

Introduction

Since first introduced by Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* in 1974 the term Ecofeminism has come to represent and encompass a broad range of views centered around feminism and deep ecology. (Hobgood Oster 2005) Its central tenet, and perhaps its most significant contribution to contemporary discourse is that all forms of oppression are interrelated and must be examined together or neither can be confronted fully. (Hobgood Oster 2005) With its implicit focus on the oppression of women and the oppression of the natural world Ecofeminism asserts that both of these are formed out of the power dynamics of patriarchal systems. (Merchant 1990, Plumwood 1997, Hobgood-Oster 2005) This assertion has given rise to a range of theories of kinship between these two forms of oppression.

Nature as Feminine

The word nature has its origin in the Latin 'Natura' meaning birth, nature or quality with its root in the verb 'nasci' meaning being born. (Oxford 2018) At this very basic level by virtue of their biological function of reproduction women have an innate kinship with nature something that figures consistently in Ecofeminist philosophy.

In her book 'The Death of Nature' Carolyn Merchant (1990) proposes what she labels an 'organic theory' to describe the organically evolved close-knit, cooperative communities shaped by 'daily, immediate, organic relationship with the natural world.' She argues that this way of life has characterized human societies from the beginning up until the scientific revolution. (Merchant 1990:1) Within this organic way of life, the prevailing view of 'self, society, and cosmos was that of an organism' (Merchant 1990:1). Nature, and especially the earth, was seen as feminine and associated with the image of a nurturing mother but also an opposing image of wild, uncontrollable nature (Merchant 1990).

In this, we can see that a close association between women and nature has roots stretching back to the origins of human societies. This organic framework with its imagery of nature as a nurturing mother carried with it a set of implications and associated value systems. (Merchant 1990). Merchant argues that the technological and economic development in Europe, starting during the middle ages but increasing dramatically in the 16 and 1700's demanded the disposal of the normative constraints that the normative conceptual structure of 'mother earth' provided. (Merchant 1990). The new world view that was to emerge during the Scientific revolution replaced the nurturing mother with a mechanistic, rational worldview in which control or mastery of nature was the objective. (Merchant 1990:2). Several leading Ecofeminist scholars including Val Plumwood (1997) support this thesis.

In this argument, we see how there are two central kinships between the subjugation of women and nature. Within the organically evolved form of society the view of nature as nurturing mother provided a practical, conceptual and normative framework. For the expanding scientific, technological and capitalist worldview this normative framework of 'mother nature' needed to be subverted to enable domination and extraction. The feminine and its association with the creative power in nature had to be subjugated. Also the opposing view within the organic theory of nature as wild and uncontrollable also demanded subjugation for stability and control. As we shall see the degree to which women identify with this ancient framework has come to be very

influential in ecofeminist discourse and how women have recognized and experienced oppression.

Dualism and Hierarchy

‘ Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women’s movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this [modern industrial] society.’

The above quote from Rosemary Bradford Reuther’s book *New Woman New Earth* (Hobgood Oster 2005) points to one of the central Ecofeminist arguments concerning the kinship of subjugation between women and nature. This argument posits that the patriarchal structure exerts and justifies its dominance through hierarchical dualisms. These dualisms are central to the formation of patriarchal society and are enshrined in its institutions (Hobgood-Oster 2005) and thus is a fundamental element of the western worldview. Ecofeminist argue that it is the continued reinforcement of these binaries that form the basis for all forms of domination. Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies write that ‘capitalist patriarchy or ‘modern’ civilization is based on a cosmology and anthropology that structurally dichotomizes reality, and hierarchically opposes the two parts to each other: the one always superior...thus, nature is subordinate to man; woman to man’ (Mies, Shiva 2014:5) Val Plumwood calls this thought construct the ‘master form of reason’ and argues that ‘It’s the exclusion from the master category of reason which..explains the conceptual links between different categories of domination’. (Plumwood 1997:4)

Mies, Shiva’s and others point out that the view of society as an assembly of individuals activated by antagonistic interests introduced by Hobbe’s and perpetuated by the a selective interpretation of Darwin’s theories has come to dominate modern economic theory. The effects of hierarchical dualism is magnified when both the economic and social dynamics are seen as perpetual struggle of the stronger against the weaker. (Mies, Shiva 2014)

In this well researched and documented Ecofeminist argument a deep kinship between the subjugation of women and the subjugation of nature exists.

