



## So What Happened to Ecofeminism?

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**Abstract:** Headlines are full of dire warnings about the loss of honeybees, the perils of factory farming, and our detachment - from nature, other species, and each other. As environmental destruction, species extinctions, and planet wide contamination secures a toxic foothold, it becomes imperative to understand how we came to this crossroad. This essay will address the following important questions: What is patriarchy? What is ecofeminism? How has ecofeminism changed in thirty years and can it still be relevant to today's pressing environmental issues? Have patriarchal values led to environmental decay and how? This essay also examines patriarchal society and its historical leverage on environmental degradation. Before the rise of institutionalized religion, various cultures such as the American Indian, European Sami, or Australian aborigines avowed nature and the environment as sacred. For the past 200 years the Western world has been obsessed with conquering it. Whether we see it as the feminine Mother or as a gift from the Creator, we cannot sustain life without it. We must no longer engage in wishful thinking, religious platitudes, or outright denial. A more knowledgeable perspective can only aid us in understanding the various social and environmental problems along with their environmental movements. Perhaps rethinking the dominant paradigms in our existing systems can aid in the salvation of that future which we are robbing from our children.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, Patriarchy, Environment, Social Movements

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## WHAT IS PATRIARCHY?

Patriarchy is a rigidly entrenched social system characterized by historical and present-day power relations whereby any living being other than a human male is systematically disadvantaged, subjugated and oppressed. It is a highly organized system that endorses those whose behaviors are consistent within its philosophy. Patriarchy is a culturally enduring concept “synonymous with exploitation, and there is no more accepted form of exploitation than that of animals and the environment” (Adams, 2010, p. 36).

From the eleventh century forward, teachings from principal texts of the Bible were used to continue the determination of proper roles for women and animals in society and to vindicate their subordination to men. Through these teachings, men and women were conditioned to believe gender roles were sanctioned by God and therefore natural. Transitions in religious beliefs and practices took place in the same period as the rise of feudal societies under strong kings, where cultural changes were accompanied by a stronger regulation of female sexuality and an increasing exclusion of women from public activity. Women were depicted as emotionally fragile and intellectually deficient in comparison to men, with their inherent role in the service of man, children and family.

The beginning of the Scientific Revolution, which heralded pre-industrial capitalism, brought about a profound redefinition of nature. Once seen as a nurturing and bountiful *mother*, nature was now something to be tamed, as *she* was responsible for disasters such as floods, drought, or plagues. As man distanced himself from the natural world, feminine/nature was seen as something to be feared, manipulated, and forced into submission. This achievement brought an understanding of nature that was rational

and predictable which then translated into order and power. This image of a manageable and manipulated bounty became so prevalent as to become the only way to see nature - as feminine, as the *other* and outside of man-kind. “Characterizing women and nature as the ‘other’ allows for the operation of dualism through backgrounding, hyperseparation, relational definition, objectification, and homogenization, all of which ultimately result in the exploitation of the ‘other’” (Leshak, 2009, p. 01).

Capitalism is essentially patriarchal, as it requires the duality of production/reproduction to function. Production is the labor provided by men in creating worthy and important commodities for the capitalist market. Low paid, unpaid, or *invisible* work is predominantly done by women consisting of child rearing, domestic or menial work, elder or sick care, and volunteer work which facilitates the operation of a capitalist economy. During the change to early modern capitalism, women were restricted in the area of production through the reining in of their roles in commerce, while in the area of reproduction, male physicians were pivotal in undermining women’s established roles in midwifery and thus women’s control over their own bodies (Merchant, 2006).

Continued attitudes of domination and oppression in modern society act as a legitimizing structure that supports and promotes destructive environmental impacts through patriarchal capitalism. Venerated masculinity and trivialized femininity permeates our language and culture. The more an individual or a social category is feminized, the more likely the denigration is assumed to be self-explanatory. “The common sense of privileging the masculine and devaluing the feminine is culturally institutionalized and collectively

internalized to such an extent that we are all variously complicit in its reproduction. And it is also implicitly and explicitly manipulated to reproduce inequalities as if this were natural and inevitable, thus undercutting critique and resistance” (Sjoberg, 2010, p.20). An established oppressive system such as patriarchy reinforces a dualistic hierarchy by creating either scientific theory as evidence or religious dogma as definitive proof of its validity. Society compels its members to abide by the beliefs that are built into such a system or to risk conflict and exclusion through incompatibility.

