

Essay Question: Give a critical appraisal of the Ecofeminist argument that the subjugation of Nature is akin to and stems from the subjugation of women.

My first brush with ecofeminism came from reading a dry version of the Chipko movement story, in a middle school history textbook. Chipko' in Hindi means to 'stick'. I remember feeling a surge of wonder at the courage shown by local villagers as they chained themselves to trees, becoming the human barriers between trees and saws in order to prevent commercial logging and to save their livelihoods in the Garhwal Himalaya's. These widespread protests led to a 15-year moratorium against logging in 1981. What also captured my imagination years later, was the specific account I read of a local woman in the movement, Bimla Devi, who in 1977, led a resistance against her husband who had obtained a contract to cut down a patch of forest in the Himalayan state of Uttar Pradesh; an audacious act of 'defiance' in Indian culture. The Chipko movement was my introduction to the woman-nature connection, lived, and upheld all-pervasively as the natural order in patriarchal cultures across the world.

Another more personal experience brought home the subordinate role women play in religion and society at a young age. My grandmother is a practicing Catholic. I was brought up identifying as one, augmented by receiving a convent school education complete with its values, creation myths and philosophy. By the age of fourteen I had decided I wanted to be a Catholic priest "when I grew up." My mother instantly disabused me of that notion. Girls, I was told, were not allowed to be priests. With this began my instinctive rejection and simultaneous yearning to belong to an institution (the Catholic Church) that has shaped my personality in ways I have only begun to unravel now, almost two decades later.

This essay explores the intimate relationship between the subjugation of women and Nature, from an ecofeminist perspective, looking particularly at the ways in which Christianity has contributed to this dynamic.

I.

"What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them" - Lynn White, Jr.

Ecofeminism is a political, social and philosophical movement that links feminist and ecological theory, which believe that the concerns of both stem from male domination of society. Some feminists have chosen to broaden their approach to speak to the spiritual rootlessness that underpins the ecological crisis, reimagining human interaction with the non-human world. The term *ecofeminism* itself or ecological feminism is generally claimed to have been introduced by Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*, (Feminism or Death) in 1974. The ecofeminist movement weaves the concerns of radical/cultural/spiritual feminists, that "humanity is gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women" (Mellor, 1997) and the green

movement, which points out the degenerative impact of human activity, on the environment, of people in power, while challenging both.

Ecofeminist consciousness explores the interrelations between the dominance of women and the natural world by a patriarchal/capitalistic system and aims at healing them through strategies that understand the causes of this imbalance and how they are enforced. The prefix 'eco' or 'ecology' in ecofeminism is used to differentiate it from the term 'environment' often used interchangeably. Ecofeminists argue that the two are not the same. 'Environment' is seen as something "out there" that needs to be studied; 'ecology' conveys the meaning of the inclusivity of humans and their natural place in the web of interconnectedness with other living beings, energy and matter. The basic premise of ecofeminists is that there can be no liberation for women and no ability to find solutions to the ecological crisis if the system of domination that prevails in patriarchal societies is not understood, challenged and changed. The advocacy of ecofeminism then is twofold: 1) the welfare of women and non-human nature oppressed by patriarchy 2) the welfare of the planet exploited by people in power for their economic advantage.

Ecofeminism has two distinct approaches to the connection between women and nature. Direct affinity draws heavily on cultural/ radical feminism, which promotes the exclusive interests of women excluding men, and sees their connection to nature through their biology. While the argument based on woman's biological connection to nature, through rites of passage such as pregnancy, childbirth, lactation and menstruation or the "blood mysteries" (*Leonard and Davis, 1996*) have been known historically to exploit women, ecofeminists choose to take an empowered view of this connection by arguing that this makes women closer to nature giving them unique insight.

I would be careful in agreeing with the body-based view of the woman-nature connection as being superior to men. Biological processes of men and women are different but only as far as reproduction goes. Men share other biological processes with nature too, such as death, getting sick, eating and sleeping as well as experience of creating life by ejaculation. Other-ing the social status of men, to claim superiority because their body-stories are different to that of a woman's, flips the old hierarchical dualism, which is not the aim of ecofeminists.

The second approach of ecofeminists is the belief that the connection between women and nature lie in their joint experience of being exploited. Women, like natural resources, are seen as something to be plundered by dominating patriarchal forces. It challenges the dualisms or 'hyperseparations' (*Bird, 2013*) or "master identities" (*Gaard 1997*), of mind vs body, culture vs nature, as well as the hierarchy between the two. Belief in the biological connection or the capitalist theory apart, both groups of ecofeminist thinkers agree upon the need to challenge the hierarchies of power, in the form of patriarchy, in the existing equation, while calling for a conscious connection and healing with the natural environment.

This 'system of domination' stems from a dualistic view of the world, that separates mind/body, men/women, culture/nature, materialism/spirituality, reason/feelings and science/folk knowledge (Mellor, 1992); keeping the hierarchies of power with one side of this duality, suppressing the other. D' Eaubonne believes that the root cause of our crisis lie within the patriarchal structures that define Western societies that enforce these dualisms, rather than within men per se (Mellor, 1996). The masculine principle in the dualistic viewpoint equates to all things positive, mind, culture, materialism, reason and science, which is shaped in the image of Man to create a unidimensional world that has negative associations to women, nature, body, spirituality, feelings and folk knowledge. This negative association of 'women' and 'nature' is shaped into a system of domination based on theological, social, political, and philosophical systems, to ratify it as a reflection of the "nature of things" and the "will of God/the gods" (Reuther, 2000), determining and cementing the subsumed role women will play under the male.

