

Ecofeminism: The Path towards Healing the Earth

Jamie Thompson

Department of Biology; College of Arts and Sciences

Abilene Christian University

The concept of the patriarchy, or any concept in which one group dominates another, is inseparable from the formation of human kind's domination of nature. This domination of nature has led to the current the ecological crisis humanity faces. Those who deny climate change can admit to the massive amounts of pollution, trash, and deforestation. Despite this worsening economic crisis, those in power have been slow to react. Women can ultimately provide and lead the movement to solve this ecological crisis through the growing movement of Ecofeminism. In the philosophy of Ecofeminism, individuals recognize and reject western dualistic thinking that the earth, and all things physical, is separate from the divine.

Women have typically been associated with the earth and this connection has led to both the oppression of women and the oppression of the earth. Through this societal connection Ecofeminism has arisen. Ecofeminism seeks to emphasize the interconnectedness of all creation through caring for the earth as well as other oppressed groups. Some threads of Ecofeminism take this association further and insist that women innately have a stronger connection to the earth than men which is why they are the only people who can lead the movement of earth healing. However, this is an unsupported and damaging claim that is not accepted by most Ecofeminists. Despite these criticisms, Ecofeminism has the potential to lead the way in the healing of the earth and perpetrating a culture of sustainability. Women from all over the world have already set a precedent of caring for the earth.

Historical Connection Between Women and Nature

To first understand why Ecofeminism is a necessary and powerful

movement, the dualistic thinking of the western world that Ecofeminism rejects must be understood. Dualistic thinking involves the separation of nature and culture, of spirit and matter, and even of man and woman. Popular Christianity, the dominant form of religion in the West, has contributed heavily to dualistic thinking. Pauline theory heavily influenced Christian dualistic thought. Paul was influenced by Gnostic thinking which clearly separates good and bad, and associates bad with matter and good with spirituality.¹ For Paul, sin is equated with death and decay, and salvation is linked with eternal life. When Christians are baptized, they transcend their mortal bodies, subject to decay, and take on an immortal spirit. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul speaks of the duality of bodies. He states that humans have a lesser natural body "sown of dishonor" and a spiritual body "raised in glory."² This type of dualistic thinking, which has become the dominant form of thinking in the West, leads to the domination of men over women and the domination of humans over nature. For example, Christians who are always focused on heaven have often ignored the

¹ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 1992.

² *New International Version*

degradation of the earth because the earth represents the material realm, which is of lesser importance than the spiritual realm³. Therefore, in order for the position of human over nature to end, the entire chain of being must be upended; this includes male over female, scholar over worker, humans over nature.⁴ This view of nature as evil (or not of the sacred or divine) has led to the justification of its domination and exploitation.

The oppression of women and the exploitation of the earth is further connected because, historically, women and nature have been tied together. Plato's concept of the disembodied soul and ultimate enlightenment involving transcending the Earth and reaching the heavenly realms, involved women being incapable of this type of enlightenment. Plato outlines this in *Timaeus* stating that if man fails to achieve enlightenment then he will return to Earth as a woman and then beast.⁵ This lumps women with nature, both incapable of transcendence, and leaves women on Earth as enlightened men ascend to the heavens. So, there is a clear societal link between women and nature and it becomes clear that "we cannot criticize the hierarchy of male over female without ultimately criticizing and overcoming the hierarchy of humans over nature."⁶ The destruction of the natural world is even talked about with phrases that are normally associated with violence against women, for example, the rape of the earth.⁷ The domination of the earth, justified because the earth is part of the material world, which is lesser than the spiritual world, becomes linked with the domination of women as they are more closely related to this material world than men.

