women authors we further delve into the intricacies of nature/women connections which sometimes are overlooked by the theorists themselves. Issues such as gender, class and race are raised, city life or urbanity is presented with both the positive and negative aspects, and most importantly these authors present us an alternative idea of modernity that does not necessarily subjugate the "other". As we go through these texts by Indian women authors we begin to realise that it is not possible to define Indian Ecofeminism in simple, monolithic terms. This is a field of diverse and intricate relationships within which man, woman, animals, plants and every other entity are entangled. One cannot be separated from the other. The idea of oneness comes vividly alive when we start to form an essentially Indian Ecofeminist theory. The contribution of these women authors in shaping the theory is undeniable. It is these texts which are set in Indian villages from 1940's to 2000's portray women protagonists of different background and how they connect to nature and it also shows how the relationship has evolved with time. That is how we get more or less a complete picture of ecofeminism which is essentially Indian.*

**Keywords:** *Ecofeminism, women, nature, third world, theory, fiction.*

Ecofeminism is a relatively new method of critical thinking that aims to explore the various ways in which nature and women are connected. Traditionally both were seen as similar in terms of caring, nurturing, giving entities. But there is another connection: their shared history of oppression. Both nature and women have been oppressed for time immemorial as both are seen as resources. They have been conquered, possessed, dominated and exploited. The reason, ecofeminists believe is the male patriarchal capitalist attitude that sees both nature and women as inferior "other". From here the dualisms of culture and nature, man and woman arise. Ecofeminism not only points at these dichotomies that are predominant in our lives but also seeks to know from where these dichotomies arise in history. In this search ecofeminists come face to face with questions, some fundamental questions of which they aim to provide answers too. These are:

Why do we see women and nature are connected?

What are the unique ways that they share a common platform?

How systems of traditional knowledge create dichotomies?

How does the dominant power structure create the divide between man and nature?

To begin with we have to look at the western ideas of what they thought of Enlightenment. The modern world and its very basic theories have emerged out of the enlightenment movement which speaks of a uniformity, universality, aims to constitute a definite world order where there would be no place for multiple cultural spaces, faiths and religions. The enlightenment project was only focused on the so called development that is fundamentally based on science, technology and industry. In such schemes of development man begins to see himself as a separate independent entity from nature. The whole point of progress, and development was to have power over nature and all the other whom he thought as inferior: the land and its people whom they began to colonize. Adorno and Horkheimer in their essay *Dialectic of Enlightenment* writes: "Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumph calamity. Enlightenment program was the disenchantment of the world... The 'happy match' between human understanding and the nature of things that he (Francis Bacon) envisaged is a patriarchal one: the mind conquering superstitions is to rule over disenchanted nature. Knowledge, which is power, knows no limit, either in its enslavement of creation or in its defence of worldly masters." (22)

Thus in his attempt to rid himself of fear of nature which arises out of ignorance man conquers nature, starts to dominate it, projects himself as independent from it. From here the division between master (man) and its slave (nature) begins to form and with it the dualism of culture and nature. In our ambition to reach feats of development and progress we have started to view nature as inert, as a resource which has to be exploited in order to progress. A dominant system of world order begins to take shape; a system that establishes a definite idea of progress and development. This idea is mainly a western capitalist product. Vandana Shiva writes in her article "Reduction and Regeneration: A Crisis in Science" (Ecofeminism by Maria Mies and Vandana Shive): "Third World and feminist scholarship has begun to recognize that the dominant system emerged as a liberating force not for humanity as a whole (though it legitimized itself in terms of universal benefit for all), but as a western male oriented and patriarchal projection which necessarily entailed the subjugation of both nature and women" (22)

The disenchantment of nature and life forms within it also begins to take place. We no longer see nature as a living body, we fail to understand that we are not separate from nature; when nature is violated we are affected too and the worst wound is suffered by women and children, animals and plants. All these life forms are in the dominant equation of dualisms are the 'other' and share a common ground of being the inferior, being the provider, being the oppressed- here lies a connection.

