

# Ecological Criticism Based on Social Gender: The Basic Principles of Ecofeminism

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## Abstract

Through analysis of the main schools and theories of Ecofeminism, this study reveals its basic principles. The study finds that ecofeminism is the feminism oriented on ecology and is the latest development of feminist theory. As an ecological movement led by women, ecofeminism has experienced a process from spontaneity to consciousness of practice; as a feminist school, ecofeminism contains numerous sub-branches and sub-schools. However, Ecofeminism adheres to a basic theory that the patriarchy is the origin of natural domination and gender domination. It is necessary to adhere to the unity of feminism and ecology principles for the opposition to the patriarchy.

**Key words:** Ecofeminism; Natural domination and gender domination; Patriarchy and basic principles.

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## INTRODUCTION

Ecofeminism is a feminism oriented on ecology and is the latest development of feminist theory. As an ecological movement led by women, ecofeminism has experienced a process from spontaneity to consciousness of practice;

as a feminist school, ecofeminism contains numerous branches, however, the school adheres to a basic theory which tries to reveal the relation and origin between natural domination and gender domination. That is, although differences exist in schools and theories of ecofeminism, when discussing the feminist value and significance in the environmental movement, they all agree that women and nature have the same dominated status in the history, and patriarchal structure is the cultural origin which causes natural domination and gender domination, thus they advocate a unity of the natural liberation and the liberation of women, and call on women to play a leading role in the ecological movement.

Thus, as a radical green political slogan, ecofeminism aims to reveal the internal link between the natural domination and gender domination, pays attention to its social cause and social criticism so as to realize the dual liberation of nature and women. This view insists on ecological criticism from the perspective of gender, tries to reconstruct the relationship between women and nature, and demonstrates the basic characteristics of ecological feminism to be female principle and ecological principle.

## 1. PHASES OF DEVELOPMENT AND SCHOOLS OF ECOFEMINISM

### 1.1 Phases of Development of Ecofeminism

From the 1980s, ecofeminism has had a new development in the process of social changes, and has consciously integrated itself with ecological movement, thus it has not only obtained theoretical development from the ecological movement, but also has provided unique supports for the ecological movement. Overall, ecofeminism has experienced the following three stages: the first stage is the beginning of the 1960s. It's mainly demonstrated that the American women challenged large nuclear power stations, the Chipko movement in northern India and

green belt movement in Kenya. The movement at this stage is based on the general ecological awareness in working women's daily life, and attempts to combine the expression of women's interests with the pursuit of environment maintenance and protection. The second stage is taken from 1970s to 1980s. This is a stage that the concepts and theories of ecofeminists have initially formed. As a term, ecofeminism began to narrowly refer to a new feminist school and theory. The third stage is taken from the 1980s until the present. This is a stage that ecofeminist theory has established and developed. Along with the establishment and development of ecofeminism, the prelude to the large-scale environment movement and a peace protest movement in western world has been initiated, such as the "Women and Life on Earth: 80's ecofeminism" Conference held by the feminist group "Antinuclear Clamshell Alliance" in April in 1980, the antimilitarist "Women Pentagon Action" organized by "Antinuclear Clamshell Alliance" in November in 1980 and November in 1981, the first West Coast Eco Feminist Conference in April in 1981 and the US Eco Feminist Conference in April in 1987.

## 1.2 Schools of Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is a wide concept. As long as persisting a view that there is internal relation between the nature and women, it can be attributed to the field of this theory. The famous ecofeminist Greta Gaard once vividly portrayed the ecofeminists as a lake, from which the complexity of the source and branches of ecological feminist theory can be seen. Here are a few of the main schools of ecofeminism.

A. Cultural Ecofeminism. According to Cultural Ecofeminists, the cause of the subservient positions of nature and women lies in the molding of natural temperament and identity of the female by social culture, which itself is on behalf of male. To Cultural Ecofeminism, natural domination and gender domination are caused by patriarchal culture, therefore, the relationship between women and nature must be recognized. And all depreciated and suppressed by the patriarchal system, must be re-experienced, understood and evaluated including women and nature, new female cultures be developed, principles and spirits of women be constructed and promoted, thus the patriarchy can be overthrown.

B. Spiritual Ecofeminism. The appearance of Spiritual Ecofeminism is related to the discovery of ancient matriarchal culture of archaeology. By comparing matriarchal culture and patriarchal culture, Spiritual Ecofeminism thinks that God and its religion are the patriarchal religion. They advocate the revival of ancient religions, and promote the goddess psychomotor to reconstruct the relationship between women and nature. In addition to criticizing the patriarchal religions, Spiritual Ecofeminism advocates the worship of goddess, deems women and nature as the sacred religious beliefs, and replaces politics with religions. This view was severely

criticized by Social Ecofeminism, from whose point of view, women worship for Spiritual Ecofeminists is a kind of mythical way to escape the social and ecological problems in the real world.

