

# A Critique of Ecofeminism

by Anne Archambault

*Une discussion du concept d'écoféminisme est présenté dans cet article, plus précisément d'une tendance à associer les femmes et la nature comme base de l'action environnementale. L'auteure conclut cependant, qu'une fois cette difficulté surmontée, l'écoféminisme est un mouvement prometteur.*

Since Françoise d'Eaubonne first coined the term *eco-feminisme* in 1974, a growing number of feminists and environmentalists have been concerned with the links between the domination of women and the domination of nature in Western culture. Although the concept of ecofeminism has come to mean quite different things to different ecofeminists, Karen Warren suggests that it is at least based on the following claims: (i) there are important connections between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature; (ii) understanding the nature of these connections is necessary to any adequate understanding of the oppression of women and the oppression of nature; (iii) feminist theory and practice must include an ecological perspective; and (iv) solutions to ecological problems must include a feminist perspective (1987, 4-5). Ecofeminism is thus more than a complement to either feminism or environmental thought; "ecofeminism locates itself as a theory and movement which bridges the gap between feminism and ecology, but which transforms both to create a unified praxis to end all forms of domination" (Sandilands, 3).

Ecofeminists recognize that the association between women and nature has historically been used to exploit them, but they choose to embrace this connection as a source of empowerment and as the basis for their critique of the patriarchal oppression of women and nature. As Robyn Eckersley points out, "[t]his is an explicitly ecofeminist project because it exposes and celebrates what has traditionally been regarded as Other—both woman and



Tamara Thiebaux, *Mother Earth Posing*, 1989  
Watercolour, 4 x 3"

nonhuman nature" (64). Some ecofeminists have argued that women are in a better position than men to relate with nature, that they are in fact *closer* to nature and hence can derive some unique insight from this bond.

This ecofeminist discussion takes two forms (66).<sup>1</sup> Proponents of the "body-based argument" claim that women, through their unique bodily experiences—ovulation, menstruation, pregnancy, child birth, and breast-feeding—are closer to and can more readily connect with nature. The "oppression argument" is based on the belief that women's separate social reality, resulting from a sexual division of labour and associated oppression, has led women to develop a special insight and connection with nature. In either case, ecofeminists typically derive an ethics based on historically undervalued feminine values of "care, love, friendship, trust, and appropriate reciprocity" (Warren, 1990: 141) that is meant to overcome all forms of domination.

## Relying on women's bodily experiences

While it is hard to deny that female and male bodily experiences differ in many ways, one must be careful before giving support to the "body-based" argument that specifically female bodily experiences actually confer on women *superior* (as opposed to different) insight into our relationship with nature. As Catherine Roach points out,

although men do not menstruate, bear children, or breast-feed, they do share all other human biological processes (eating, sleeping, eliminating wastes, getting sick, dying), and in addition, in their ejaculation of semen they have experience of a tangible stuff of the reproduction of life (52).

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reinforces the patriarchal ideology of domination and  
limits ecofeminism's effectiveness.***

Furthermore, if child-bearing or breast-feeding is what attunes women to nature, are women who do not experience these biological processes any less connected to nature? Robyn Eckersley suggests that "[t]o the extent that bodily experiences may differ between men and women, there is no reason why either should be socially elevated as superior to the other" (66). It is questionable whether women's "body parables" are any more "natural" than men's. Reducing men's status to otherness because they cannot actively participate in the body-consciousness that provides women with a more acute awareness of nature effectively reverses the hierarchical dualism which many ecofeminists (paradoxically) claim to want to overcome (Zimmerman).

Biological conditions are experienced differently by different individuals, and bodily experiences are themselves conditioned by culture. Lynne Segal points out that one should be "a little more than sceptical of an over-emphasis on the significance of 'female biology' where the woman's body is seen entirely in terms of sex and reproduction." This is a reflection of the power that patriarchy exercises over women's experiences of their own bodies (9).

**Over-privileging women's experiences**

Because women have historically been less implicated than men in the process of environmental degradation, they "occupy a vantage point of 'critical otherness' from which they can offer a different way of looking at the problems both of patriarchy and ecological destruction" as do other groups such as indigenous people and other ethnic minorities (Eckersley, 67). This lends support to the "oppression argument."

However, Robyn Eckersley cautions ecofeminists to be wary of "over-identifying with, and hence accepting uncritically, the perspective of women." She points out three ways in which overprivileging women's experiences can "inhibit the general emancipatory process." First, such an analysis can overlook the extent to which many women have been accessories in the process of ecological destruction in the past. Second, it can fail to identify the different ways in which men themselves have suffered from "masculine" stereotypes. Third, it can be less responsive to the impact of other social dynamics and prejudices that are unrelated to the question of gender. Ultimately, she feels that while "rendering visible and *critically* incorporating" women's experiences is commendable, over-privileging their experiences can only lead to a "lopsided and reductionist analysis of social and ecological problems" (67).