Elizabeth Gray, an ecofeminist theologian and author, argues that men’s need to conquer women and feminize nature is the result of sexual differences in gender role development. Female infant gender development is a continuous interrelation with the mother as they both identify as female. Male gender development leads to rejection and denial of his dependence on and attachment to the mother. In order to ensure men’s continuous independence from the mother and the female through rejection and denial, it becomes essential for a patriarchal culture to define the feminine role as submissive and inferior (Huey-li, 2007). Feminist theories of gender construction also suggest the creation of dominant masculinities take place in opposition to the feminine, and thus desire for transcendence, autonomy, and action is translated in patriarchal cultures as rejection of the feminine, the body, animals, and nature (Sturgeon, 2008).

The power of patriarchy endures today precisely because those most affected by it do not understand its beginnings or its history. “So long as we are afraid to name patriarchy and to study its workings historically, we will understand our current circumstances inadequately” (Bennett, 2006). Remembering the past when *men*

*were men and women were women* is comforting and safe. To relinquish it and rewrite history embracing diversity would deny the American public the archetypes it has grown accustomed to—“the strong father, supportive mother, heroic knight, vulnerable maiden” (Adams, 2010).

### **WHAT IS ECOFEMINISM**

Ecofeminism is a term introduced by Françoise d’Eaubonne, a French feminist, in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* (Feminism or Death) published in 1974. It called for a feminist revolution to secure global ecological survival. D’Eaubonne held that patriarchal systems and male power are responsible for ecological destruction leading to eventual environmental collapse for future generations. She set forth that the connective relationship between the oppression of nature and that of women must be recognized and explored (Hobgood-Oster, 2003).

Ecofeminism is broadly viewed as a feminist approach to environmental ethics with the core belief that the domination of women and the domination of nature are fundamentally connected. Others have been drawn to ecofeminism through advocating for animal rights, alternative spirituality, and other progressive affiliations. Ecofeminism explores the concept of dualism such as man/woman, mind/ body, reason/emotion, human/nature, active/passive, and how the former in each pair is believed to be legitimately superior in a patriarchal system (Sydee, 2001). Patriarchal ideology separates these beliefs into sharply contrasting groups such as: “men are not-women, enemies are not-allies, gays and lesbians are not-“normal”, nature is not-human, and most of the world’s people are “non-white.” This definition-by-differences is an essential first step to exploitation: naming someone or something as “other”

justifies fear and abuse” (Forsey, 1993). Ecofeminists understand this oppressive ideology as a deliberate control over women’s sexuality and reproductive power. The appropriation and commodification of women’s sexual and reproductive capacity by men lies at the foundation of private property, institutionalization of slavery, women’s sexual subordination and economic dependency on the male” (Lerner, 1986). According to Gaard (2011, p. 30), the historical institutionalization of masculine violence against women, animals, and nature are legitimized and normalized through religion, culture, and language.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the vast rise in global environmental concern with scientific and popular interest centering on environmental protection and sustainable development, brought the intersection of global awareness and feminism toward a very promising union. The prejudicial values placed on the feminine or *other* within the ruling androcentric philosophy became a vital recognition in bringing a more globally comprehensive understanding of the juggernaut that is feminine oppression. The structural insight of ecofeminism connected global processes of environmental decay with “oppressions of nature, women, and all those constructed as “feminine” by examining patterns in global economics such as “third world debt, maldevelopment, industrialized animal food production and food scarcity, reproductive rights, militarism, and environmental racism” (Gaard, 2011, p.33).

The ecofeminist agenda insists that care and consideration be brought to the cyclical activities that preserve and support all living beings. Evidence demonstrates that when women and men are relatively equal, economies tend to grow faster, the poor move more quickly out of poverty and the

well being of men, women and children is enhanced (Buckingham, 2004).

