

# Ecofeminism and the Ethics of Care: Rethinking Gender, Nature, and Sustainability

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## **Abstract**

Ecofeminism emerges at the intersection of feminist theory and ecological thought, arguing that the exploitation of women and the degradation of nature are rooted in the same patriarchal structures of domination. This paper explores ecofeminism as both a theoretical framework and a praxis that challenges hierarchical dualisms—man/woman, culture/nature, rational/emotional—that have historically justified the subjugation of both women and the environment. Drawing on the insights of thinkers such as Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, and Carolyn Merchant, the study examines how ecofeminist perspectives illuminate the interconnectedness of social and ecological justice. It also investigates cultural and literary representations where the female body and the natural world become symbolic sites of resistance against capitalist and patriarchal exploitation. The paper argues that ecofeminism's ethic of care offers an alternative model of sustainability—one grounded not in domination but in reciprocity, empathy, and responsibility. Ultimately, ecofeminism is presented not merely as a critique but as a transformative philosophy capable of reshaping contemporary debates on climate change, resource equity, and gender justice.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, Patriarchy and Nature, Gender and Ecology, Feminist Environmentalism

*'The ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature.'* – Greta Gaard

## **1. Introduction**

Ecofeminism provides a critical lens that connects the exploitation of nature with the subordination of women. Both the natural world and the female body have historically been constructed as passive, silent spaces—territories to be appropriated, invaded, and consumed. The language of conquest, mastery, and possession that has long shaped human–nature relations echoes the patriarchal discourse that frames women as objects of control. This parallel oppression forms the central concern of ecofeminist thought.

Emerging in the mid-1970s, alongside second-wave feminism and the green movement, ecofeminism did not arise in isolation but grew out of a network of intersecting struggles. It has roots in the labour movement, women's health care initiatives, peace and anti-nuclear campaigns, and environmental and animal rights activism. These movements, though varied in scope, share a common thread: a protest against systemic inequality, the normalization of violence, and the coercive practices of the state and other

hegemonic institutions. Ecofeminism thus stands at the intersection of social justice and ecological sustainability, insisting that neither can be achieved without the other.

At the same time, ecofeminist discourse interrogates the myths and metaphors that naturalize this double oppression—the feminisation of land and the territorialisation of women—and exposes how such symbolic associations underpin structures of domination. It also critiques the entanglements of consumerist capitalism, market economies, and colonial practices that commodify both the environment and women's bodies.

### **Objective of the Paper**

This paper seeks to examine the origins and theoretical foundations of ecofeminism, to trace how it challenges the gendering of land and the territorialisation of women, and to analyse its relevance in the context of global capitalism and colonial legacies. In doing so, it aims to highlight the political urgency of ecofeminism as a framework for resisting ecological destruction, gendered oppression, and the intersecting forms of violence perpetuated by patriarchal and capitalist systems.

### **Ecofeminism and Indian Mythology**

Myths have always drawn parallels between women and nature. In Indian mythology the feminine principle is a combination of *shakti* and *prakriti* which stand for power and nature respectively. But the possibility of both nature and woman being unduly exploited by men of power can be traced in Indian mythology. To cite a couple of instances:

*Prithu Prithvi*: In the myth of Prithu, Lakshmi is Vishnu's daughter Prithvi. Prithu is the son of the evil king Vena whose reign spells anarchy as he fails to observe the vedic rituals and curse befalls the land. Vena is killed by the sages who then churn his corpse, out of which emerges a dark dwarf that is symbolic of his evil or shadow self. Out of his remains which are now pure, rises Prithu who is also regarded as a part incarnation of Vishnu as he is born of a man's body without a woman. Prithu's birth is primarily to negotiate with Bhudevi or the earth, a form of Lakshmi who has taken the form of a cow and run away to escape the atrocities of Vena. Prithu chases her but she refuses to return saying she cannot bear to be exploited any further. Prithu convinces her to come back with him promising her that she will not be exploited and be 'milked' on his watch. Prithu then 'milks' the earth by summoning Manu in the form of a calf for the earth to be replenished with vegetation and natural resources once again. Thus guarded and assured of her safety by Prithu, the earth comes upon being regarded as Prithvi the daughter of Prithu. In her identification as the Earth Goddess and the metaphor of the cow to symbolise her,

*Puloman, Lakshmi* : Lakshmi is also believed to be the daughter of the asura Puloman who rules over patala or the netherworld and thus is also called Pulomi. At a symbolic level this would refer to the mineral reserves, fossil fuels and precious stones all amounting for the immense wealth found under the earth. As the daughter of Puloman she is Pulomi, the princess of the netherworld and the source of all wealth and buried treasures. Puloman is attacked and killed by Indra who takes Pulomi as his wife, after which she comes to be known as Sachi or Indrani. Symbolically, this myth possibly alludes to the violation of the earth by the devas or 'light skinned migrants' and their pursuit of extracting natural resources from the earth especially metals and minerals.

## **Ecofeminism and Greek Mythology**

*Gaia*: The primordial Greek goddess Gaia who was also the Earth mother, is supposed to have borne the mountains the sea all gods with the cow as her symbol standing for nourishment. She is also the grandmother of Zeus since she is the mother of Zeus' mother Rhea.

