

Re-Reading Nature, Reproduction and Motherhood: Towards an Alternative to Development

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to critically look at some of the important debates within feminist debates on ecofeminism, by specifically focussing on different schools of feminist critiques of development, and these include socialist feminists to eco-feminists. It is well acknowledged that the concept of femininity and motherhood and its defined relationship with nature has played an important role in feminist critiques of development. And the nature/culture binary in western theories of knowledge has had an important role in contributing to this relationship. However, Feminist epistemologies have debated for long the origin and history of binaries in western theories of knowledge and its contribution to the concept and politics of development. Feminist critiques of development have contributed important fundamental challenges to the nature/culture binary and also to the production/reproduction binary, which provided an in depth understanding and critique of the norm and normality around nature and the 'human' nature. Feminist critiques of development in general took the position that the failures of development established a clear connection between ecological crisis and capitalist growth. The paper argues that the challenges raised by categories of race, caste and class are once again extremely relevant in contemporary times in order to bring any meaningful changes towards rereading nature/culture binary or relationship and its impact of the politics around reproduction and motherhood which are fundamental to any ideas and thoughts towards rethinking development.

Keywords: Nature, Ecofeminism, Motherhood, Reproduction, Development

Concept of femininity and motherhood and its defined relationship with nature has played an important role in feminist critiques of development. The nature/culture binary in western theories of knowledge has had an important role in contributing to this relationship. Feminist epistemologies have debated for long the origin and history of binaries in western theories of knowledge and its contribution to the concept and politics of development. Most primarily these include the male/female or femininity/masculinity binary, the nature/culture binary and the production/reproduction binary along with others which are all fundamental to this debate. Feminist critiques of development contributed important fundamental challenges to the nature/culture binary and also to the production/reproduction binary. This provided an in depth understanding and critique of the norm and normality around nature and the 'human' nature. Among the many schools of feminist critiques of development and these include socialist feminists to eco-feminists and the critics of the ecofeminist school, this paper will discuss some of the important debates within feminist debates on ecofeminism.

Women, Feminism and Ecology

Feminist critiques of development grew to a great extent with ecological activism and theorizing. Ecofeminists argued in favor of treating women and nature together as a united whole unlike others who favored an analysis which dialectically link women with nature. Ecofeminists considered the domination of nature by men and masculinist science as an important problem to be critically exposed in order to develop a meaningful critique of development. They considered women as saviors of earth and wanted to strengthen the relationship between women and nature. An important icon of ecofeminist theory in the Global South, Vandana Shiva argued that women and nature are associated not in passivity but in creativity and in the maintenance of life¹. Identification of women as 'nurturing mother' linked women with the story of nature. This attachment of women with nature through both biological and social roles in life also made them the worse victims of ecological crises. Adding to this, the 'development crisis' in the Global South added to the struggles of women in everyday life with scarcity of water, fuel and fodder.² Through the introduction of modern technology, many women who were agricultural laborers lost their traditional employment. Feminist critiques of development in general argued that what was considered modern development criteria treated traditional women's skills and expertise as of no value. Scholars like Shiva and Mies argued that interpretations on women's role as subsistence producers have both biological and cultural basis which also vary in different historical contexts³. For Shiva, women in grassroots in the Global South challenged universal patriarchy with the idea of diversity and a new version of non-violence as a method of struggle. Maria Mies another important name in the field of ecofeminism considered women's work as having a truly productive relationship with nature. She argued that women's interaction with nature as a reciprocal process. Women conceived their own bodies as productive and creative in the same way as they conceived of external nature. Their appropriation of nature does not constitute a relationship of dominance or a property relation. As producers of new life, women are the first subsistence producers and the inventors of the first productive economy. Mies and Shiva together exposed the close connection between the ecological destruction and the capitalist growth and terms both as patriarchal projects.

Feminist critiques of development in general took the position that the failures of development established a clear connection between ecological crisis and capitalist growth. Both the ecological and ecofeminist groups thus share common aims and interests. The important question was if women as a category or subject were able to put forward a mode of production which will overcome the exploitation of nature and labour power. In the 1970s and 1980s, women's groups such as 'Women for Life on Earth', and 'Women's Environmental Network' were active in exploring the relationship between women and environment, feminism, militarization and ecology. Ecofeminism grew out of many social movements like

¹Shiva Vandana, *Staying Alive*, (New Delhi: South End Press, 1988)

²Escobar Arturo, "Imagining a Post-Development Era?: Critical Thought, Development and Social Movements", *Social Text* (New Jersey, Vol.10, No.2, 1992):20-25. Escobar Arturo, "Reflections on Development", *Futures*, (Vol.24, No.5, June 1994): 411-436.

Escobar Arturo, *Encountering Development: The making and Unmaking of the Third World*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011)

³Shiva Vandana, *Staying Alive*.

feminist, peace and environmental movements as a philosophical and political viewpoint and an important approach in Gender and Environment Debate (GED).