The noted Indian ecofeminist Vandana Shiva sees women as the most vulnerable to environmental change. The fact that women are harmed the most by environmental problems makes them better qualified as experts on such conditions and therefore places them in a position to be more knowledgeable about earth systems. This puts women in a unique position to aid in creating new practical and intellectual ecological paradigms. “It is the awareness of nature as a living force, and of themselves as partners with her in the production of sustenance that guides their ecological struggles. These movements, while dependent on women's insights, are not based on a gender ideology” (Shiva, 1988).

Marija Gimbutas (1921-1994) former Professor Emeritus of Archaeology at UCLA, contributed greatly to women’s studies with her archeological and philosophical work on Neolithic culture and religion. She wrote the book *The Language of the Goddess* (1989) that provoked the theory that early civilization had at one time been an egalitarian society and supported an earth-based spirituality. “At this critical time when the earth is facing environmental catastrophe and it is clear that we need a change of values, this work questions the precept that Western civilization has always been equated with male domination and warfare. The message is that for thousands of years European people lived quite well as an integral part of the web of nature” (Marler, 1995).

Starhawk, a proclaimed Pagan and Witch, is founder of Earth Activist Trainings that conduct intensive seminars combining permaculture design and political organizing. She is the author of many works celebrating the Goddess movement and Earth-based, feminist spirituality. She is a global justice activist who is highly

influential in progressive movements and in bringing the techniques and creative power of spirituality to political activism (Starhawk, 2008).

### **HOW HAS THE ECOFEMINIST PERSPECTIVE CHANGED OVER THE PAST THIRTY YEARS?**

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 (Lorentzen & Eaton, 2004).

So what happened to ecofeminism? What happened was that the arguments being made no longer focused on patriarchal consequences. The multifarious range of woman/nature interconnections being explored within ecofeminist theory were no longer seen as centered on the critical connections of the domination of nature and the exploitation of women.

The term ecofeminism began to take on the tarnish of being essentialistic and ethnocentric. This was inferred through the expansion of cultural based ecofeminists who embraced various forms of nature-based religions, paganism, goddess worship, Native American traditions, and the Wiccan tradition. Essentialists believed women inherently had more *natural* qualities such as bearers and nurturers of life; qualities essential to correcting the ecological damage wrought by men. The conception of a patriarchal shift to a contrived and alarming matriarchal position was assumed, and became highly suspect.

"People come to ecofeminism from many directions and have taken it to other places, disciplines and actions. It is impossible to provide a straightforward

narrative of the origins and evolution of ecofeminism, as its development is neither straight forward, nor does a singular narrative suffice. Ecofeminism has quickly become a multidisciplinary and increasingly international insight" (Eaton, 2006, p.12).

Yet, there is no highly visible, easily identifiable, significantly labeled ecofeminist activist movement. Several websites promote ecofeminism such as Ecofeminist Literature, EVE Online, Ecofeminism at Erratic Impact's Philosophy Research Base, Ecofem.org, W.V.E. (Women's Voices for the Earth), and while W.E.D.O. (Women's Environment and Development Organization) is the largest and most well known ecofeminist organization in the U.S., it is hard to find any coherent organized activist or group activity. There are several leading figures in the theory and practice of ecofeminism such as Vandana Shiva, Karen Warren, Susan Griffin, Val Plumwood, Greta Gaard, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Alice Walker, Maria Mies and the late Marti Kheel, but no distinguishable leaders for the uninitiated to follow. Additionally, most groups that can be recognized as principally ecofeminist do not identify themselves as ecofeminist due to the essentialist and ethnocentric stigma.

You are more likely to find mainstream articles concerning an *environmental feminist* approach, which is a political stance that recognizes the systematic interconnections between environmental degradation and a multiplicity of oppressions dealing with social, economic, and political inequality of all marginalized peoples. Some have just replaced or simply interchanged the titles of ecofeminism and environmental feminism so as to distance themselves from the taint of essentialism and goddess worship. "So dominant has anti-essentialism become in feminist theory that accusations of essentialism have become akin to accusations of not being a

'proper' feminist. From certain feminist perspectives ecofeminism appears almost anachronistic, and claims that ecofeminism might be part of a third wave of feminism appear incongruous" (Gillis, 2004, p. 229).

