Ecofeminism, Religion and Nature in an Indian and Global Perspective

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Women tend to take a secondary place in society and also tend to be equated with nature, thus being on the losing end on both fronts, and fighting the same battle against oppression. Ecofeminism has many phases and faces, but one of the most influential is that of spiritual ecofeminism and its many expressions under the New Age umbrella. In an Indian context the picture seems to be different, as spiritual ecofeminism seems to be more closely aligned with “traditional” Hinduism. Vandana Shiva, the most famous Indian ecofeminist writer, faces a massive critique from numerous scholars. Her work is seen as essentialist and as romanticizing history, where a gender analysis perspective would focus on, among others, unequal power relations in society.

Keywords
Ecofeminism, spirituality, Vandana Shiva, New Age, India, gender analysis

The imaginal relationships between gender and nature are manifold and diverse. They vary with time and culture, change as gender roles change, or stay the same even in the face of globalization and revolution. In this paper I will critically examine the romanticized ecofeminist view of women’s lives, especially as it bears on religion/spirituality and women’s perceived closeness to nature. At the same time I want to explore the extent to which women’s attitudes towards nature are interlaced with issues of belonging to a religion and culture. I believe that the religious identities of women are important in a multitude of ways to an analysis of nature and natural resource management that focuses on gender.

Literature
In the case of India it is interesting to explore and discuss the correlation between ecofeminism, religion, attitudes towards nature and resource use/ management. Agarwal’s (1998) debate on India’s experience of environmental management, equity and
feminism is useful, as she traces the history of gender inequalities in India and argues against an ecofeminist approach which she finds can cement oppressive structures rather than loosen them. Tomalin (2008) on ecofeminism, religion and development has also been useful. Both scholars criticize Vandana Shiva’s heavily debated ecofeminist writings. In this paper I will use Shiva’s 1998 paper on women and ecology in India as a point of departure. Apart from criticizing ecofeminist thought for an Indian context, Agarwal and Tomalin suggest some ways forward in the debate. They explore possibilities to factor gender and religion into natural resource management, while skirting the practical and ideological pitfalls of spiritual ecofeminism.

Women and nature

As Ortner (1974) points out in her paper on natural/cultural differences between men and women, the secondary status of women is a pan-cultural fact. I will not disagree with that per se, but rather emphasize the vast variation in the cultural concepts of women found throughout the world. We can agree, however, that women generally are given—and take—an inferior status in society. For Ortner, this inferiority is reflected in the dual opposition and the hierarchical stratification of culture over nature, and subsequently of men over women. Nature and culture are not given entities as such, but are conceptual categorizations found in almost every society. Some scholars, like Bird-David (2004) argue for the existence of a particular indigenous epistemology transcending nature/culture divisions, but according to Ortner there is an inherent will in humanity to distinguish a cause-and-effect, non-human nature from a creative, agency-filled culture. In this view culture, as opposed to nature, has purpose. It is not only “[…] distinct from but superior to nature, and that sense of distinction and superiority rests precisely on the ability to transform—to ‘socialize’ and ‘culturalize’—nature.” (Ortner 1974: 73) Simplified, one can say that through her body and through the social roles that are conferred upon her because of her body, a woman is equated with nature. Ortner here highlights that a woman’s physiological processes often restricts her social spheres of action, again putting her in a place that is seen to be closer to nature than that of a man.

A brief history of ecofeminism

Ecofeminism can be defined and described in many ways. According to Besthorn and McMillen (2002), the term was coined in the seventies by the French author Francoise d’Eaubonne. For d’Eaubonne the term was meant to describe how the human race could be saved by women initiating an ecological revolution, as a way to counter the
oppression of women that is one and the same as the oppression and destruction of nature. Phrased like this, ecofeminism is ecological because the preservation of ecosystems is a prime objective, and feminist on the basis that it offers up ways to recognize and counter male favoritism.