C. Social Ecofeminism. It is the combination of anarchist feminism and social ecology, a left-wing ecofeminism. social ecofeminism admits natural domination and gender domination, emphasizing the economic and political roots of domination and advocating political and economic changes to achieve the liberation of nature and women. Like other ecofeminism, social ecofeminism admits natural domination and gender domination, and does not deny the patriarchal domination, however, in the view of social ecofeminism, patriarchy is only a particular form of social hierarchy, and the most important is to eliminate all forms of hierarchy. Therefore, social ecofeminism pays more attention to the analysis of hierarchical structure itself, emphasizing the dominant function of social and economic factors on the society and the reform of the social and economic systems.

D. Socialist Ecofeminism. socialist ecofeminism concerns that the origin of natural domination and gender domination lie in political and social factors, mainly for the dual oppression of private ownership and patriarchy. Private ownership not only ensures men's class interests, but also naturally leads to men's dominance to women. Patriarchy has been built on the material basis of the capitalist system, so socialist revolution is the main means to eradicate natural domination and gender domination. This school mainly analyzes natural domination and gender domination from the view of social and economic development, objecting to capitalist patriarchy, concerning that patriarchy caused the natural domination and gender domination, and advocating the elimination of all practices and systems which would result in dominance. It is the theoretical characteristics of socialist ecofeminism to analyze natural domination and gender domination from the perspective of practice.

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## 2. BASIC IDEAS OF ECOFEMINISM

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Although schools and theories of ecofeminism all maintain environmental protection, differences still exist, hence, schools' argumentations to approve their own views are not the same thing. However, when arguing the feminist value and significance in the environmental movement, the schools all hold that women and nature have the same dominated status in the history, pointing out that the patriarchal structure is the cultural origin which caused natural domination and gender domination, advocating the combination of natural liberation and women liberation, and calling on women to play a leading role in the ecological movement. Obviously, ecofeminism has mainly constructed its theoretical system from three aspects, including three basic points of view, namely, the admittance of the relevance between nature and women,

the fact of natural domination and gender domination, and the dominance root of patriarchy.

## 2.1 Relation of Nature and Female

The relationship between nature and women are the basic content in the research of Ecofeminism. Ecofeminism thinks there is an inherent association between nature and women. Ecofeminism has been founded and developed on the basis of the research on the relationship between nature and women. Recognition and study of relationship between nature and women is the theoretical basis of research of ecofeminism.

The first person who discussed the relationship between nature and women is Sherry B.Ortner. In her *Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?* she points out that nature and women are always associated with some cultural symbols (Ortner,1974). Karen Varren points out in *ecofeminism*,

ecofeminism provides a diverse framework, since it does not have a unified theory of ecofeminism, and there is not a unified ecofeminist philosophy. The different views of ecofeminism are from different philosophical perspectives. Of course, what they have in common is the philosophical thought of the relationship between women and nature. (Warren, 1994)

That is to say, Ecofeminists have different points of view on the relation means between nature and women. Karen Varren concludes the relation between nature and women into ten means, in particular: historical relation, concept relation, social economic relation, language relation, symbol and literature relation, empirical relation, spiritual and religious relation, epistemological relation, political relation and ethical relation.

Historian Caroline Merchant examines the historical process of evolution of natural concept, pointing out “The connection between women and nature has a long history, and the connection stubbornly exists through culture, language and history” (Merchant, 1999). The Cultural Ecofeminists emphasize the close relationship between nature and women. They think that based on the biological roles of female fertility and rearing, women have a special, natural and empirical relationship with nature physiologically and psychologically. Rearing and tending make women naturally closer to nature than men, which provide the basis for a good relationship between women and nature. Therefore, women have more ethics of caring than men, so they are inevitably the best spokesperson for the interests of nature. The Spiritual Ecofeminism finds in the mainstream Western religions that, whether Judaism or Christianity, it is essentially a patriarchal religion. Therefore, Spiritual Ecofeminism criticizes patriarchal religions, advocating to worship the sacred spirit of Goddess and the Earth, and emphasizing the sacred relationship between nature and women.

Different from cultural ecofeminism and spiritual ecofeminism which both emphasize the relationship between nature and women, social ecofeminism attempts

to weaken the relation between nature and women. They think that the connection between nature and women has been socially constructed and strengthened by ideology. The thought of binary opposition which has been recently formed in western modern holds that there is an opposition between culture and nature, men and women, rational and emotional, mental and physical, and subject and object in the way of thought and concept, leading to the hierarchical relations and dominance relations. In this way, not only nature becomes the object of male domination, but also women and their bodies become the dominated objects, that is to say, women and their bodies have been constructed as a culturally specific women. From this point of view, body is a kind of social structure, and countries is like the human body, therefore, the relationship between women and nature is a social product constructed based on political results, or is a political product constructed based on the social results, both of which reflect a kind of political relation.

