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ECOFEMINISM: A CONCEPTUAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Ecofeminism is an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that examines the interconnection between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature. Emerging in the 1970s as part of feminist and environmental movements, ecofeminism critiques patriarchal structures, hierarchical dualisms, and mechanistic world views that legitimize domination over both women and the natural environment. It argues that systems based on control, profit-driven development, and industrial expansion have simultaneously marginalized women and degraded ecosystems. The study explores the origin, conceptual foundations, and purpose of ecofeminism by analyzing its core assumptions. Further, the paper examines the contemporary relevance of ecofeminism, particularly in the context of climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental injustice. With special reference to India and Kerala, it emphasizes how ecological disruptions disproportionately affect women while also recognizing their crucial role in environmental stewardship and sustainable community practices. The study concludes that ecofeminism provides a holistic and justice-oriented framework for addressing ecological crises by integrating gender equity with environmental sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Ecofeminism is an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that links the domination of women with the exploitation of nature. Emerging at the intersection of feminist theory and environmental ethics, ecofeminism argues that patriarchal structures have historically justified both gender oppression and environmental degradation. By highlighting the interconnectedness between social hierarchies and ecological crises, ecofeminism seeks to reconceptualize development, sustainability, and justice from a gender-sensitive perspective.

Origin of Ecofeminism

The term "ecofeminism" was first coined in 1974 by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in her work *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*. She argued that patriarchal systems driven by domination and control were responsible for both ecological destruction and women's subordination. Ecofeminism gained intellectual momentum during the late 1970s and 1980s, particularly in Europe and North America, alongside the growth of environmental movements and second-wave feminism.

In the Global South, ecofeminist thought developed through grassroots environmental struggles. Indian scholar and activist Vandana Shiva emphasized how colonialism, capitalist development, and patriarchal science marginalized women while degrading biodiversity. Shiva's analysis of rural women's role in forest conservation and subsistence economies connected ecological sustainability with women's knowledge systems. Similarly, philosopher Karen J. Warren developed ecofeminism as a philosophical framework, arguing that systems of domination are conceptually linked and must be dismantled together.

Ecofeminism thus evolved from both academic discourse and grassroots activism, incorporating perspectives from environmental ethics, political ecology, feminist epistemology, and development studies.

Conceptual Foundations of Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is grounded in the fundamental assumption that there exists both a symbolic and material connection between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature. Ecofeminist scholars argue that the same patriarchal structures that subordinate women also justify the domination of the natural world. This linkage is not merely metaphorical; historically, women and nature have been associated with reproduction, nurturance, and passivity, while men have been associated with rationality, culture, and control. Such symbolic associations reinforce systems in which both women and the environment are treated as resources to be managed, appropriated, and exploited (Shiva, 1988).

A second foundational principle of ecofeminism is the critique of patriarchal dualisms. Thinkers such as Karen J. Warren identify hierarchical dualisms man/woman, culture/nature, reason/emotion, mind/body as central to Western philosophical traditions. These dualisms do not merely differentiate; they rank one category above the other, thereby legitimizing domination. For example, associating men with reason and women with emotion historically justified excluding women from scientific and political spheres. Similarly, positioning culture above nature has rationalized environmental exploitation in the name of progress and development (Warren, 2000).

Ecofeminism further argues that sustainable environmental solutions require dismantling these hierarchical and exploitative social systems. Environmental degradation is not viewed as an isolated ecological issue but as a structural problem rooted in systems of power, capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. Consequently, ecofeminists maintain that ecological sustainability cannot be achieved without social justice. The liberation of women and the protection of nature are seen as interconnected struggles that must be addressed simultaneously (Merchant, 1980).

Another important conceptual foundation is the critique of mechanistic and reductionist scientific paradigms that emerged during the Scientific Revolution. Ecofeminists argue that modern science often conceptualized nature as inert, passive matter to be dissected, controlled, and manipulated. This worldview, as described by Carolyn Merchant, contributed to the commodification of natural resources and reinforced exploitative economic systems. In contrast, ecofeminism promotes a relational and ecological worldview that recognizes the dynamic, living, and interconnected character of ecosystems.

Finally, ecofeminism advances an ethic of care and interdependence as an alternative normative framework. Rather than emphasizing domination and control, ecofeminists advocate values such as reciprocity, empathy, cooperation, and sustainability. This relational ethic acknowledges that human well-being is inseparable from ecological health. By recognizing the interconnectedness between social and environmental systems, ecofeminism offers a holistic approach to addressing contemporary ecological crises while promoting gender equity and environmental justice.

Purpose of Ecofeminism

The primary purpose of ecofeminism is to expose and transform structures of domination that simultaneously harm women and the environment. Ecofeminists argue that

environmental degradation and gender inequality are interconnected outcomes of patriarchal, capitalist, and exploitative systems. Therefore, the movement seeks not only to critique these systems but also to promote transformative social change that ensures both ecological sustainability and gender justice. By linking environmental concerns with feminist analysis, ecofeminism broadens the scope of both movements.

One central objective of ecofeminism is to promote environmental justice with gender sensitivity. It highlights how environmental problems such as deforestation, water scarcity, pollution, and climate change often disproportionately affect women, particularly in rural and marginalized communities. Scholars like Vandana Shiva emphasize that women, as primary caregivers and managers of household resources in many societies, bear the direct consequences of ecological destruction. Thus, ecofeminism calls for policies that recognize gendered vulnerabilities and ensure inclusive decision-making in environmental governance.

