

Ecofeminism: An Overview

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Ecofeminism is an activist and academic movement that sees critical connections between the domination of nature and the exploitation of women. The term ecofeminism, first used by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne¹ in 1974, was hailed as the third wave of feminism. Ecofeminism, as Karen Warren notes,² is an umbrella term for a wide variety of approaches. One may be a socialist ecofeminist, cultural ecofeminist, radical ecofeminist, ecowomanist, etc. Although the categorization of ecofeminism is a contested point, what holds these disparate positions together is the claim that, as Karen Warren writes, “there are important connections between the domination of women and the domination of nature.”³

Ecofeminist activism grew during the 1980s and 1990s among women from the anti-nuclear, environmental, and lesbian-feminist movements. The “Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the Eighties” conference held at Amherst (1980) was the first in a series of ecofeminist conferences, inspiring the growth of ecofeminist organizations and actions. The politics behind these ecofeminist organizations, conferences, and actions were based on an assessment of critical links that were thought to exist between militarism, sexism, classism, racism, and environmental destruction.

The publication of *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*,⁴ *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*,⁵ *New Woman/New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation*,⁶ and *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*,⁷ in the 1970s and early 1980s, were precursors to a burgeoning of ecofeminist scholarship, especially in the fields of philosophy, theology, and religious studies. These and other books, such as *The Politics of Women’s Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power Within the Feminist Movement*,⁸ *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, and Politics*,⁹ and essays by Ynestra King,¹⁰ were important texts for women trying to integrate and interconnect their personal, ecological, and political concerns.

The University of Southern California hosted the “Ecofeminist Perspectives: Culture, Nature, Theory” conference (1987). This conference was followed by similar conferences that inspired the publication of important anthologies that articulated ecofeminist perspectives (e.g., *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*,¹¹ *Reclaim the Earth: Women Speak Out for Life on Earth*,¹² and *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*¹³). Anthologies and conferences also reflected the growing involvement of ecofeminists in the international arena, including an ecofeminist presence at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro (1992).

Although a range of woman/nature interconnections are being explored within ecofeminist thought and action, three connections seem central to ecofeminist theory—the empirical, the conceptual and/or cultural/symbolic, and the epistemological. The empirical claim is that in most parts of the world environmental problems generally disproportionately affect women. The increased burdens women face result not from environmental deterioration per se, but from a sexual division of labor found in most societies that considers family sustenance to be women’s work. It is increasingly

difficult for women in such societies to provide food, fuel, or water. Empirical data supports this claim.¹⁴

A second claim is that women and nature are connected conceptually and/or culturally/symbolically. These connections are articulated in several ways. Many agree with Ruether that Western cultures present ideas about the world in a hierarchical and dualistic manner that is lived out in the way the world is organized. The claim is that dualist conceptual structures identify women with femininity, the body, Earth, sexuality, and flesh; and men with masculinity, spirit, mind, and power. Dualisms such as reason/emotion, mind/body, culture/nature, heaven/Earth, and man/woman converge. This implies that men have innate power over both women and nature. This dualistic structure was championed in the Greek world, perpetuated by Christianity, and reinforced later during the scientific revolution. In this cultural context, the twin dominations of women and nature seem justified and appear “natural,” primarily because they are reinforced by religion, philosophy, and other cultural symbols, networks, and constructions.

The ecofeminist epistemological claim follows from the connections noted between women and nature. The fact that women are most adversely affected by environmental problems makes them better qualified as experts on such conditions and therefore places them in a position of epistemological privilege; that is, women have more knowledge about earth systems than men. This means that these women are in a privileged position to aid in creating new practical and intellectual ecological paradigms. This kind of understanding is advocated by Indian ecofeminist Vandana Shiva.

Various responses to the woman-nature link exist. Although both a historical and cross-cultural connection, some claim the link should be deconstructed and contested. It has not served either women or the Earth. Others say it should be celebrated and honored. Still others consider it to be part of past rather than present history. Ecofeminist responses to these contested points vary given the preclinations of the particular theorist (e.g., ecofeminists may be Marxists, socialists, cultural ecofeminists, radical ecofeminists, postcolonialists, postmodernists, ecowomanists, goddess-worshippers, deep ecologists, social ecologists, etc., or from a variety of religious backgrounds or none at all).

Some of the earliest ecofeminist texts in theology and religion examined the historical origins of patriarchy via the philosophical and theological traditions of Europe and the Mediterranean and found that patriarchal religion justified the domination of both women and nature. In historical reconstructions by Gerda Lerner, Marija Gimbutas, Carol Christ, and others, it is alleged that goddess-centered cultures that valued women and nature predated the patriarchal and militaristic systems that overthrew them. As patriarchal gods replaced Earth goddesses, both women and nature were degraded. According to these reconstructions, male domination and hierarchy became the religious symbols and social norms.