**The feminine ideal**

Whether women have developed a special connection with nature through their specific biology or through their historical oppression, ecofeminists seem to agree that female traits such as caring and nurturing should be part of an ecofeminist environmental ethics. Val Plumwood suggests that:

perhaps the most obvious way to interpret the ecofeminist argument is as one which replaces the masculine model of the human character by a new feminine model. That is, if the masculinizing strategy rejected the feminine character ideal and affirmed a masculine one for both sexes, this feminizing strategy rejects the masculine character ideal and affirms a feminine one for both sexes (20).

She identifies several forms which the feminization of the character ideal can take: it can be affirmed as a complement (rather than as a rival) to the masculine model; it can be based on a reversal of traits under-valued in the masculinizing model; it can be presented as an actual rival to the masculine model of the human; or, it can be based on the celebration of women's differences from the masculine character ideal.

The feminization of the female character ideal revolves around the concept of the female ideal. One must first determine what the characteristics of the archetypal feminine ideal might be. How can such traits be identified? Are these traits the ones that actual women really have or the ones that are traditionally associated with women?

Andrew Dobson raises the following dilemma: "we could know what a representative sample of 'female' women would look like only if we already had some idea of what female traits were, but then the traits would be announced a priori, as it were, rather than deduced through observation" (195). Furthermore, a number of women exhibit what might be regarded as "masculine" traits while a number of men exhibit what might be considered "female" characteristics. How can generalizations be made in such a context? Does adopting the feminine character ideal include both positive and negative traits currently associated with women? Patriarchy has produced both some "desirable" and some "undesirable" character traits in women. Would the feminine ideal come as a package deal and include a trait such as subservience—which is considered by many to be a negative characteristic associated with women—for instance? Otherwise, how does one differentiate between positive and negative traits? And, given that both women's and

men's traits have been developed under patriarchy, why should either set of traits be considered more valuable?

Ultimately, Val Plumwood concludes:

[t]he genuinely feminine is either unknowable or as yet unknown, to be brought into existence...[S]ince it cannot be *actual* existing women whose character forms the basis for the ideal, this position sets off a search for some sort of feminine essence which eludes expression in present societies, but appears as an unrealised potential, so much unrealized that it is, in some versions, almost essentially inexpressible (21).

To the extent that specifically female traits cannot be identified and to the extent that women are connected to nature conceptually only, ecofeminists will have to rethink their concept of ecofeminist ethics based on women's special insight into, and caring for, nature.

### **Implications of ecofeminist ethics for women**

Christine Cuomo suggests that:

[i]f it is true that females have been socialized certain ways in order to maintain an oppressive system, then it is also true that aspects of this socialization must be thoroughly examined and recontextualized before they can be reclaimed and considered useful (354).

Not surprisingly, the most common criticism of ecofeminism is that the claim that women are essentially or biologically closer to nature is regressive, that it reinforces the patriarchal ideology of domination and limits ecofeminism's own effectiveness. As a result, it merely perpetuates the notion that biology determines the social inequalities between men and women. The view that 'biology is destiny' has been actively contested by feminists for the past twenty years. Andrew Dobson states:

[e]cofeminism proposes a dangerous strategy—to use ideas that have already been turned against women in the belief that, if they are taken up

and lived by everyone, then a general improvement in both the human and the non-human condition will result. If they are not taken up, then women will have 'sacrificed themselves to the environment,' and this is a price some feminists are clearly not prepared to pay (202).

Janet Biehl finds the implications of an ethics based on biological attributes such as caring or nurturing to be devastating for women.

For ecofeminists, women's caring and nurturing have presumably been so long-lived and so extensive, and their 'association with nature' so longstanding that their own 'nature' is ostensibly sufficiently permanent to be constituted as a ground for ethics (25).

An ethics based on such an immutable female 'nature' is constricting because it does not leave room for evolution, "consciousness, reason and freedom" for women (26). Women are thus confined to their nurturing role and have no hope of transcending it.

If we believe that women are connected with nature and possess the character traits necessary for preserving the environment, then it follows that they are most qualified to save the Earth. Men cannot be expected to participate in this restoration project since they presumably lack the sensitivity to nature that women have. Women will therefore simply end up in charge of cleaning up the global mess—fulfilling their traditional role as nurturing mothers. In the end, the implications of ecofeminist ethics hardly appear to be emancipatory for women.