*Demeter*: the ancient word 'meter' for mother is actually embedded in the name of this goddess. In Greek mythology, the wealth on the surface of the earth and the wealth below the earth are represented by Demeter and her daughter Persephone respectively. The names of Demeter and Persephone are always taken together. Perspehone is abducted by Hades the god of the underworld and Demeter is so infuriated that she will not let anything grow on the earth till her daughter returns. Zeus under a lot of pressure, pleads with Hades to release Persephone but just as she is about to leave, Hades gives Persephone a pomegranate seed to eat thus making sure that she will not be able to stay with her mother permanently. Thus Persephone is forced to spend one third of the year with Hades underground. Persephone's act of eating the pomegranate seed stands for a compromise that changes the world forever. Whereas she might have expected an immortal existence with her mother on Olympus, Persephone becomes the epitome of the cycle of life and death.

## **What do myths do?**

All these myths feminise nature and they naturalise woman. Ecofeminist critique draws attention to the manner in which myths bind the two together in ways that are seemingly inevitable and irreversible. In these cultural narratives, women are endowed with the qualities of nature, while nature is attributed traits associated with women. Both are represented as possessing creative and reproductive potential. The problem, however, lies not in recognising this symbolic connection but in the reductionist logic that emerges from it—one that confines women and nature to reproductive and productive functions alone (Merchant 3–5; Shiva 38).

This trajectory can be traced historically to the shift from nomadic to pastoral and agrarian communities. With the consolidation of control over the fertility of the earth came the territorialisation of land, the demarcation of property, and the institutionalisation of ownership. A parallel logic was subsequently extended to women: their fertility was territorialised, their bodies treated as property, and their reproductive capacities appropriated by patriarchal systems (Mies and Shiva 12–14). Laws of inheritance reinforced this structure—just as land and its yield were claimed by the landowner, so too was a woman's body and her "yield" claimed by her husband. In both cases, commodification reduced them to passive entities, valued primarily for their procreative potential (Plumwood 21).

Ecofeminism resists such modes of domination. It seeks to deconstruct the ideological and material structures that naturalise oppression and to envision the liberation of both women and nature from systems that commodify, control, and silence them (Salleh 8).

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## **Ecofeminist Framework**

Ecofeminism argues that oppression arises from a dualistic conception of the self as separate from and superior to the rest of creation. When this belief dominates, the self inevitably acts in its own interest—accumulating resources, amassing wealth and power, and exploiting others—even if this entails resorting to violence. In such a framework, violence is not accidental but intrinsic, for it is driven by greed rather than need.

In contrast, ecofeminism advances the idea of an interconnected self, one rooted in an ethic of care, sharing, conservation, and sustenance. This perspective emphasises responsibility over self-interest, ensuring that all beings have what they need to thrive. Rather than working within a self/other dichotomy framework, ecofeminist thought espouses a self-in-each-and-all approach—a consciousness that acknowledges the fundamental interconnectedness of all life.

Importantly, ecofeminism integrates theory and praxis. It insists that meaningful change requires dialogue between academics and activists. Its commitment to pluralism values diverse voices and struggles, extending beyond women's issues alone to encompass the wellbeing of trees, plants, animals, soil, water, minerals, and the wider environment. In this sense, ecofeminism is both an intellectual paradigm and a call to collective action for the liberation of all forms of life.

## **Ecofeminism's critique of the Western intellectual tradition**

Contemporary scientific and rational thought is largely shaped by Western intellectual traditions, which have historically devalued qualities associated with women—such as emotion, intuition, and feeling—in favour of logic, rational thinking and reason. This hierarchy of values extends into the political and economic realm too. Militarist economies, for instance, train soldiers from the outset to embody an ideology of masculine pride and national strength, fostering a culture of machismo as the norm.

The roots of this marginalisation can also be traced to myth as discussed earlier. In many Semitic traditions, woman was not even equated with nature or a goddess figure but reduced to an elemental quality—water—portrayed as formless, chaotic, and unpredictable. Such symbolic relegation positioned women as primal forces without agency, associated primarily with reproduction and aligned with animals and the natural world.

With the Enlightenment and the subsequent Industrial Revolution, these hierarchies were reinforced through the rise of modern science and rationalist thought. Certain qualities—order, control, rationality, productivity—were elevated, while others—emotion, embodiment, creativity—were systematically devalued. The pursuit of scientific knowledge and economic development thus evolved as a distinctly Western patriarchal project, shaped both historically and ideologically.

## **Ecofeminism's critique of Science**

Indiscriminate industrialisation and unregulated technological advancement have resulted in widespread environmental degradation. The rapid pace of scientific progress has not only exploited natural resources but also created a profound disconnection between human beings and their ecological surroundings. Ecofeminist thought underscores that the earliest and most direct victims of this model of development are women and nature itself.