**Applying the perspective to understanding social / environmental problems and environmental movements:**

Aristotle's philosophy of the *Great Chain of Being* represented life forms in a hierarchy with man at the top and all below him in service to his need. This "became one of the most persistent and powerful, if utterly erroneous, ways of conceiving the universe, dominating scientific, philosophical, and religious thinking until the middle of the 19th century" (Wise, 2006).

The rise of Western modern science that promoted a mechanistic and physical worldview with the dualistic structure of all things feminine inferior to the masculine was advocated in the Greek world, extended by Christianity, and supported by the scientific revolution. In this cultural context, the dual dominations of women and nature seem substantiated and believed to be the natural order of things as reinforced by religion, philosophy, and other cultural symbols, networks, and constructions (Lorentzen & Eaton, 2004).

Original primate studies postulated similarities between apes and humans while focusing on the highly competitive and dominant nature of the males. These primacy patterns in great ape relationships were the assumed foundation for stability within the group and protection for the females and infants. Anthropologists who trained in predominantly male controlled social organizations and institutions naturally described primate society as simulating human male dominance patterns. "These observations provide more than a comparison to contemporary human social

organization. They provide a glimpse into the origins of patriarchy. If our close relatives live in groups organized around male relationships, then clearly our patriarchal pattern is given an evolutionary perspective, and some would say a validation, of millions of years" (Parish, 2003).

Japanese primatology led by Kinji Imanishi in the 1950's, profoundly challenged Western evolutionary theory. Eastern beliefs saw all living things as spiritually connected through reincarnation as the indigenous populations of primates figured prominently in Buddhist beliefs. "Monkey mythology is an important part of both Hindu / Buddhist lore (India) and Zodiac / Taoist / Buddhist lore (China). The monkey embodies the themes of repentance, responsibility, devotion, and the promise of salvation to all who sincerely seek it" (Jokinen, 2007). Imanishi initiated a rare style of field research consisting of long term observation, individual recognition, and feeding to habituate them to the presence of observers. This occurred over a decade before Dr. Louis Leakey, a prominent paleontologist, archaeologist, and anthropologist, sent the now well known Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, and Birute Galdikas into the field.

Western primate studies began to flourish in the 1950's and matured during the 1970's, which was also an era of a very active women's movement in North America and Europe. It was during this time that Dr. Louis Leakey became well known for his academic work on human origins. He prompted and encouraged field studies of chimpanzees, mountain gorillas, and orangutans by the aforementioned three women when the most important Western rule of male dominated empirical science was the rule of separation/distance from study subjects.

Leakey's philosophy of encouraging informally educated women for research initially prompted a great deal of criticism as women without the same formal training as their male counterparts did not carry the same credibility as those with degrees and researching backgrounds. As prevalent sexism obstructed equality in the sciences, encouragement of a male mentor in a male-dominated field became the opportunity for Goodall to succeed and through her determination redefine the role of women in science.

Regrettably, Leakey was also associated with having a double-edged reputation for giving women opportunities within science and attempting to have romantic relationships with these same women (Linton, 2000). Choices between advancement in a professional career and personal reputation quite often impact women as a side effect of the male dominated workplace. Women run the risk of becoming demoted to a dependence role in assisting dominant male ambitions.

Alison Jolly, a noted primatologist, has made two of the most significant contributions to paradigm shifts away from male dominance theory in primatology. She was the first to recognize the social power of females in groups, and she formulated the first statement of the social intelligence hypothesis, which argues that intelligence and mentality are consequences of social opportunities, not by-products of tool-use, bipedalism or human language (Lee, 2000).

The patriarchal system has had many steadfast variations in different times and places. "Systemic deprivation and violence against women: rape, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, female feticide, infanticide, witch-killing, sati, dowry deaths, wife-beating, high levels of female illiteracy, malnutrition, undernourishment and continued sense of insecurity keeps women bound to home, economically exploited,

socially suppressed and politically passive" (Ray, 2002, p.16). Patriarchal constructions have entrenched and sanctioned this ideology through social signification in the forms of family, religion, caste, education, media and law. More subtle expressions of patriarchy is through symbolism communicating messages accentuating the self-sacrificing, self-effacing image of women and through traditional practices which emphasize the dominant role of women as a faithful wife and devout mother. Improvements in the status of women frequently means only that we are seeing the improvements in the degree in which their situation affords them opportunities to exert some leverage within the system in exchange for sexual, economic, political, and intellectual subordination to men, thereby sharing the power to exploit men and women of lower class (Lerner, 1986).