II. The role of Christianity in perpetrating this paradigm

In accepting the seemingly 'scientific' Western thought that Man is the master of Nature giving him the ability to use "it" to dominate and distract himself from the actual conditions of life, we fail to look at the assumptions that Christian theology inhabits.

Historian Lynn White linked the impact of the medieval view of Christianity and its "anthropocentric beliefs" to the ecological crisis, citing Genesis 1:26, "*let us create man in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish.... and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.*" He argues that advancement in Western science together with religion contributed to the ecological crisis that we now face. The invention of the plow, led to humans viewing themselves as an exploiter of nature rather than a part of it, while Christianity's "anthropocentric" view put humans at the top of Creation, with nature meant for his use. By destroying pagan animism, which preceded early Christianity, along with their beliefs in a guardian spirit that lived in every tree, mountain, stream and rock, "Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects" (White, 1967). Early agriculturists, planted, sowed and harvested and killed animals in keeping with observed natural cycles of birth, death and regeneration. Love for the land and its place in the web of life once inbuilt in small- scale agriculture were now placed in the devalued aspect of the science/folk knowledge (Mellor, 1992) binary. Mies and Shiva describe the connection between ecology and women, according to the ecofeminist perspective, in the following quote: "It is no coincidence that the gruesome game of war—in which the greater part of the male sex seems to delight—passes through the same stages as the traditional sexual relationship: aggression, conquest, possession, control. Of a woman or a land, it makes little difference" (Mies and Shiva, 1993).

Christianity was woven from two older traditions: Judaism and Hellenistic thought. From Judaism it dropped the belief in reincarnated souls and drew on

the belief that the male head of the family was a representative of the divine, who ruled over both family and nature including the women, children and slaves. From Hellenic thought, it took Plato's dualistic ideas, which divided the mind and body from one another. "...on the one side stood Mind containing the archetypal ideas; on the other side, unformed matter, the receptacle or "nurse" of things to be" (Ruether, 2000). Women are relegated to the devalued feminine principle in the face of male rational culture. Patriarchal religions are thrust upon by force. Women once free were now subordinate to men. This could only have happened with violence, which once internalized and accepted lessened in force. Women's oppression has been on the basis of their body, emotions and reproductive ability. The hierarchical patriarchal system of domination that emerged from this separation of man and woman, culture and nature is a way for the warrior and priestly classes that controlled land, animals and slaves to keep wealth, power and knowledge exclusively for them. Patriarchal themes shaped early Christian thought and medieval Christian practice remain unchallenged until modern times.

Max Webber in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, explores the relationship between Calvinism, a branch of Protestantism, with its belief in predestination and worldly "calling", with the emergence of capitalism and its spirited belief in profit as a virtue in itself. As a sign of being damned or saved, they looked at worldly success for clues, valuing material profit as a sign of God's favour, making profit a religious activity. Capitalism was given an impetus by Protestants involved in business with this ethos. This profit has come at the expense of utilizing the Earth's limited resources without care, shredding the previously lived experience that Nature existed long before humans turned into the dominant species on the planet and that we as a species, are "interconnected and inter-dependent" (Christ, 2016) on the earth and with the other-than-human world. The earth, its animals, plants, rivers and mountains once imagined sacred, was no longer viewed that way by Western theology and Science. The ecological crisis that we currently face stems from overproduction and over population, by a system that controls women's sexuality and destroys the environment in order to produce surplus resources.

The cultural values and attitudes of these male dominated 'hierarchies of power' tend to be aggressive, competitive, rational and analytic (Capra, 1982); obscuring the feminine attitudes of cooperation, responsiveness, intuition and synthesising. In the words of Rosemary Radford Ruether, "the basic assumption of ecofeminist theology (although seldom clearly articulated) is that the dualism of soul and body must be rejected, as well as the assumptions of the priority and controlling role of male-identified mind over female-identified body" (Ruether, 2000). Patriarchy as a system sanctified by religious symbols arose in history and is therefore neither "inevitable" nor "eternal" as the Church would have us believe (Christ, 2016). The desire to dominate, exploit and conquer, some ecofeminists reveal, is rooted in a theological system created to flee mortality and vulnerability that is the "actual conditions of life" (Eaton, 2000).

Conclusion:

We are each shaped by the cultures we grew up in and have internalized many of its all-pervasive patriarchal ideas. In my experience of reading to write for this essay I found within me many 'masculine' perspectives that I needed to pause to take stock of. It was then that I fully understood that there is no escaping three thousand years, more or less, of patriarchal attitudes – its effects though crumbling reluctantly in our time, nevertheless play out in our own lives in both men and women alike. What then does it mean to be feminine/female? What does it mean to be a man/masculine? How much does the container of the body that you are in define this and how much of it is shaped by culture?

The culture/nature and mind, spirit/nature dualisms have been most closely looked at in the essay through the lens of Christianity. In the many interlocking systems of dualism that we live in, another binary close to that of reason/matter needs addressing: that of reason/the erotic and consequently the heterosexual/queer binary as one that has emerged as an identity in the recent past. Opening up the conversation, will help shift the focus away from the gendered perspective, to understand how masculine and feminine qualities live inside each of us, and the myriad ways in which it plays out in order to bring about embodied change. We need to continue to chip away at the hierarchical dualities we've lived with, tending to the ecologies we find ourselves in, to the *humans* we are surrounded by, simultaneously creating safe spaces that will allow new systems based on the feminine principles of cooperation, responsiveness, synthesis and responsiveness, to sprout and take hold. A new paradigm that nurtures ourselves each other and the ecology we inhabit with a fierce compassion that we haven't experienced so far.

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