Ecofeminism in an important way is a reaction against western ideas of development and what the West thinks as knowledge. On the one hand ecofeminism believes that all are connected- it disrupts the dualisms of self and other. On the other hand it tries to retain the elements of enchantment within nature by considering nature as sacred. Western ecofeminists such as prominent French critic and the proponent of the theory of western ecofeminism Francoise d'Eaubonne, American activist and writer Hazel Handerson, British critic Starhawk and Indian activist Vandana Shiva they all agree that there is a sacredness in nature and that's why they all see Eastern cultures as something that stands opposed to western cultures that see nature as a resource. These ecofeminists come together in reemphasizing on this inherent spirituality related to nature: Hazel Handerson thinks that ecofeminism actually restores the primitive cultures that worship nature, cultures that are predominantly matriarchal. She also thinks that the whole natural order, its functions are not fully knowable. Humans are an integral part of the order and that's why it is impossible for him to understand the workings of nature. Starhawk defines this idea of goddess worship as a part of spiritual ecofeminism and stresses on the goddess tradition, nature theology, and indigenous spirituality. What these thinkers believe is that when we start to see earth as alive, we act to preserve it. Vandana Shiva

also has similar viewpoints regarding this. She writes in her book *Staying Alive*: “Women in India are an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and in practice. At one level nature is symbolized as the embodiment of the feminine principle and at another she is nurtured by the feminine to produce life and provide sustenance...Prakriti is worshipped as Aditi, the primordial vastness, the inexplicable, the source of abundance, she is worshipped as Adi Shakti, the primordial power. All forms of nature and life in nature are the forms, the children of the Mother Nature who is nature itself born of the creative play of her thought.” (38)

Vijaya Rettakundi Nagarajan, in her article “Soil as the Goddess Bhudevi in a Tamil Women's Ritual: The Kolam in India” shares a similar view with the other spiritual ecofeminists of both western and nonwestern background. She in her article tries to explain many Indian rituals done by women and which are thought as part of their religion (Hindu Religion mostly) as expressions of the innate sense of sacredness within nature. This is part of nature worship. This rituals which are religious in nature and develops as a part of culture is termed by her as “embedded ecologies”. She emphasises on the element of “sacrality” in nature and shows how an assumed sacredness within natural objects or nature itself can give rise to a sense of responsibility to protect and preserve nature. “...underlying our thought and understanding of religion and environment is the proposition that “sacrality” when attached to a natural object makes that object a bounded religiously endowed entity and that object is automatically, therefore assumed to become more protected. The 'sacrality' itself creates a context a context where people surrounding that natural object are more careful, more resource conscious, and more ecologically sensitive to the consequences of using that natural resource.” (162)

When we talk about connectedness in the context of India we have to mention another perspective of ecofeminism and that is more material than spiritual. Many argue that spiritual ecofeminism has the risk of being essentialist; instead of dismantling the existing power equations it can reassert the stereotypical gender equations and roles. Vijaya Rettakudi Nagarajan in the same article mentioned above is critical about Shiva's understanding of the sacred connectedness of nature and women. She is critical of Shiva's ideas of “ecological virtueness” that Indian women naturally have as they water tulsi plant every day. It is also left unexplained in Shiva's argument that how following a ritual can make one aware of and active towards ecological conservation. Bina Agarwal's 'Feminist Environmentalism' perspective follows a similar route. She is also critical of spiritual ecofeminism and advocates material ecofeminism. She concerns herself with the social positioning of women and nature. She argues that as marginalized entities both share a common ground it is not a sacred thread that binds them together rather their material reality that connects them. And this relationship depends on materiality, material production and distribution and that's why it is variable. And to say that this connection is always a positive one would be an exaggeration. Bina Agarwal refuses to accept an unquestioning acceptance of Nature/ woman connection. Political and social issues have to be considered while we talk of Indian Ecofeminism: “What is women's relationship with the environment? Is it distinct from that of man? An intensifying struggle for survival in the developing world, however, highlights the material basis for this link and sets the background for an alternative formulation to ecofeminism, which I term “feminist environmentalism” (199)

Shiva along with other ecofeminist thinkers also project the western world as responsible for a false construction of nature, a perspective that sees nature as inert, passive, uniform, inferior and thereby a subject of domination. This formation or rather false formation of nature as inferior to man and on the other hand woman as inferior to man connects both nature and women. This is a direct result of western model of development which Shiva terms as “maldevelopment”. This maldevelopment arises from the imposition of western ideas of development and progress onto others. Shiva writes “ maldevelopment is the death of feminine principle”. She shows that the common ground of being inferior shared by both nature and women is the result of devaluation of what is being provided by both nature and women by the western world. They devalue what satisfies need and ensures sustenance. Ecofeminists such as Shiva and Mies are

critical of industrialization as a strategy for development. Shiva feels it is necessary to reestablish the notion of the feminine principle in nature, the revival of Prakriti, the resource of all life. This idea of “Prakriti”, the nature Goddess is the preserver and sustainer of each and every element in nature: animals, plants even the inanimate. And thus women's struggle for liberation necessarily entails a struggle for preservation of all life forms in this planet.

