



## Towards The Fall of Patriarchy and The Rise of Ecofeminism

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### ABSTRACT

*Most research in women's studies concentrates on the various forms of violence that women have endured historically and are largely academic in value. The studies are also fragmented with each concentrating on a particular form of suppression viz. – devadasi system, sati, child marriages, widowhood, etc. and issues arising from caste oppression such as untouchability, colonization / ghettoization, drinking water denial, landlord subjugation, lower wages, etc. and also other social concerns of educational disparities, dowry system, wife battering, honour killing, maternal and infant mortality and many more. Patriarchy which is at the core of this prejudiced culture, escapes pointed attack in most of the literary works with hardly much strategization for its elimination or shift towards a matrilineal society. Even the few scholars who do so, vilify western patriarchal conceptions for all evil, leaving Indian patriarchy untouched. Such is the invisible hold of tradition on the social psyche of our society, which immobilizes even opposing thoughts, with few daring to expose it. However, much benefit has been reaped politically, economically and socially due to these literary works and activist movements during the past century, weakening the patriarchal siege and liberating women. But the space created by a declining patriarchy, has to be filled with an ideology that is egalitarian, holistic and sustainable; and that has to be – Ecofeminism. This paper briefly traces the regressive affects of patriarchy, the progressive march of feminism and espouses the need for weaving ecofeministic concepts into the cultural fabric of our post-modern society.*

**KEYWORDS :** Patriarchy, gender, culture, feminism, ecology, capitalism, exploitation, climate change, extinction, ecofeminism.

**'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.'**  
**Simone de Beauvoir (The Second Sex, 1949, p267)**

### Introduction

All the ills that plague women and all issues that feminists of all hues have been wrestling with can be narrowed down to one single cause – Patriarchy. So also the gargantuan problems that human societies face the world over, such as – climate change, exploitation of non-renewable resources, neo-capitalism, neo-colonization, extinction of species, etc., can also be traced to androcentricism or phallogocentrism - a patriarchal derivative.

### Patriarchy

Simply stated it is a system of society in which the father or the eldest male is head of the family and women are largely excluded from it or relegated to ceremonial roles and their distinctive qualities romanticized. To be more explicit it is a system of social structures and practices, in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. Over the ages patriarchy whether of eastern or western origin, is so ingrained into the societal structures through language, culture, religion and traditions, that it is almost inseparable and mostly invisible. Through these structures woman is constructed as irrational, emotional, hysterical and a body without boundaries and hence needs to be under the control of man through all stages of her life – as a father, husband or son. Braidotti (1991) puts it succinctly - 'Men have appropriated de jure the faculty of reasonableness, de facto confining women to compulsory irrationality, unreasonableness, immanence and passivity'. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) echoes similar sentiments when she states - 'Qualities associated with the concept of woman were fabricated, culturally constructed, an artifact of patriarchy, by a society that benefited from keeping women subordinate and not because of any natural or essential qualities inherent in being a woman'.

Patriarchy has become an all encompassing aspect of our societies, modulating individual identity, family, religion, state and economy. Infact there is no aspect of life that escapes the effects of patriarchy. It even limits possibilities for exploring feminine ways of being. Women's cooperation in the patriarchal system was secured by various means – ideology, economic dependency on males, class privileges, veneration bestowed upon confirming and use of force when required. In the Indian context, the ideology of 'Stridharma' and 'Pativrata' as the highest expression of womanhood and chastity as a means of salvation, were indoctrinated in women from childhood itself. The 'Pativrata' concept was the master stroke of Hindu-Aryan genius and is one of the most successful ideological construct by any patriarchal

system, anywhere in the world.' (Uma Chakravarti, 1993). Indian culture discriminates, oppresses and suppresses women from conception till death. The list of offences are long and well known – prenatal sex determination, female foeticide, killing or abandonment of female infants after birth, under-nourishment, deprivation of education and marriage before the age of 18 – as a child; dowry, dowry killing, domestication, deprived individual identity, denial of employment opportunities, under-employment, lower wages, widowhood, divestment inheritance - as an adult and finally abandonment when old and feeble. The laws and statutes to punish all these offences do exist, but the attainment of justice is never an easy task, as the processes are undermined at all levels, not least by women themselves as they had become complicit in the larger structure in which their own subjugation was established.

Espousing the beneficial effects of a matrilineal society as in Kerala, Prof. Amartya Sen states that 'it is not merely that more justice must be received by women, but also that social justice can be achieved only through the active agency of women. The suppression of women from participation in social, political and economic life hurts the people as a whole, not just women. Those regions in India, such as Kerala, which have moved in the direction of more gender equality, have received more for all from that move. The emancipation of women is an integral part of social progress, not just a women's issue.'