While Shiva's works stressed on the importance of seeing the links between colonialism, ecological crises and women's oppression, it also ascribed an important role for spirituality in the ecological movement. It has often been allied with the belief in Mother Earth where the earth was seen as sacred and as the source of all nurturing. She invoked the 'feminine principle' to deal with the association between femininity and nature, where feminine spirituality has an equally important role. This came to be seen as an important aspect of ecofeminist discourse, especially in the non-western context. For this reason, a critical reading of this along with a deeper look at the nature/culture binary seems relevant to reveal some problematics of it from within.

Nature/Culture Binary

Women are close to nature and inferior to culture, while men controlled both. From both sides of the binary, there are numerous ways in which this power hierarchy is interpreted and played out. Women's closeness to nature is interpreted as mostly to do with the politics of motherhood and reproduction while kinship, notions around women's body, its purity along with social roles imposed on women, shapes their relationship with nature. While all women in most cultures are expected to be mothers- 'good' mothers, they are also not expected to be anything else, as in playing any other role in politics, culture, literature or art. Women embody the culture of the community by playing the set role for them as defined by local patriarchies. Local patriarchies shape the taboos around women's bodies and women's rights in the family and society through patrilineal laws and rituals. Women's bodies are controlled through the concept of purity and pollution around menstruation, pregnancy and other family values. In the Indian context, these rules are played very strongly and fundamentally through caste practices and caste hierarchies.

Non-Western scholars might argue that the very introduction of these binary thoughts and the knowledge production around this is based on the Western enlightenment thought and its projects of colonialism and modernity. Non-Western feminist scholars have been debating and exposing the western modernity project and the troubles with it for the past few decades. Much of the literature on this has come from feminist theory, particularly, feminist political philosophy, feminist anthropology and theories in feminist political economy. For feminist theory, the debate on the creation of the binary between production and reproduction is closely linked to the sexual/gendered division of labour and the politics of motherhood. Feminist debates on motherhood later included varying positions on it including that of the so called maternalists among the liberal school.⁴ Further, for modern science, nature as a feminine force is subordinated to mankind where culture is a product of human consciousness. Thus, the dichotomy between nature and culture parallels and reinforces the dichotomy of man and woman. There are important connections between the oppression and domination of women and the exploitation of nature. These also have a role in the construction of gender identities

⁴ Gilligan Carol, "In a Different Voice", in Kemp, S and Judith Squires, ed., *Feminisms*, (UK: Oxford University Press, 1997). Ruddick Sara, "Maternal Thinking as Feminist Standpoint", in Harding, S. ed., *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 161-166.

in general. Debates on this dichotomy within feminist theory explain it as something which is complexed and there is unanimity that it is in no way advantageous for women.

According to Sherry Ortner, one among the primary work among feminists on the nature/culture binary, it is by equating culture with the notion of human consciousness in systems, thought and technology that humanity attempts to assert control over nature.⁵ Thus, culture is understood in terms of its superiority to control and transform nature. For Ortner, women create naturally from within her own being, whereas man is free to, or forced to, create artificially, that is through cultural means and in such a way as to sustain culture. Thus, bodily functions are linked to their gender identities, social roles and to their psychic structure. The link between women and nature is not natural or essential for certain feminists, as, such a conception is the product of the patriarchal culture. They highlight on the genderedness of the dominant masculine culture. Scholars like Mary Daly (1978) and Caroline Merchant (1980) also contributed to the discourse on the nature culture dichotomy. For them, the male identification of nature and reality as a machine rather than a living organism and seeing the relationship as a covenant one led to a complete objectification of nature. Contributing to these debates, a branch of knowledge as 'Feminist Science' originated in the 1980s on the basis of critiques of the masculinist nature of western science and the call for a radical change in the epistemology of all sciences.⁶ The movement and thought around ecofeminism grew out of these ideas to be later taken over by feminists and environmentalists from the Global South.

Scholars like Val Plumwood (1993) wrote about the impact of Western science on men who were ripped away from their association with nature and home and forced into the 'unnatural' environment and social relations of the workplace and thus needed to reclaim their lost identification with a more 'natural' manliness. Plumwood also brings in the 'human' into the picture and problematizes it in its relation to nature and especially to the non-human world and ecofeminism in this context is seen as an integrative project, binging the human-men and women together. Kate Soper (1995) elaborates more on this relationship between the nature and the non-human. He acknowledges the instability of the human nature relationship and points out the need for both to be rethought especially against the constant figuring of nature as an antithesis to the human. He sees the naturalized women and the feminized nature both as problematic and contributing to the sexual hierarchy. Are women guardians of nature? What is problematic about linking nature to the construction of identity and community? How does this impact the discourse on gender identity? All these were important questions discussed through feminist perspectives on science and technology.