Women and Nature

‘(Ecofeminists) experienced the exhilarating discovery ... (of) the sacred link between the Goddess in her many guises and totemic animals and plants, sacred groves, womblake caves, in the moon-rhythm blood of menses, the ecstatic dance - experiencing of knowing Gaia, her voluptuous contours and fertile plains, her flowing waters that give life”

The above quote from Charlene Spretnak (James 1996) is an expression of the cultural and spiritual exploration that has accompanied the women's liberation movement since the 1960's. Leading ecofeminists argue that women are closer to nature in part because of their reproductive function but also because of their ‘psychic structure’ (James 1996). Many

Ecofeminists suggest women's close relationship with nature gives them unique ways of knowing and conceiving the world, which is in opposition to the dominant patriarchal worldview (James 1996). Views expressed in statements such as "feminists have long criticized...the structural division of man and nature, which is seen as analogous to that of man and woman." (Mies, Shiva p5 2014) are common in Ecofeminist literature and imply that women are equated with and on the side of nature and in the extension that men are not.

Precisely what this closeness to nature consists of is hard to pin down in part because of the individual experiences that form the basis for these opinions. Another dynamic at play that helps establish this perceived closeness is the experience women have of being on the same side as nature in the struggle against a system that oppresses them both. While often criticized Ecofeminism has largely embraced this 'culturally constructed association' and see it as a source of 'women's empowerment and environmental liberation' (JAMES 1996)]

Ecofeminists have also been critiqued for their biologically determined conceptualization of human nature. (JAMES 1996) Bronwyn James states that anthropological research suggests that women do not, universally or cross-culturally enjoy a closer association with nature than men. Further to this there is scant evidence linking gender categories to either the categories of nature or culture. (James 1996) That women's conceptual links with nature automatically have an impact on their environmental behavior is also unlikely. (James 1996)

So, we can see that arbitrarily equating women with nature is complicated at best. From teaching wilderness rites of passage for adult women and men for nearly a decade my own experience is that the close association that women feel with nature may be attributed to the greater compassion and connection that women are capable of because, broadly speaking, they are more in contact with their own emotions, are less emotionally repressed than men and are also less afraid to give voice to what they can feel and perceive.

The criticism of ecofeminism and particularly cultural ecofeminism for essentializing women (Hobgood-Oster 2005), lacking objectivity and giving voice to a point of view based on personal experience of nature and spirituality, stems from the suite of ideas and expectations of objectivity and emotional repression that forms an integral part of the 'master form of reason'. (Plumwood 1993) Part of the reason why Ecofeminism remains dynamic and relevant is because this is the very logic of oppression that Ecofeminism strives to undo.

Barring racism or cultural appropriation, the work to form a more profound relationship with the natural world and having the courage to give voice to that relationship is under any circumstance something that should be welcomed and supported. Maybe particularly at this time in history. While this emotive position has been an essential point for critics of Ecofeminism it is here that the bridge from theory to action lies. Our own cultural and intellectual demands of objectivity and of removing emotions from our discourse is perhaps one of the critical elements that have conspired to prevent us from charting a different course.

Other Perspectives

A critique of Ecofeminist views has been that it is predominantly articulated by white western women reflecting their personal experience of a modern industrialized society. (James 1996). Andy Smith, representing a Native American perspective, supports the above pointing out that 'depending on one's position in society, there is often one form of oppression that seems most pressing in one's everyday life.' Citing the example of Native American women for whom colonial oppression and racial oppression are far more central to their direct experience. Smith goes further and states that 'many Native women completely dismiss feminism in light of colonization'. (Smith 1997)

Drawing from her experience working with Indigenous populations in KwaZulu Natal in South Africa, Bronwyn James emphasizes that it is specific resource use contexts that ultimately determine women's environmental practices and behaviors. (James 1996) Acknowledging the narrow cultural lens of most ecofeminists, the argument for the primacy of the subjugation of women versus other forms of subjugation loses ground. Similarly, the argument for women's 'special relationship' with nature also comes into question when looking at individuals and communities outside of modern industrialized cultures.