**'You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women'** Jawaharlal Nehru

### Feminism

Defined as an advocacy of women's rights on the ground of equality of the sexes or unambiguously as a collection of movements and ideologies aimed at defining, establishing and defending a state of equal political, economic, cultural, social and sexual rights for women; it was a quest for equality with man, which insisted that male /patriarchal structural biases need to be identified as such and not concealed under the pretext of universal man. However this quest got mired in other equally pressing identities of religion, race, class and caste and got dissipated into numerous forms of feminist movements, prompting Jacques Derrida (1978) to state that – "Feminism is nothing but the operation of a woman who aspires to be like a man. And in order to resemble the masculine dogmatic philosopher, this woman lays claim – just as much claim as he – to truth, science and objectivity in all their castrated delusions of virility. Feminism too seeks to castrate. It wants a castrated woman." Susan Sellers (1991) points out in simpler terms – 'women only have currency in this system, because of her

ability to reflect man. Women under this system do little more than mimic, as the language they have is one which they had no share in creating. The realization that feminist movements are constrained by patriarchal language and symbolic systems and that women's liberation requires transforming not only the political and economic realms, but also transforming culture and its operating agency – language – a language that denigrates women in numerous and significant ways, led feminists to evolve a distinctive language and a feminism of difference which brings to the fore the feminine qualities of caring, sharing, nurturing, cooperating and compassion.

But this evolution had been through an excruciatingly long drawn struggle over centuries, nay ages, for feminism in its essence, is as old as patriarchy itself, with exemplar women – though few and far apart – who had stood their ground and shone through history even though persecuted during their life or obfuscated by male historians, but reinstated by modern historians – e.g. Hatshepsut (1508–1458 BC), one of the most powerful Pharaohs of ancient Egypt, Razia Sultan (1205-1240 AD), powerful hetaera of ancient Greece – the likes of Asparia, Archeanassa, Neaera and Thais, Meera Bai (1498-1546), Joan of Arc (1412-1431) who was burnt at the stake, Olympes de Gouges (1748-1793) who drafted a Declaration of the Rights of Women (1791), et al.

Modern feminist origins can be traced to both liberal and socialist feminist movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, personified by radical agitator Alice Paul (1885-1977), Virginia Woolf who introduced the notion of female bisexuality in her seminal work – *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Simone de Beauvoir laying bare the cognitive and social processes of patriarchy in *The Second Sex* (1949), etc., all of which are central to the canon of the first wave of feminism or equality feminism and in the Indian context – Savitribai Phule (1831-1897), Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922), Cornelia Sorabji (1866-1954), et al.

**'As a woman, I have no country. As a woman, I want no country. As a woman, my country is my world.' Virginia Woolf (1822-1941)**

A more radical feminism evolved out of numerous other movements across the world, viz. – Civil rights, Black Power, Anti-Beauty Pageants, Gay & Lesbian Rights, Dalit Movements, Neo-Marxists, etc; which felt the need to address the differences among women and grew into 'difference feminism' also referred as 'identity politics'. This second wave feminism is characterized by an explosion of feminist research, literature and critical discourse across the third world too, exemplified in the Indian scenario through the testimonials, biographies, autobiographies and literary works of Bama, Baby Kamble, Shantabai Kamble, Sumitra Bhavne, Urmila Pawar, Sharmila Rege, Uma Chakravarti, et al. However this progress is nowhere near what has to be achieved, as exemplified by a statement of Gloria Steinem (1934) - 'We have begun to raise our daughter more like our sons ... but few have the courage to raise our sons more like our daughters'.

The research on deconstruction of feminist writing, the search for a gender neutral language and the reconstruction of the cultural ethic, led to third wave 'feminisms', which challenged the notions of universal womanhood and confronted the complex intersection of gender, sexuality, race and class; as well as globalization and ecological concerns – literarily represented through works such as 'In search of my Mother's Gardens' by Alice Walker (1983) and 'Staying Alive' by Vandana Shiva (1988) and numerous such works worldwide.