The above example shows how the privileging of masculinity is key to an established governing code within the symbolic, discursive, cultural, corporeal, material and economic power relations that constitute multiple forms of subordination and exploitation with feminization common to hierarchies of ethnicity/race, class, gender/sexuality, and nation (Sjoberg, 2010).

Today, as population increases and environmental degradation continues to escalate, the unease of economic development along with environmental sustainability are slowly prompting an awareness of the dualism of economic and female inequality. Mounting concerns about this relationship have created movements such as the deep ecology movement, environmental justice movement, and animal rights which in turn have spurred such activism as the Chipko movement in India, the Green Belt movement in Kenya, Greenham Common in the U.K., and Love Canal in the U.S., to

name a few.

**CONCLUSION: The Mounting Conflict between forces of Patriarchy and Ecofeminist Resistance**

While a range of woman/nature interconnections have been explored within an ecofeminist discipline, three connections are central to ecofeminist theory. The empirical connection claims the higher percentage of global environmental problems affect women through the sexual division of labor. Where family sustenance is seen as woman's work, this labor is becoming increasingly problematic as women try to ensure access to food and household resources. Where women are seen culturally and symbolically connected with nature, a hierarchical and dualistic structure emerges with all things feminine inferior to the masculine. This dualistic structure is still continuing to be reinforced by religion, philosophy, and other cultural constructions. The epistemological claim is that women are most adversely affected by environmental problems putting them in a privileged and advantageous position to be better qualified as experts on such conditions. This places women in a position of knowledge thereby giving them an advantage over men concerning earth systems.

Western patriarchal self-interest is universal in the form of globalization that is proclaimed as economic growth, progress, and civilization. This supposed improvement is spawning financial poverty for the majority as well as the loss of indigenous cultures and traditional cultural practices. To continue to place patriarchy as the entrenched societal convention, which is fortified within conventional organizations created by that philosophy, makes pioneering and revolutionary approaches almost impossible because they are literally unthinkable to the larger segment of the

representative community. Allowing and/or sanctioning control over women's sexuality and reproductive power due to class, caste, religion, or ethnicity should not be categorized and accepted as a biological destiny.

The course of action that is essential to reduce oppression of nature and the feminine is not the end of an association of woman and nature, but the end of a *negative* association between the two, and the termination of this sole association. The point is quite simple: humans (male and female) and nature are connected; humans and nature are not separate. Until conventional philosophy is allowed to fall away and be replaced by a more open and accepting approach to diversity - inequality, violence, oppression, and discrimination will continue. There should neither be indifference or antagonism to cultivating diversity, which is known to be more stable than a single system.

Religious and scientific beliefs that further man's dominion over nature and not the belief that we should be caretakers of the earth promote the continued indulgence in the rampant consumption of resources. The ecological crossroads that we find ourselves at has been hastened by uncontrolled greed and abuse that has led to the degradation of the environment. Because of the value placed on time and the ultimate power of money, nature is exploited as though its bounty was eternal and mankind has the supreme right to do so.

This understanding of the connection between humans and the rest of nature must replace the present attitude of human superiority and dominance over nature. Further subterfuge by patriarchal traditions to ignore the historical and observational association between women and non-human animals as the *other* must no longer be fueled by conservative traditional values and/or lifestyles that are grounded in

material and profit-seeking interests. As long as the male dominated view of capitalistic patriarchy is firmly ensconced and the men and women who control, perpetuate, and profit from this ideology believe that this represents the authentic human experience, they will be unable to see reality accurately and honestly. Realizing that women play a crucial role in the development of society and by acknowledging that women's rights and non-human animal rights must be upheld, the miasma of underlying issues generated by gender conflict and environmental destruction could be better understood thereby lessening the barriers to an auspicious future.

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