However, there are some questions and concerns among the feminist responses which brings out the challenges within the feminist ecology and ecofeminist thought. It is true that whether the nature and women connection is outdated or not, the relationship between instrumentalization of both women and nature both in their role in reproduction and the

⁵ Ortner, Sherry B, "Is female to male as nature is to culture?" *Feminist Studies* 1, no. 2, (1972).

⁶ Fox Keller, Evelyn, "Feminism and Science", *Signs*, Vol.7, 1982. Ruth Bleier, *Gender and Science*, (New York: Pergamon Press, 1984) Schiebinger Londa "The History and Philosophy of Women in Science", *Signs*, Vol.12. (1987) Harding Sandra, *The Science Question in Feminism*, (New York: 1986) L. Witt, Patricia and others, "The October 29th Group: Defining a Feminist Science", *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol.12 (1989)

invisibility or their contribution and its relevance continue to be an important question to be addressed. However, it is also important to look at the following concerns. The imperative that women must have a particular interest in ending human domination over nature is seen as an essentialist one as it endows the 'nature' of women with great conceptual importance. The process of Othering within the self/Other, subject/object and nature/culture binary, depicting the Other as the barbaric, uncivilized, primitive, savage, wild goes very well with women's marginalization and victimization as in witches or inferior beings. There are multiple levels of cultural Otherings which contributes to devaluation of women in the society especially in the majority patrilineal societies.

As I mentioned earlier, culture, purity and pollution are core to these discourses which are contributing to social hierarchies against women. These hierarchies continue to reflect upon contemporary societies since many of the kinship and other social institutions like marriage and family endorse these ideas contributing to women's subordination. Further, other than essentializing women as a category and unified subject, scholars like Mies and Shiva takes a position making women into mother goddesses.⁷ Though Mies's arguments around subsistence economies and women's contribution to sustainable development is extremely relevant, the ecofeminist ideas around the feminine and motherhood definitely carried the danger of a kind of biological determinism.⁸ Further, it most importantly carries the danger of being misinterpreted against women's freedom and choice especially by the conservative and fundamentalist elements which is a rising force in many parts of the world in contemporary times. New debates in feminist theory challenged the very concept of femininity as a product of patriarchy which also cannot be universalized. The ideas of the feminine and women as mother goddesses, fundamentally spiritual in nature is also blind to the idea and reality around many women contributing to patriarchy and the destruction of nature and also actively engaging in violence.

While the importance of women's triple burden towards imposed household work and their contributions towards a sustainable development economy continues to increase, the invisibility of their increased contributions becomes more and more unjustifiable. Is it good to argue for women's masculinization and for men's feminization? Many see this as a good way of challenging gender socialization and gender hierarchy. However, none of this may actually contribute in a meaningful way to the undoing of the existing hierarchies created through binarical thought based of western epistemologies. In fact, many of the questions would actually take us back to the fundamental binary raised by socialist feminists on the relationship between production and reproduction. A feminist critique of development or the search for an alternative to development itself has to go back to this fundamental binary between production and reproduction and attempt a rereading of the politics around it. However, the arguments constructed through ecofeminist debates hasn't helped towards this.

A postmodern critique of the same in the past also in many ways failed to politicize the subject while it did bring in some or the core questions of identity around gender, race, caste

⁷ Shiva Vandana, *Staying Alive*.

⁸ Mies, Maria & Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, *The Subsistence Economy Perspective: Beyond the Globalized Economy*, (London: Zed books, 1999).

and sexuality into the debate.⁹ While this debate is relevant for a rereading of the increasingly gendered nature of development and the challenges it poses to both nature and human society in order to see the possibilities of an alternative, it remains that there are no paths to make sure that ecofeminist positions on women and nature won't be misused by conservative nationalist elements against women's rights and agency in the future. Further, the fact is that the history and politics of eco-feminism and its relevance in the Global South is being challenged by the inability of the very same schools of thought and thinkers like Shiva to address the questions of caste and class fundamental in these non-western societies. Therefore, while on the one hand at many levels the feminine principle and nature and mother faced the limitations of an essentialist subject 'women', on the other it failed to see the relevant linkages and intersections between the categories of class, caste and gender in the context of the global south. The challenges raised by categories of race, caste and class are once again extremely relevant in contemporary times in order to bring any meaningful changes towards rereading nature/culture binary or relationship and its impact of the politics around reproduction and motherhood which are fundamental to any ideas and thoughts towards rethinking development.

⁹ Davion Victoria, "Is Ecofeminism feminist?", in Karran J. Warren ed., *Ecological Feminism*, (London: Routledge, 1994); Lennon, Kathleen and Margaret Whitford, *Knowing the Difference*, (London: Routledge, 1994); Marchand, Marianne H and Jane L Parpart, *Feminism, Postmodernism and Development*, (London: Routledge, 1995).