**Exploitation of Nature**

The origin of exploitation of our natural resources can be traced to the origin of capitalism, accumulation of wealth and resource appropriation; be it for personal, corporate or state. Historically, men have always viewed both nature and women as available and exploitable resources and hence traditionally undervalued. Ecological despoliation too like women's subjugation is a patriarchal derivative. Capitalism cannot function without patriarchy and its associated androcentric values of power, competitiveness, control and domination as reflected in the exploitative relationships in – man to woman, human to nature and colonizer to colonized. The patriarchal concepts of woman and nature, logic and knowledge and science and development; have led us down the path of ceaseless exploitation of natural resources, limitless marginalization of women and finally to the brink of extinction. The earth along with its soil, water, and air are dying;

we are losing one species of life a day due to the polluting effects of our industrialized, consumerist and growth oriented societies. India alone is losing more than 1 million hectares of forests a year to mining, river valley projects, commercial plantations etc. The destruction of our tropical rain forests where 50% of all living things or 5 million species exist, along with industrial pollution has led to the deleterious effects of climate change, as seen in recurring floods and drought, desertification, ozone depletion, melting of glaciers and rising sea levels, etc. There is violence inherent in the green revolution for food crops and white revolution for dairying, due to the exploitative perception of food as a commodity, produced for profit maximization. Vandana Shiva conceptualizes this exploitation succinctly when she states that – 'Nature shrinks as capital grows. In nature's economy, the currency is not money, it is life. The growth of the market cannot solve the very crisis it creates'.

**Repercussions on women**

Women bear the brunt of the economic and social consequences of climate change as destruction of the environment results in the elimination of women's method to survival. No wonder then that women have been at the forefront of ecological movements starting from Chipko Movement (1974- India) and Green Belt Movement (1977-Kenya) to Navadanya Movement (Ongoing – India).

During extreme climatic catastrophes like drought, floods, cyclones, typhoons and other natural disasters; women who are not permitted to learn life saving skills such as swimming, climbing trees, and coping strategies such as evacuation; suffer disproportionate mortality during disasters. The surviving women and girls are subject to intimidation and gender based violence, innumerable instances of which are documented around the world, especially in the third world.

**Ecofeminism**

A feminist approach to ecology, which exposes and tries to dismantle conceptual structures of hierarchy and domination, commodification of nature and women as well as colonization of nature and marginalized humans. It is an awareness that we have reached an age of environmental limits and aims to create a world built on species parity, develop gender sensitive language, theory and practices that do not further the exploitative experiences and habits of dissociated male – gender identification of culture towards women and nature. It is a recognition that the exploitation of women and the oppression of women are intimately bound up with notions of class, caste, race, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Femininity and ecology are natural allies, mutually synergizing and almost synonymous, as in the depiction of 'Mother Earth' or 'Prakriti' (which means 'Nature') and even in exploitative language such as 'virgin forest'. The concept of 'Prakriti' can be explained as the primal motive force (Adi-Shakti) of the universe, the basis of creation, the nature of intelligence by which the universe exists and functions and which is essentially feminine as against 'Purush' which is the masculine other. It also means Earth, Nature and Environment which has three modes of operation – creation, preservation and destruction. The holism implied in the feminine respects and nurtures diversity, whereas the concepts of globalization imply homogenization which destroys diversity. The development models of the modern industrial age and the growth oriented models of present economic development are all rooted in the patriarchal assumptions of homogeneity, domination and centralization. There is violence inherent in these development and growth models and are absolutely unsustainable.

**Conclusion**

'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 socio-economic relations and the underlying values of this [modern industrial] society'. Karren J. Warren (1993). This view is concretized with documented statistical proof, by Achim Steiner (2011), Under-Secretary General, United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), when he states - 'Women play a much stronger role than men in the management of ecosystem services and food security'.

A brief note on the recommendations of UNEP (2011) for govern-

ments of all countries and NGOs can put the whole concept of Ecofeminism in perspective –

- 1) The adaptation programmes for food security, agriculture, rangelands and managing natural resources should have a strong focus on women and gender equity to ensure success.
- 2) Strengthen adaptation by ensuring women's access, control and ownership of resources (land, livestock, property and income opportunities) and access to development resources such as credit, information, training and out-reach and culturally appropriate and labour saving technology.
- 3) Invest in gender sensitive and culturally appropriate labour saving green technologies, water harvesting, storage and irrigation systems in collaboration with women, to reflect their needs and concerns, while ensuring that physical, cultural, social, economic and practical elements are compatible with their livelihood practices within diverse ecosystems, households and communities.
- 4) Conduct a systematic analysis of climate change from environment, development and gender equity perspectives to fill urgent gaps in research, knowledge and data – with a distinct focus on women's needs, priorities, constraints, impacts, local strategies, knowledge and meaningful participation.
- 5) Ensure that education, training, awareness raising and information programmes address the vulnerability and risk of gender-based violence, sexual abuse and trafficking – especially in high-risk flood, drought and disaster prone areas.

All the above and other recommendations of UNEP are ecofeminist in their approach and thrust. The attainment of a vibrant harmony between man-woman and human-nature and in fact for our earth and all earthlings, can only be through the fall of patriarchy and the rise of ecofeminism – our future depends on it!

'We are either going to have a future where women lead the way to make peace with the Earth or we are not going to have a human future at all.' Vandana Shiva

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