In addition, several religions throughout history have also heavily linked women with nature and specifically with the act of creation. In many ancient near east religions, the universe springs from the womb of a Goddess.⁸ In classical Greek culture, the earth is controlled by the goddess Gaia, and in Hindu religion the earth is a sacred mother deserving of gifts and reverence.⁹ Within the Christian Wisdom tradition, Wisdom was brought forth from God before creation as a female counterpart to God and assisted in creation. Wisdom is described in the book of Proverbs as well Song of Solomon as a creative force.¹⁰ Christianity goes further in being a dominant force linking women with nature, and linking women with the "fallen" aspect of the Earth, and therefore something that can be dominated and exploited. Eve, if the creation story is to be taken at face value, is the mother of all humanity and is responsible for sin entering into the world and the fall of all creation. In addition, women as life givers, as the bearers of children and active participants of the creation of life and organic matter have tied them to nature. This does not mean that because women can bear children they naturally have a closer relationship with nature, but historically the designation of women as child bearers and homemakers has tied them closer to nature. In the same way that there is a link between oppression of women and the exploitation earth, there is also a link between emancipation of women and the restoration of the earth.¹¹ In order for the destruction of the earth to end oppression of marginalized groups must also come to an end.

³ Dwivedi and Reid, 2007.

⁴ Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk*, 1983.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, pg. 73.

⁷ Maria, Shiva, and Salleh, 2014.

⁸ op. cit. Ref. 4

⁹ op. cit. Ref. 2.

¹⁰ op. cit. Ref. 4.

¹¹ op. cit. Ref. 2.

Tenets of Ecofeminism

It is clear that there is at least a societal link between women and nature, and because of this link, women have begun to recognize the link between the oppression of women and the oppression of the earth. The culmination of these thoughts being the rise of Ecofeminism. The term Ecofeminism is a term coined only recently. It was created to refer to the numerous protests that were led by women that arose in the 1980's that protested ecological degradation. One of the main tenets of Ecofeminism is the acknowledgement of interconnectedness of all life. This idea asserts what humans do impacts nature and everything that goes on in nature affects humans. Humans rely on Earth for survival. As humankind has not yet found a way to live permanently outside of the confines of this planet, humans therefore rely completely on the earth and its products for survival. On a more microscale humans cannot function properly without the bacteria living on our digestive tract, and as Ruth Rutherford says in her book *Sexism and God Talk* "The plant can happily carry its processes of photosynthesis without human being, but we cannot exist without the photosynthesis of plants."¹² Ecofeminists fully accept their reliance on the natural world and hold a certain high level of respect for nature because of it. This is a hard concept to grasp, especially for Christian Westerners, who are fully entrenched in the idea of humanity's uniqueness. However, Ecofeminists realize that even when one species goes extinct the whole integrity of the system is weakened.¹³ So it is the duty of women, and of humanity as a whole to assist in the healing of the earth because of this interconnectedness and the dependence humans have on nature.

Another main tenet of Ecofeminism is that climate change, and the destruction of

the earth, hurts marginalized members of society the most, in particular women and children. The society that rose up to dominate world politics, economics, and for a significant time, the world's land itself, was the capitalist, patriarchal, west. It is this society that is responsible for the destruction of the natural world. However, it is not the society responsible that will feel the brunt of the devastating effects of this destruction. The effects of this destruction will be felt by the least powerful and the most vulnerable individuals in the world. These effects will be felt by women and children dying in war torn Syria, by children dying of starvation on Madagascar because of a prolonged drought, and by native peoples whose water is polluted by oil pipelines. Those most ill-equipped to deal with the effects of climate change and environmental destruction are in developing countries and belong to marginalized groups. This is because those individuals do not have the infrastructure, safety precautions, health care, access to clean water, or food security which would help alleviate the problems with climate change and environmental degradation.¹⁴ The upper class, in particular the capitalistic west, has the power and resources to delay or avoid the effects of climate change, at least for a limited amount of time.

Because climate change affects the lost marginalized of society it disproportionately affects women and children of these groups more than men. For example, this can be seen in casualties in severe weather events. The frequency of Environmental disasters and severe weather events is increasing due to climate change, and these disasters impact women and children more than men. In the flood and cyclone that hit Bangladesh in 1991 90 percent of the deaths were women. In 2004 when a tsunami hit Sumatra 75 percent of

¹² op. cit. Ref 4, Pg. 87.

¹³ op. cit. Ref 1.