Cultural ecofeminists embrace goddess-oriented ecofeminism. Drawing from nature-based religions, paganism, goddess worship, Native American traditions, and the Wiccan tradition, some ecofeminists construct feminist spiritualities that they view as being more friendly to nature and women than the patriarchal religious traditions.

Rosemary Radford Ruether, Anne Primavesi, Sallie McFague, and other Christian ecofeminist theologians do not explicitly promote worship of pre-historic goddesses but they do question the historical accuracy of the claims. They argue that the possible existence of pre-historic goddesses may serve as a “liberation from the ultimacy of the biblical/Christian image of the patriarchal god,”¹⁵ but they claim that a historically uncertain past will not liberate the present. McFague and Merchant examine the connections between religion, culture, and scientific worldviews, claiming that the mechanistic models of Western science led to a rupture between the material world and the sacred that has harmed both women and nature. McFague, Primavesi, Merchant, Ivone Gebara and others look to the science of ecology to articulate a “common creation story” as part of an ecofeminist/natural sciences dialogue.

Although this essay has focused on the growth of ecofeminism in the North America, a variety of regional, ethnic, and cultural ecofeminisms exist. Vandana Shiva frequently invokes Hindu concepts and goddesses in her ecofeminist thought. Ecofeminism and the Sacred¹⁶ included essays from Buddhist, Native American, Hindu, womanist, Christian, and Jewish writers. Ruether's text, *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism*,¹⁷ includes essays from contributors living in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Gebara, a Brazilian theologian, articulates an ecofeminist liberation theology connecting social justice to ecological health.¹⁸

Ecofeminist critics, some of whom are ecofeminists themselves, warn of essentialist positions latent in some forms of ecofeminist thought. Others doubt that the woman/nature link holds cross-culturally. The borrowing of symbols from other traditions by some ecofeminists is often harshly criticized, especially by Native Americans such as Andy Smith. Others criticize the dominance of white well-educated and privileged North American ecofeminists. There is also much debate over the place of ecofeminism within other ecological paradigms, such as with social ecology or deep ecology. Finally, for many the historicity of the matriarchal to patriarchal shift remains suspect. The central premise of ecofeminism remains; the dominations of women and nature are linked in various ways (e.g., historically, materially, culturally, or conceptually).

End Notes

¹ Françoise d'Eaubonne, "Le Feminisme ou la mort." In *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980).

² Karen Warren, ed., *Ecological Feminist Philosophies* (Bloomington, Ind.: University of Indiana Press, 1996) x.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

⁵ Mary Daly, *Gyn-Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1978).

⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

⁷ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).

⁸ Charlene Spretnak, *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power within the Feminist Movement* (Garden City, N.Y. : Anchor Books, 1982).

⁹ Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, and Politics* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1982).

¹⁰ Ynestra King, "Feminism and Ecology," in *Toxic Struggles*, ed. Richard Hofrichter (Philadelphia, Pa.: New Society Publishers, 1993), 76–84; Ynestra King, "Healing the Wounds: Feminism, Ecology, and the Nature/Culture Dualism," in *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, eds. Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein (San Francisco, Calif.: Sierra Club Books, 1990), 106–21; Ynestra King, "The Ecofeminist Imperative," in *Reclaim the Earth: Women Speak Out for Life on Earth*, eds. Leonie Caldecott and Stephanie Leland (London: Women's Press, 1983), 9–14; Ynestra King, "Feminism and the Revolt of Nature" *Heresies* 13 (fall 1981): 12–16.

¹¹ Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein, eds. *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* (San Francisco, Calif.: Sierra Club Books, 1990).

¹² Léonie Caldecott and Stephanie Leland, eds., *Reclaim the Earth: Women Speak Out for Life on Earth* (London: Women's Press, 1983).

¹³ Judith Plant, ed., *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* (Philadelphia, Pa.: New Society Publishers, 1989).

¹⁴ Rosi Bradiotti, et al., *Women, the Environment, and Sustainable Development: Towards a Theoretical Synthesis* (London: Zed Books, 1994); Irene Dankelman and Joan Davidson, *Women and Environment in the Third World* (London: Earthscan Publications, 1988); Joni Seager, *Earth Follies: Coming to Feminist Terms with the Global Environmental Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (London: Zed Books, 1989).

¹⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, ed. *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996) 4.

¹⁶ Carol Adams, ed., *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* (New York: Continuum, 1993).

¹⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether, ed. *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996).

¹⁸ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1999).