### **The effectiveness of an ethic of care**

Although, as Christine Cuomo points out, "caring promotes health and stability of the community, creates and strengthens friendships, and is necessary for the health and livelihood of dependent individuals," such caring is not "always morally good" (354). Cuomo believes that caring can also be "neutral" (as in the case of caring for the outcome of some sport event) or "morally damaging" (when the moral agent neglects responsibilities to

herself for instance). Ecofeminists, hence, cannot speak of "caring" without specifying the object and purpose of the caring.

Janet Biehl, for her part, argues that even the most 'caring' people cannot extend their care to all other human beings. They certainly cannot extend their care—the way a mother would care for her children or relatives—to everyone in the world. She states: "[a]s an emotion, 'caring' cannot be universalized as the basis for social organization outside one's own small group, whether kinship based or not. Nor can the kind of caring that a mother (or father) feels for a child be universalized" (148). For Biehl, to care for everyone simply trivializes the concept of caring, rendering it "meaningless" and "unfocused."

She further contends that "an ethic of motherly care...does not *by itself* pose a threat to hierarchy and domination" in any event (144). She feels that the notion of caring is not necessarily anti-hierarchical and may not necessarily promote democratic practices. Individuals may not care enough; may stop caring; or may only care for a certain group of individuals. Caring is by nature particular and limited. Ultimately, this kind of ethics rests on the good will of individuals to exercise 'caring.' In Biehl's opinion, caring then becomes whimsical, subject to prejudices and can hardly provide a solid foundation for emancipatory political life.

### **Conclusion**

In spite of the weaknesses of ecofeminism, it still remains one of the most promising movements within radical environmental thought. I feel ecofeminism has the capacity to transcend its difficulties: the reliance on women's biological functions to establish a connection between women and nature, the uncritical overprivileging of women's experiences, the inappropriateness of designating ideal female characteristics, and the regressive political implications of associating women with nature. The final concern, that an ethic of care may not fulfill the task of emancipating both humans and nature, is the most problematic. Although such an ethic of care certainly represents an improvement over the current situation, can it be relied on as the sole (or even main) source of ethical guidelines to foster global emanci-

pation? It remains for ecofeminists and other environmental thinkers to clarify what the new ethics will be.

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<sup>1</sup>It should be noted that some authors refuse either of the following interpretations. For instance, Catherine Roach finds the question "Are women closer to Nature?" misleading. First, she claims that "[i]n no way can anyone or anything be 'closer to nature' than any other being or thing because, through the inextricable implication of all in an environmental web of interconnection, all is already and equally 'natural,' that is, part of nature." Furthermore, she believes, such a question assumes and perpetuates the nature/culture dualism (53).

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## WOMEN'S ACTION AGENDA 21

### Code of Environmental Ethics and Accountability

Recognizing the current moral and ethical double standards that are applied to environment and development activities, women's participation and social justice throughout the world,

Recognizing that, in contrast, the women's global environmental model is cooperative rather than competitive, values women's roles, work, and participation, and acknowledges the responsibility that accompanies power and is owed to future generations,

Believing that a universal code of ethics and international law should be based on equity, respect for humans and other species, and biologic and cultural diversity,

Distressed that policy planners and political representatives use barren instruments (systems of national accounts) on which to make all major economic and environmental decisions,

Insisting that national boundaries should not impede the development of global concepts of the environment and responsibility on a global level,

We will work for adoption of an International Code of Environmental Conduct by business and industry, governments, U.N. agencies, and non-governmental organizations that includes precautionary and preventative approaches, considering the true value of the environment and the effect on women when planning activities that may affect the Earth,

We support new principles of international environmental law, including: strict liability for environmental harms (the polluter pays), the intrinsic value of biodiversity, and non-adversarial dispute resolution mechanisms to include the public in decision-making about compensation for victims.

We call for non-governmental monitoring systems that will hold institutions, corporations, states, organizations, and individuals accountable for their actions, products, and policies.

We demand time-use studies of women's work (household, cottage industries, subsistence agriculture, child care, elder care, volunteer community service).

We demand that qualitative indicators be used for environmental and natural resource measurements.

We urge governments to agree to a timetable for implementation of full cost accounting that includes environmental and social costs—and assigns full value to women's labor—in national accounting systems and in calculation of subsidies and incentives in international trade.

We require governments, the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and lending agencies to establish environmental audits with which every funding proposal must comply before implementation of loans.

*Excerpted from Women's Action Agenda 21.*