And there is the systematic exploitation of the third world by the west in taking over its market. And these market strategies disrupt the lives of people and specially of women and children. The lives of these women and children depend directly on the land. The industries change the economy and the market strategies. We need to understand here how the new economy do that in order to profit from the market and within these systems the poor villagers, the farmers are remain deprived of better livelihood. Chhaya Datar in her book *Ecofeminism Revisited* writes: “Global markets allow the interior of the Third World to produce for the market and enter the cash economy. However, these people lack bargaining power and thus earn lesser. / The terms of trade (i.e., the price at which poor countries sell to buy from the rich) are pitted against the poor. Rich countries form a “buyers' market” to dictate prices. Even though poor people from the majority they do not enjoy absolute control over their products.

The productivity of the Third World has been molded to suit the demands of developed countries...It promises modern amenities but destroys their self-sufficiency. Development dismantles and disintegrates while promising to reconstitute - a hollow assurance which is never realized in the Third World.”(66)

All these theoretical approaches make it clear that ecofeminism is definitely such an emerging critical thinking which we need to adapt to see and understand all the subtle power politics that are being played out around us in every possible way. When we talk about ecofeminism in the Third World countries like India, it presents a rather different picture. India is a land of diversities; diversities in cultures, economic positions, faiths and propagandas. Thus it becomes difficult to measure or define Indian Ecofeminism from a fixed theoretical point of view that speaks of Third world in general. We tend to generalize and include the question of India within the parameters of Ecofeminism in third world. What we ignore is that India can offer a very different scenario when we talk about Ecofeminism in the third worlds. As a theoretical frame work ecofeminism emerged in the west. And all the contemporary discussions on Indian ecofeminism is done on the frameworks laid by the west. Not only that ecofeminism has given a new direction to feminism. Feminism emphasizes on equality in an already existing system. Ecofeminism strives to dismantle the predominant power structure, for ecofeminists equality is not emancipation. They explain it in the following way: with the power of reason and rationality, the very weapons of enlightenment, man has made it clear that emancipation can happen only by dominating nature, being free from nature; progress comes from using and exploiting nature. Feminism never questions this, rather they demand equal power to dominate and there lies a problem. The idea of “catching up” with the men in this very power dominated society, within the existing paradigms will help to strengthen clutches of false, manipulative development processes. The system will remain the same. I quote from *Ecofeminism* by Shiva and Mies : “ So the question is can the concept of emancipation be compatible with a concept of preserving the earth as our life base?” (7) This is not the objective of ecofeminism : not to equate equality to emancipation but to seek emancipation of all through preservation. True emancipation does not lie in having equal rights in already existing order rather it lies in a change of that order which sees nature as inferior to culture and woman to man, animals to humans.

These theoretical approaches give us some ideas of what ecofeminism is and how it fits within the context of the third word. But this is not enough to have a comprehensive idea of how women relate to nature. This relationship is a complicated one and its many complexities are explored by Indian women authors. Many of these writers were writing long before ecofeminism as a theoretical approach emerged in the west. For example the works of Kamala Markandya were writing in the 1950s. But her works reflect an