Another important purpose is to revalue women's ecological knowledge and subsistence practices. Ecofeminists argue that women's traditional knowledge in agriculture, seed preservation, water management, and biodiversity conservation has historically been marginalized or dismissed by mainstream development models. By recognizing and legitimizing this knowledge, ecofeminism seeks to restore respect for sustainable practices that are community-based and ecologically balanced. This perspective challenges dominant narratives that equate modernization with industrialization and technological control over nature.

Ecofeminism also challenges exploitative development models driven primarily by profit and industrial expansion. It critiques economic systems that prioritize growth, extraction, and consumption over ecological balance and social well-being. Such models, according to ecofeminist thinkers like Maria Mies, rely on the unpaid labour of women and the unchecked exploitation of natural resources. By questioning these assumptions, ecofeminism advocates alternative development paths rooted in sustainability, equity, and collective responsibility.

Ecofeminism aims to expand environmental discourse beyond technical and managerial solutions by integrating social justice and ethical dimensions. It asserts that ecological crises cannot be resolved solely through scientific innovation or policy reform without addressing deeper inequalities based on gender, class, and race. By promoting values such as care, reciprocity, cooperation, and community participation, ecofeminism envisions a holistic transformation of society—one that recognizes the interdependence of human and non-human life and seeks harmony rather than domination.

Contemporary Relevance of Ecofeminism in India and Kerala
In the context of climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion, ecofeminism offers a critical framework for understanding environmental challenges in India. The country faces recurring floods, droughts, deforestation, coastal erosion, and agrarian distress, all of which disproportionately affect rural and marginalized women. In many parts of India, women are primarily responsible for water collection, fuel gathering, small-scale farming, and household energy management. Environmental degradation therefore directly increases their workload, reduces livelihood security, and intensifies socio-economic vulnerability. Ecofeminism highlights these gendered dimensions of ecological crisis and argues that environmental policies must account for such structural inequalities.

In Kerala, the relevance of ecofeminism becomes particularly evident in the aftermath of recurrent floods such as the Kerala floods, landslides in hilly regions, and coastal erosion along the Arabian Sea. Women in affected communities often face heightened insecurity, loss of livelihood, and increased domestic burdens during post-disaster recovery. For example, disruptions in water supply systems and agricultural land degradation place additional strain on women who manage household sustenance and local food production. Ecofeminist analysis underscores that disaster management and climate adaptation strategies must incorporate gender-sensitive planning to ensure equitable resilience building.

Ecofeminism is also relevant in understanding women's active role in environmental movements across India. The historic Chipko Movement, where rural women protected forests by hugging trees, symbolizes the deep connection between women's livelihoods and ecological preservation. In Kerala, women-led Kudumbashree groups have been actively involved in organic farming, waste management initiatives, and local self-governance. These initiatives reflect ecofeminist principles by recognizing women not merely as victims of environmental degradation but as key agents of sustainable development and community resilience.

Furthermore, Kerala's high literacy rate and decentralized governance system provide opportunities for integrating ecofeminist perspectives into policy frameworks. Through participatory planning at the panchayat level, women can contribute to climate adaptation strategies, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable agriculture programs. Ecofeminist scholarship argues that inclusive governance strengthens both ecological sustainability and social justice by valuing women's experiential knowledge and local ecological practices.

In conclusion, ecofeminism remains highly relevant in India and Kerala as environmental challenges intensify under climate change. By foregrounding gendered vulnerabilities while simultaneously empowering women as environmental stewards, ecofeminism expands environmental discourse beyond technical solutions. It calls for development models rooted in equity, sustainability, and community participation principles that are crucial for addressing contemporary ecological crises in a socially just manner.

CONCLUSION

Ecofeminism, as a conceptual and critical framework, establishes a profound connection between the domination of women and the exploitation of nature. By challenging patriarchal dualisms and hierarchical social systems, it exposes how structures of power shape both gender inequality and environmental degradation. Rather than treating ecological crises as purely technical or scientific problems, ecofeminism situates them within broader social, economic, and cultural contexts.

The theory emphasizes that sustainable development cannot be achieved without addressing systemic inequalities rooted in patriarchy, capitalism, class, and race. It advocates dismantling exploitative development models and replacing them with ethical frameworks grounded in care, reciprocity, cooperation, and interdependence. In doing so, ecofeminism broadens environmental discourse to include justice, equity, and human dignity.

In the Indian and Kerala contexts, ecofeminism demonstrates practical relevance by highlighting women's lived experiences in agriculture, water management, disaster response, and community development. Environmental disruptions such as floods, biodiversity loss, and resource scarcity disproportionately affect women, yet they also reveal women's critical role as agents of ecological stewardship.

Recognizing and institutionalizing women's ecological knowledge can strengthen climate resilience and sustainable governance.

Ultimately, ecofeminism calls for a transformative shift in how society conceptualizes development, progress, and human-nature relationships. By integrating gender justice with environmental sustainability, it offers a holistic approach to addressing contemporary ecological crises. As global environmental challenges intensify, ecofeminism remains a vital framework for promoting inclusive, ethical, and sustainable futures.

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