Industrial effluents, toxic emissions, large-scale deforestation, mining, dam construction, and infrastructure projects in ecologically fragile regions destabilise ecosystems in irreversible ways. The use of pesticides, chemical waste disposal, acid rain, radiation, and other pollutants disproportionately affect women, particularly their reproductive health, as well as children, who are most vulnerable to ecological hazards. Furthermore, many advances in science and medicine continue to rely on animal experimentation, reinforcing a cycle of domination over non-human life forms.

### **Ecofeminism, Colonisation, and the Market Economy**

Ecofeminism critiques the colonising project of the Western world, arguing that it is not merely a historical event but an ongoing process. During the colonial era, colonised countries were exploited as sources of raw materials and as markets for finished goods. In contemporary times, this legacy continues under the guise of developmental and economic agendas that prioritise the growth of First World nations while extracting resources and labour from the Global South. These policies, deeply embedded in classism and racism, exact their heaviest toll on women in the Third World.

Rural and tribal women, who are often responsible for securing food, fuel, and water, bear the brunt of such development models. Farming, traditionally a joint occupation of men and women, is also an important site of women's ecological contribution, as they preserve and transmit biodiversity through indigenous agricultural practices. However, corporatized, profit-driven farming systems that privilege monocultures erode biodiversity, diminish indigenous grain, vegetable, and pulse varieties, and undermine food security. Even infrastructural interventions—such as diverting rivers—translate directly into increased physical and temporal burdens for women, who may now walk twice the distance to fetch water.

The writings of Vandana Shiva and Arundhati Roy offer incisive accounts of how tribal and rural lives are devastated by modernising and development initiatives. For instance, damming projects have destroyed ecosystems, extinguished fish species, submerged natural vegetation, and disrupted cycles of cultivation dependent on riverine silt and alluvium. Communities that once sustained themselves through seasonal farming and fishing are displaced overnight, their homes flooded with no redress or rehabilitation. Their stories rarely reach national headlines, yet their forced migrations fuel the ever-expanding slums of Indian cities, where the homeless are perceived as urban nuisances rather than victims of systemic ecological and economic violence.

### **Ecofeminism and culture**

Though ecofeminism's primary concern is nature, it also traces the systematic destruction of ways of life by imperial, colonial and now corporate forces. The project of modernisation aims at a homogenous, unified society. The brutal violent history of colonisation stands testimony to this. The white man ravaged the world and nature, destroying indigenous communities, their culture, their religion and their way of life. In the process, the interconnectedness between these communities and nature like those of the native Indians, the Africans and the like which was the corner stone of these cultures was lost and lost were the ways of communion with the natural world, the ways of conserving and yet remaining apart of the natural world. What colonisers did till the early 20<sup>th</sup> century went on even after the colonies became technically free. Now it is corporates and governments that come to power with the help of corporate funding that are doing the job of systematically erasing indigenous communities and way of being which are more

sustainable more in harmony with nature and that do not otherise nature. And what happens to the women in these communities which are in this state of a culture shock? The women are the worst hit. They are losing their old ways of being, community living and shared sisterhood. Also with neoliberal patriarchy seeping in with its profit-making and commodifying obsession, women are being increasingly commodified. These communities which were relatively more egalitarian are now undergoing ideological mainstreaming and social marginalisation at the same time. Mahashweta Devi is one writer for instance whose works bring out very poignantly the predicament of women in changing tribal societies as the boundaries between modern communities and indigenous one keep blurring. And the atrocities at the hands of the state, the landowners and the media they are subjected to.

P Sainath gives us the horrid condition of tribals in the mining localities of Odisha and Jharkhand. With their natural, self-sustaining existence gone with the advent of the mining companies, these tribals have been displaced. They try to steal some of the excess coal that lies as waste. And they are jailed for it. The woman then who is already facing enough hardships of fetching firewood water and food has to now run from pillar to post either to get her husband out of jail which takes her to enforcement authorities and we all know how that fairs. or she is forced to fend for the family either by working at half the wages for more time with the local landowner or at the colliery or as a worker in the mines. This makes her vulnerable to her employer and the state as both are in cahoots. In his book *Everybody Loves a Good Drought* he tells us exactly how a small section of the privileged and elitist population continues to reap and enjoy the benefits of development while the vast majorities of rural and tribal India wallow in abject poverty. In that sense you will realise that ecofeminist politics is very closely intertwined with third world economy, politics and social inequities.

## Conclusion

From the Antarctic to the deserts to the tropical rain forests to the grasslands, whatever we do has a direct impact on every corner every inch of this planet. Therefore, we need to be careful what kind of fingerprint we'd like to leave behind. And like Greta Thurnberg in her 2019 UN Climate Action Summit powerfully stated, "Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction" and went on to say how "Climate Change" and a dying world is not a phenomenon of the future. It is happening now, right as we speak. Ecofeminism is a way of conceiving and working towards a more inclusive world which acknowledges women, animals, plants, trees, rivers, mountains, forests as entities autonomous entities who have a right to exist. It is a way of saying no to military capitalism, neoliberalism, free market economy, weapon trade, industrialisation, indiscriminate scientific pursuit, genetic engineering all under the umbrella of capitalist patriarchy. Like Gandhi said – "Theres enough in this world for everyone's need but not enough for everyone's greed."



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