acute sense of eco-consciousness. Her women characters are portrayed as an integral part of nature. The world of Markandya is a rural world where industries are making its presence felt very subtly. The issues that Markandya brings forward are very similar with many approaches discussed in western eco-feminism as well as in contemporary Indian attitudes. This happens because there has always been an eco-consciousness in Indian psyche as our cultures have always given importance to nature, seen nature as something divine, worshipped it as a goddess. Thus what western eco-feminism terms as spiritual ecofeminism comes very naturally to the Indian women authors who have portrayed human characters within the circle of nature. These women authors wrote in the 1950s, 1970-80s and very recent 2000s. They all share a common thing and that is eco-consciousness. They explore in their works the many faceted, multi-dimensional Indian ecofeminism and make us stand face to face to this extraordinary world where women and nature connect in so many diverse ways. The literary texts of these writers become sites of resistance that question and critique the dualisms such as man/woman, culture/nature. Markandya's *Nectar in a Sieve* is a classic example of what happened in postcolonial India as it moves from agriculture to industry. Through the life and struggle of the central character Rukmini we witness a world that is ravaged by industry. Exploitation of land invariably entangles with exploitation of women. We see that when the local and self-sustaining economy collapses the women and the children suffer the most. Many women characters in the novel that include Rukmini's elder daughter Ira turn to prostitution to survive and provide for the family members. With no way left for them to earn they are compelled to sell their bodies. We encounter many deaths of little children in the village. And finally they have to leave their land, the last ray of hope vanishes with them. Rukminin rightfully explains the expansion of the factory as the growth of an untended weed that destroys the lives of every other life-form that comes in its way.

“It had changed the face of our village beyond recognition and altered the lives of the inhabitants in a myriad way. Some- a few- had been raised up; many others cast down, lost in its clutches.”(136)

Nature too is not left unaffected. The tannery not only changed the lives of the villagers it has also left its mark in many damages it caused in nature. Rukmini reminisces: “At one time there had been kingfishers here, flashing between the young shoots of our fish; and paddy birds; and sometimes, in the shallower reaches of the river, flamingos, striding with plumage of a glory not of the earth. Now birds came no more, for the tannery lay close- except crows and kites and such scavenging birds.”(71)

They move now to the city. Ecofeminists view urbanity not as a space of opportunity but as one of the reasons of environmental pollution and an inhabitable place for poor villagers. But in the novel the city space emerges as a multi-dimensional world that is unforgiving and yet offers enough for Rukmini to return to her roots and begin afresh. Rukmini returns and sees a different kind of modernity that is being set up in the village, the hospital for the poor. This idea of an alternative modernity is offered by the women writers and thereby it helps to broaden the scope of ecofeminist theory as a whole.

In Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* the connection is explored in a private space; her world is a domestic world where women from different background relate to nature differently. This novel touches upon issues of gender, urbanity, and along with very subtly industry and exploitation. Nanda, Raka and Ila they all relate to nature in indifferent ways. Thus to say that this connection is a uniform one as they all are women from third world is a wrong assumption. Nanda Kaul the protagonist of the novel finds the stark, rugged mountain village as welcoming because she searches for a place that is devoid of human interaction and relationship. We come to know that she has been a wife of a vice chancellor and spent much of her life in the closed doors of a mansion. She is disillusioned with the urban, high society life that may seem as a place for the privileged but in actuality she is frustrated with its double standard that subjugates women and forces them to play roles dictated by the society. And when the news arrives of the coming of Raka, her grand-daughter she is visibly depressed as she no longer wants human company. Raka on the other hand connects to nature differently. She is lost within the wilderness and loves the company of every entity within nature. Desai writes : “ She would return with her brown legs scorched, her knees bruised, sucking a

finger stung by nettles, her hair brown under a layer of dust, her eyes very still and thoughtful as though she had visited strange lands and seen fantastic improbable things that lingered in the mind.” (50)

It is through the eyes of Raka that we also see that nature in the high altitude is also being harmed by so called development. Raka in spite of being one from the city realises the importance of saving nature and each of its inhabitant. Desai successfully adds to the existing paradigm of ecofeminist theory the fact that to consider that women's connection to nature is monolithic specially in the third world is wrong.

Anuradha Roy on the other hand has chosen to explore the connection in an urban setting in her novel *Folded Earth*. She voices her concerns on globalization and growing industrialization in India and its impact on gender, family relations, animals and birds and the environment understood in its broadest sense. Here the most significant character other than the protagonist Maya is Diwan Sahib and a social outcaste Puran. These male characters are extremely conscious of ecology and the importance of maintaining balance and harmony within nature. Puran shows a remarkable capacity to love and care for animals. His bond with nature is almost spiritual. He loves an orphan fawn with such care and gentleness that we instantly recognize that Puran has deep connection with nature. And Diwan Saheb understands all the nuances of this connection shared by man and nature. He has seen a lot of change taking place in the area and could also foresee what fate has in store for the people and the place. Female characters are portrayed within nature too. Charu, a village girl and a friend of Maya also is able to have a deep connection with nature. Both Charu and Puran are people whose connection to nature cannot be explained only in terms of materialist aspect. Roy explains: “he could not talk to people, but he could talk to animals. Animals trusted him. Foxes came to him if he called them. Injured birds arrive on his doorstep to be cured. Dogs with broken legs found their way to his cowshed.” (170)