Ecofeminism as a school of thought has had its own historical evolution. Baugh (2011) states that ecofeminism draws on numerous disciplines stretching from social sciences and humanities to natural and political sciences, as well as an aspect of grassroots organizing. The agreement between the different disciplines, she states, is the above—the ecological crisis and women’s issues are one and the same, one cannot be rectified without the other. Hobgood-Oster (2005) and many others also highlight ecofeminism drawing on various movements, and that it favorably can be understood as an umbrella term. Encompassing everything from “traditional” feminism to deep ecology it also draws on political ideologies. These are more often on the left wing than not, as Marxist/socialist thought and ecofeminism have ideas in common. Since the conceptualization and popularization of the ecofeminist movement, the number of writers, scholars and definitions on, and of, ecofeminism has burgeoned, creating a very diverse field.

**Ecofeminism and religion**

Ecofeminism does also have a spiritual side, encompassing many expressions of feminist concern with religion based on nature. Sandilands (1991:93 in Besthorn and McMillen 2002) describes spiritual ecofeminism as

…the resacralization of Nature, of the divine feminine inherent in all living beings. It is seen as part of a process of reconnection, a reestablishment of ways of knowing and being in the world that have been lost in the history of patriarchal domination. The Goddess, in myriad forms, represents an ultimate vision of connectedness…

The idea that women are, because of their womanhood, spiritually close to nature is central to ecofeminist thought, and is manifested in many forms of (nature) religion—both in the west and the east—often in the form of worshipping the inner goddess that resides in women. There are many examples from the west, often closely connected to the New Age movement, and which can be placed under the umbrella of neo-paganism. Some of these are Wicca and feminist witchcraft, the druid tradition and neo-shamanism (Tøllefsen 2007). In neo-pagan discourse key concepts encompass strong
emotional relations to nature, as well as a baseline pagan ethic, emphasizing free will and an imperative of doing no harm. The concept of gods and goddesses is also very much present in ecofeminist spirituality, and can be understood in two ways. On one hand both male and female goddesses can be present in the belief system, bringing together masculinity and femininity without the oppression of the female in traditional religion, and in society. On the other hand nature can be personified as a goddess, as Mother Earth. Spiritual ecofeminists, in Starhawk’s words “[…] do not believe in the Goddess—we connect with her; through the moon, the stars, the ocean.” This shows that some sides of ecofeminism are deeply spiritual, concerned about the sacredness in nature and the holism of humanity and everything living. Especially women’s connection to nature is seen as positive and transformational, a source of strength and celebration. If humanity can reaffirm its bond to nature, the hierarchies of difference and degradation can ideally be broken.

New Age and neo-pagan spirituality can also increasingly be found in India. Although at first look New Age seems to be a Western concept which borrows on an eclectic assemblage of religions, including Hinduism, New Age-inspired modes of spirituality are gradually making quite a dent in the urban middle-class population. The urban populace is increasingly globalized, and thus has access to a wide variety of cultural inputs from media and other sources. The belief in astrology is widespread, and on every Indian street-corner you can find a palmist and astrologer. Adherence to various cults and ashrams with charismatic leaders are also not uncommon, some of the more internationally famous are those of Osho and the Art of Living.

One example of the ecofeminist New Age scene in India is women connected to the Wicca movement writing columns in magazines and newspapers, often providing spiritual advice. But in India eco-feminist thought is generally more concerned with the Hindu tradition, selecting aspects of this tradition as a rationale. The famous Indian ecofeminist Vandana Shiva invokes just this kind of notion about women, spirituality and nature as she writes that ‘women in India are an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and in practice. At one level, nature is symbolized as the embodiment of the feminine principle, and at another, she is nurtured by the feminine to produce life and provide sustenance.’ (1988:38 in Tomalin 2008) Shiva seems to be supporting the agenda that with the worship of something in nature or nature itself as divinity, ‘naturally’ the result will be a friendly and ecological way of life. In her most famous book, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, she furthers two arguments. First we find her notion of “the feminine principle” (*prakriti*, seeking to foster and preserve harmony and diversity of nature, as it is the source of life), which has strong connections to
spiritual ecofeminism and ideas from Hindu mythology and worldview. Secondly we find her strand of political, socialist ecofeminism which furthers a strong critique of masculine hegemony and worldview, and also a critique of the west for bringing mal-development and the reductionism inherent in western-made capitalism to the east through colonialism and globalization.