¹⁴ Gaard, 2015, pg. 23.

those who died were women and in May of 2008 when a cyclone hit Myanmar 60 percent of the casualties were women. Even during Hurricane Katrina, women, in particular black women, were more severely impacted than men.¹⁵ In countries hit by drought or lack of clean water, it is women who spend hours each day collecting clean water. In areas hit by famine, it is women who first go without food so that children and working men can eat.¹⁶ Industrialization and capitalism has contributed to environmental degradation and climate change. But those responsible for these problems are not the ones that will feel its pressure as they can more easily adapt and deal with the problems that arise.

Criticism of Ecofeminism

To emphasize this link between women and nature, many Ecofeminists point to the term Mother Nature and the development of the term. Many also exclusively use this term when talking about nature. In fact, the book *Ecofeminist*, which is a standard text in Ecofeminist theory, refers to the earth using only feminine pronouns.¹⁷ The development of the term certainly points to the link that society has made between Women and nature. However, the insistence on using the term Mother Earth when referring to nature, and talking about nature in gendered terms is damaging. When we use only masculine terms when speaking of God, we make it seem as if only men can relate to God. Using only female terms to talk about nature relates only women to nature when in actuality men and women are equally related to nature.

Women have a deeply entrenched connection with nature, and from this association with nature, and through the

common connections of oppressed groups, Ecofeminism has arisen. One of the arguments against Ecofeminism is that it involves biological determinism, and that ecofeminists assert that women are biologically determined to have a closer relationship with nature. This is an idea that is held by some extreme ecofeminist, and cursory readings of some mainstream ecofeminist works can lead to this misconception.¹⁸ However, it is essential that this movement does not become closed off to male input or refuse to acknowledge the validity of male connection with nature. It would be a mistake to claim that only women can experience a deep connection with nature and then to say that for this reason women are the only group capable of leading an environmental restoration movement. This falls into the mistaken way of thinking that women possess traits of empathy, nurturing, and tenderness that men do not have and that men possess traits of strength and boldness that women do not have. This is of course incorrect and not supported by research.¹⁹ These are not masculine or feminine traits, they are simply human traits.

Ecofeminism emphasizes the interconnectedness of the earth. If they hold to this idea that the entire earth is interconnected and dependent on each other, then it follows that men are an important part of the system. It is important that men recognize their role in the creation and participation in the destructive patriarchal society. However, it is equally important that they are active participants and contributors in searching for a solution to the current ecological crisis.²⁰ Society has associated women with nature and many women identify with this link. This is of course not to say that men cannot feel a link

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ op. cit. Ref. 7.

¹⁸ Shiva, 1997.

¹⁹ Ley, 2012.

²⁰ op. cit. Ref. 1.

with nature, the first to study the natural world were in fact men. It should also be noted that some of the first people to champion for conservation and preservation of the wilderness in the United States were in fact, upper class, men.²¹ A better argument to make is that women did not study the natural world first because they did not have the opportunity of the privilege to be able to.

World Changing Power of Women

People in power tend not to want to give up that power, whether consciously or subconsciously. Men, particularly straight white men, are the demographic currently in power. While they do have their own merits and personhood, and will certainly be vital allies in the process of healing the earth, they do not represent the most likely catalyst for change. In most cases of social revolution or change, the movements were started by the oppressed. The Civil Rights Movement in the United States, the Russian Revolution, even Christianity was begun by people on the margins of society, not those in power.²² It certainly takes either the new power or cooperation with the powers that be to create real change, those in power are not the ones that start revolutions. This is why marginalized women represent a powerful force for change and are more likely to be the catalyst for the process of healing the earth.

Furthermore, women have already demonstrated significant power to change thoughts and the world. Many movements which champion the earth and fight against ecological destruction are women. Recently on January 21st 2017, over a million people in the United States, and over 5 million people worldwide participated in the Women's March which protested injustices of all kinds. One prominent point of protest

was that of ecological justice. In fact, one of the official unifying principles of the Women's March movement is Environmental Justice. On their website, they state "We believe that our environment and our climate must be protected, and that our land and natural resources cannot be exploited for corporate gain or greed - especially at the risk of public safety and health." This shows that feminist movements recognize and fight for the needs of the environment and see the link between the rights of women and the rights of the earth. Furthermore, the March for Science, which will take place on April 22, 2017, was made in the spirit of and modeled after the Women's March.