When her cow that she names Gauri is lost in the woods she spends sleepless nights. She even stays with her wounded cow till its death. On the other hand Charu's mother is completely unable to have a bond with nature though she too belongs to the same place that Charu inhabits. Thus the ecofeminist assumption specially of materialist ecofeminists that women of working class background has a connection with nature as they work within it can also be questioned. Roy refuses to accept that there is a simplistic and monolithic connection between women and nature. She recognizes that women's position in different cultures and societies can alter or change the modes of this connection. She touches upon issues of corruption, class struggle and shows that an ecofeminist concern encompasses all struggles against domination. It also shows that in the study of ecofeminism ecology is not always an external environment, a big outside that we go into. It's a study of interrelationship. And in here she contributes to the whole gamut of ecofeminist theory.

The literary texts end up questioning some of the standpoints of theory itself. Those are

1. An essentialist connection between women and nature,
2. An unquestioning acceptance of the connection as monolithic and simplistic without recognizing that women's position in different cultures and societies can alter or change the modes of this connection.
3. The “purity and authenticity” of third world cultures that celebrate the connection. it doesn't take into account the social hierarchies inherent in such cultures and issues of class, race or gender.
4. Absence of the male voice.
5. Modernity and its negative impact on nature and human behaviour.

These women writers sometimes go along with the established theoretical framework, sometimes deviate from it and in this deviation the function of these women writers as contributors to the formation of a definite Indian ecofeminism becomes important. There has been a progress since independence, in terms of industry, economy and technology. These process influences lives of different people differently. There is an accepted notion within ecofeminist theory of third world which is seen as unaffected by outward changes has remained unchanged and has been able to preserve the culture that worships nature. This idea

of third world is a western projection that do not take into account that India is a land of many diverse cultures and women have different social positions and thereby one synchronized connection with nature is not possible. There is no one synchronized development, there are many. These effects are varied in nature as the subject or the characters of a text speak from urban as well as rural positions, public and personal spheres, spiritual along with material perspectives. These are all different angles from where Indian Ecofeminism can be approached. Thus what we get from the study of the works of these women writers is a picture of Indian Ecofeminism complete with its many dimensions, perspectives and diversities.

Along with ecofeminist approaches we find that their works raise issues such as gender, race, class etc. They present an image of India which is different from dominant cultural representations. It shows a land besides mystery, a real world of struggle, sufferings, economic imbalance, material inequality, sexual discrimination, and survival. Indian ecofeminism thus becomes one such distinct approach that not only explores many bonds between nature and women but also connects all, all marginal entities together. This aspect of ecofeminism also broadens the peripheries of feminism itself. It forces us to see that emancipation doesn't mean having equal rights in already existing social system which today is a capitalist and patriarchal system. True emancipation will come from a radical change in that very structure that subverts all marginal subjects. Ecofeminism encompasses all those issues that are in this establishment marginal, inferior, less valuable.

Indian women writers both in theory and literature of post-independence era have been dealing with connection that man shares with nature. These writers are looking at things a bit differently. They have been able to reflect on a definite eco-consciousness in their works. This consciousness sees human lives as a part of a larger nature and realizes that when this nature is exploited human lives are affected. These writers have gone against the norm; when growing industrialism was looked upon as an optimistic change in the lives of poor Indians these writers showed the worse effects industrialism, development projects of free India. This eco-consciousness of the writers of both 1940s as well as of 2000s is uniquely Indian that can't be compared with any other forms of eco-critical writings. Whereas this eco-consciousness is uniquely Indian and can also be analyzed in terms of the very recently developed theories of eco-criticism and ecofeminism. The aim is to find out the ways in which the works of these Indian women writers can be in some ways categorized as ecofeminist as the theory dictates and at the same time deviate from many aspects of ecofeminism. And through this process of finding similarities and dissimilarities one can see how Indian women writers have managed to create a unique form of eco-critical writing which is definitely Indian in nature.

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