James (1996) provides some nuance and cautions that, while the patriarchal worldview places masculine qualities above feminine qualities, continuing to dichotomize women as intuitive, 'caring and nurturing and good as opposed to men who are rational, destructive and bad' simply aims to reverse the power relationship between the two binaries which suggests an inherent belief in the superiority of the feminine and its ability to enable a different worldview. (James 1996) James, also warns that this general dichotomizing also 'obscures the different interests and values that exist within each gendered category'. (James 1996)

The Primary Oppression

It can clearly be said that there is a kinship between the subjugation of women and the subjugation of Nature. However, the suggestion that the subjugation of nature stems from the subjugation of women is more problematic. A central and often quoted statement by Ynestra King that 'domination of women was the original domination in human society, from which all hierarchies - of rank, class and political power - flow' (Smith 1997) suggests a hierarchy of oppression where the domination of women is primary. Gerda Lerner's (1987) historical analysis supports this position but neither make an explicit connection to nature.

Andy Smith points out the central role assigned to the subjugation of women by predominantly white, privileged; Western Ecofeminists has to do with it being the primary form, if not the only form, of subjugation that they have experienced. (Smith 1997)

Beyond the industrialized world, women, as providers and caretakers, relying more directly on the natural world for their subsistence (recalling Merchants 'organic theory') are likely to experience the hierarchy of subjugation differently. This is supported by Andy Smith's comments above. The combination of the point of view that women are closer to nature than men and the experience of exclusively sexist oppression could be seen as a contributing reason for the idea of the primacy of the oppression of women versus other forms of oppression. Curiously it seems inherent in the proposition that all other forms of subjugation (of nature, animals, indigenous

peoples, etc) stem the subjugation women that women are paramount thus implying a hierarchy to the different forms of oppression. Alas, yet again the specter of dualism and hierarchy.

To comprehensively answer the question of whether the subjugation of nature stems from the subjugation of women it seems necessary to ask the deeper questions about the inception and objectives of the patriarchy. What precipitated its emergence and expansion and what was its objectives?

The theories of scholars like Gerda Lerner (1986), Marija Gimbutas (1989), Riane Eisler (1987) and Steven Taylor (2005) all propose different constellations of environmental stress and conflict as precipitating a reorganization of early agrarian, egalitarian and matrilineal societies along hierarchical and patriarchal lines. The creation of these new power structures did not have as their primary objective to subjugate women but did eventually come to do just that as part of the process of subverting what it perceived as obstacles to domination and control as well as the necessary means for production. The advent of the patriarchy, its driving forces, its objectives and methods refined over time must be said to be the reasons for the subjugation of nature. In the extension, this has implicated the subjugation of women, not the other way around.

Conclusion

If the views above are accepted one could indeed say that the subjugation of nature is akin to the subjugation of women. However, the subjugation of nature cannot be said to stem from the subjugation of women instead both women and nature are subjugated as part of the dominant patriarchal system. Further to this, the arbitrary stance that men are the oppressors and women the oppressed is partially accurate and only in general terms. All are oppressed but men created this system and enjoy a position of significantly greater privilege within its hierarchy. Making this point is not in defense of patriarchy but an argument that 'the logic of domination' (Warren 1990) is a fundamental organizational principle that affects everybody and everything. Oppression is a pervasive, defining characteristic of our culture, and it affects both women and men.

Therefore the domination of nature does not equate the domination of women because they are closer to, more connected to or seen as equal to nature but because the patriarchy will simply, because of its inherent objectives and methods, its cosmology and anthropology, dominate and subjugate all 'others' that it sees as inferior which includes nature, and women.

Ecofeminism has been and continues to be an important area for continued exploration and critique of the patriarchy. Its wide, dynamic and transgressive nature ensures its vitality and relevance. (Hobgood-Oster 2005) Still it continuously runs the risk of being locked into the dichotomy and hierarchy it aims to dismantle. As long as masculinity or men, in general, are vilified the most that could be achieved is greater insight and balance but within the extant system. EcoFeminism is then perhaps a critical intermediary step towards a more unifying philosophical framework that rather than perpetuating the division between feminism and masculinity, nature, and culture, focuses on the central issue of domination in all its forms under which all suffer.

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