In addition to the power of the Women's March, there is already a substantial historical precedent for women championing the environment as well as the disenfranchised simultaneously. Many consider Rachel Carson, author of *Silent Spring*, to be single handedly responsible for the modern environmental movement.²³ In her book *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson recognized the interconnectedness of nature and humanity, that humanity was not separate from, but an integral part of, creation. She recognized that harmful chemicals, most notably DDT, literally designed to harm certain parts of the environment, had negative effects on the entire ecological system, even humans. Her love for the environment and desire to help was fostered by her mother. In addition, Carson had many women that helped to build and continue her legacy of environmental consciousness. After Carson's death in 1964, one of Carson's closest friends, Shirley Briggs continued to write about the dangers of pesticides as well as founded the Rachel Carson Council.²⁴

²¹ Mann, 2011.

²² Op. Cit. Ref. 12.

²³ Musil, 2014

²⁴ Ibid.

However, this is not a movement that involves only middle class white women of the West, but involves women from various different countries and social classes. In India in the 1970s villagers in several small villages in the Himalayas had been fighting against the government which was attempting to cut down parts of the forest. In 1974 most of the men had left the villages to go collect compensation from the disputes. When the lumber companies moved to take advantage of the presence of only women, children, and the elderly, 30 women marched into the forest and protected trees marked for felling by hugging them.²⁵ In Kenya in the late 1970s, Wangari Maathai started the Green Belt Movement. This was a grassroots environmentalist effort that sprung up as a way of helping rural women have access to the things that they needed like firewood, clean water, and balanced diets. Members of the Green Belt Movement worked to establish public greenbelts for growing food, plots for growing firewood, and fighting against soil erosion. In 2004 Maathai became the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize, partly because of her efforts with the Green Belt Movement.²⁶

Conclusion

These are just a few examples of the female leaders of the efforts to healing the

earth and to list them all is beyond the scope of this paper. These examples show the potential of women to provide the solution to our current ecological crisis. The mistreatment of women is deeply tied to the degradation of nature. The devaluing of both women and nature is due in part to western dualism which holds the spiritual as higher than the material. This leads to the justification of human domination over the environment. Furthermore, nature has historically been more closely related with woman than with men. This has led women to develop a deep kinship with nature, but it has also led men to relate women to the lesser spiritual realm and therefore justify domination of women. Some Ecofeminist have taken the kinship that they feel with nature a step further and asserted that women are naturally more connected to nature than men. This is a mistake, as men are an important ally to the ecofeminist cause. Through the domination of both women, nature, and all marginalized groups, the ideology of Ecofeminism has arisen. This ideology emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life as well as emphasizes justice for all marginalized groups. Women, with the help of Ecofeminism, have the potential to lead changes in thought that can help heal the earth and bring justice to all people at the same time.

Literature Cited

- Dwivedi, O.P. & Reid, L. (2007). Women and the sacred earth: Hindu and Christian ecofeminist perspectives. *Worldviews*, 11, 305-323.
- Gaard, G. (2015). Ecofeminism and climate change. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 4920-33. doi:10.1016/j.wsif.2015.02.004
- Ley, R. (2012). Ecofeminism and nature-religion. *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa*, 36(1), 53-73.
- Mann, S.A. (2011). Pioneers of U.S. ecofeminism and environmental justice. *Feminist Formations*, 23(2), 1-25.
- Miles, M. Salleh, A. & Shiva V. (2014). *Ecofeminism*. London: Zed Books.
- Musil, R. K. (2014) *Rachel Carson and Her Sisters: Extraordinary Women who have shaped America's Environment*. New Brunswick, Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

²⁵ op. cit. Ref. 2.

²⁶ Muthuki, 2006.

- Muthuki, J. (2006). Challenging patriarchal structures: Wangari Maathai and the green belt movement in Kenya. *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 69, 82-91.
- Ruether, R. R. (1992). *Gaia & God: an Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Ruether, R. R. (1983). *Sexism and God Talk: Toward A Feminist Theology*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Shiva, V. (1997). Feminist ecology is the answer. *Herizons*, 11(4), 16.