**A critique from gender analysis**

Both Tomalin and Agarwal criticize Shiva for an uncritical and narrow view of the role of the female in Hinduism, and even in the introduction to Shiva’s 1998 volume, Rajhni Kothari calls attention to “[…] her often explicit and often implied equivalence between women and nature, as if all women are by definition conservationist, life-enhancing and equity-seeking […]” (p.7). With respect to Shiva’s line of spiritual ecofeminism, and also towards the many that see tradition as the ‘savior’ of sustainable natural resource management, there are many counterarguments to be aware of. These imbibe varying degrees of oversimplification, romanticization and Orientalist construction. Ecofeminism also has a tendency to focus on an essentialized idea of women. Brosius makes it clear that there is a need to differentiate between essentialisms of the ‘strategic’ and ‘romantic’ kind, noting that ‘historically marginalized communities have begun to recognize the political potency of strategically deployed essentialisms’ (1999:281 in Tomalin 2008). Thus contextualizing the struggles of indigenous and other rural communities in India lends a whole new dimension to the critique (non-existent) ecofeminist solutions.

As Agarwal (1998) states there is some sort of prevailing myth of tradition as a viable means of sustainable resource management, but one that steadily overlooks the involvement of women in decision making. Reviving or continuing traditional forms may well cement women’s subordinate position in society. At the same time, it is often women that bear the brunt of declining natural resources—in the form of firewood and other non-timber forest produce essential to the survival of the family. “Women have a relationship to the natural environment in many societies that is a reflection of their reproductive role in the household, and the recourse to religious values is one way in which this role is defined and sustained.” (Tomalin 2008:8)

An ecofeminist view states that, reflected in their religious and cultural actions, women’s closeness to nature is different from, and more than, men’s: there are essential and immanent differences between the sexes. Gender analysis on the other hand takes a stance that is very different from ecofeminism. Rather than looking at innate differences, a gendered analysis emphasizes the fact that women are often caught up in distinct
associations with nature for many different reasons. Decided by cultural traditions and societal beliefs of desirable female conduct, and by women’s status and tasks within the family, a gendered analysis recognizes the multiple pressures women in (traditional) societies face. Ecofeminism often projects women as having easy access to the status of an actor in the family and society. Also, in the romanticized pre-colonial traditional societies that often are depicted in ecofeminist theory (see Shiva 1998), the genders are seen to be equal, and humans and nature to be existing in harmony. A gender analysis takes into account the oversimplification of these ideas, pointing out that women often are trapped in unequal power relations in the family, society and culture, and that today the situation is not overly different from what it was in the past, especially in an Indian context (Agarwal 1998).

**Final remarks and further explorations**

It is crucial to stress the importance of looking at the range of what creates and moves gender relations, and what in this system we can use to factor in religion and culture. As Tomalin points out, although ecofeminism has its obvious constraints and drawbacks it is important to include religious beliefs and identities in the debate over natural resource management. It can be widely agreed that the ‘nexus of religion-gender-environment-development’ should not solely be viewed through an essentialist ecofeminist lens.

Religion, being a vibrant, colorful and significant cultural trait, must be handled with care. ‘Non-Western religio-cultural traditions’ are easy to romanticize and essentialize, especially when it comes to indigenous tradition—and even more so in a feminist perspective. Above I have summarized some of the pitfalls when it comes to ecofeminism and religious environmentalism. But surely the “mistakes” made must not deter us from recognizing the importance of religion when studying women, nature, resource management and development. This convergence of fields holds great promise for not only “saving the world”, but also for doing it in a fashion that draws attention to the way religion helps shape gender structures and female religious identity.
References


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