Socialist ecofeminism emphasizes the link between the subordinate status of women and the degeneration of nature. During the process of development and use of technology in industrialization to enhance the ability to change nature, the single mode of production brought in homogenization, thus eliminating the diversity of production modes, demeaning women, denying the intrinsic value of nature, and replacing biological diversity with human homogenization. This kind of production model which aims to obtain benefits inevitably brings in the plundering of nature, destructs biological diversity, and then endangers the human itself, especially the women. In general, the development of modern industry and agriculture makes women, women’s knowledge and nature linked with women at a subordinate status. The biological diversity is in danger, and the subordinate status of women and the degradation of nature have an internal unity.

## 2.2 Domination for Nature and Female

Regardless of the manner in which nature and gender relate with each other, there is a consensus of ecofeminism that natural domination and gender domination are essentially homologous in the frame of mind. “What ecofeminists need to analyze are the twin dominions—dominion of nature and dominion of women, and think the dominion of colored people, children and the underclass” (Warren, 1994). Revealing the thought framework of internal relationship between natural domination and gender domination is the most important feature of Ecofeminism.

Through the investigation of the evolution of natural concept, Caroline Merchant holds that natural domination and gender domination are historically linked. Modern reductionist mechanical view of nature has replaced the organic view of nature, and nature and women became the dominated objects. “The change from organism to machine, as a dominant metaphor, combines the universe,

society and ego into a single cultural reality, namely the world outlook.” (Merchant, 1999) Val Plumwood holds that the relationship between natural domination and gender domination can be traced back to the thought tradition of Western rationalistic dualism, namely the division method of binary opposition of sense / emotion, mind / body, culture / nature, and male / female, etc..

From the ultimate sense, ecofeminists think that natural domination and gender domination are determined by a common conceptual structure. This conceptual structure has five important characteristics: (a) thinking mode of value level; (b) value dualism (either-or thinking); (c) concept of power (power) to dominate the subordinate; (d) concept of privilege, in a hierarchical structure the “superior” is always favored; (e) dominance logic, an argument structure used to verify the rationality of rule and domination relations, according to which for any X and Y, if the value of X is higher than that of Y, then X’s rule and domination upon Y is reasonable.

In the whole conceptual structure, logic of domination is the most important. Domination logic is not only a logical structure, but also involves a certain kind of substantive value system, because it requires a certain ethical premise to provide justification for the existing dominance relationship. The typical practice to prove the rationality of dominance is the pre assumption that the dominated innately lack some features, which are precisely the dominator possesses, such as human beings are living and conscious, while natural is dead and unconscious; men are rational, while women are irrational. When the Western dualistic culture presupposed that culture was better than nature, and sense was better than emotion, according to the logical structure of the above concept construction, the conscious human being have a certain capacity compared to nature. They were morally rational to dominate nature. Similarly, culture and men were morally concerned to have a higher value, which would naturally result in the conclusion of natural domination and gender domination.

Thus it can be seen, this conceptual structure is oppressive, as long as a value opposite pair can be presupposed, the domination system and relationship can be explained, demonstrated and supported with the logic of dominance. Obviously, dominance logic is the theoretical premise to keep up the conceptual structure, “the logic of domination is not only used to defense the domination of human gender, race, ethnicity or class rules, but also used to defense the domination of nature”(Warren, 1996). Therefore, to eliminate the dominant logic, social barriers and boundaries of previous analysis of social oppression must be broken.

### 2.3 Patriarchy

Ecofeminism links natural domination and gender domination, and points out that the origin of this domination is patriarchy. The patriarchal concept

occurred originally as an anthropological and sociological terminology. As in a dictionary of sociology, the definition of patriarchy is the family pattern that men who have ruled rights dominate all the members of the family. The first person who introduced patriarchy into feminist theory is the radical feminist scholar Kate Millet. In *Sex Politics*, she defined patriarchy as the domination system that male domination female, and older male dominates younger male throughout the history.

Patriarchy can take two forms in natural domination and gender domination: the weak correlation and the strong correlation. In the weak correlation, natural domination and gender domination have their roots in the patriarchy, namely a culture opposed to nature is also a culture opposed to female. For the strong correlation, patriarchy gives nature and gender the same characteristics, then systematically depreciates them. According to the different fields where patriarchy acts, patriarchy can also be divided into the public patriarchy in public domains and the private patriarchy in private domains (namely parental patriarchy).

The initial patriarchy mainly refers to the parental patriarchy. In a core family, husband obtains the right to dominate his wife, and father obtains the right to dominate children. Patriarchy is a right hierarchy where the male dominates the female and then is extended to all right relationship. In the patriarchal hierarchy, female culture is linked to the body, blood and flesh, material, nature, emotion and private fields, while male culture focuses on spirit, intelligence, sense, culture and public fields. Therefore, male can conquer female like treating the nature, “in fact bring the nature and all her descendants to you, let her serve you, be your servant.” (Merchant, 1999) This is the view of scientism represented by Bacon in modern times, which provides the legal rights of natural domination and gender domination to male.

Concerning subject and object, spirit and body, culture and nature as two opposites, the hierarchical male value system and the logical system of domination can be generated, out of which, the logic of domination is the most important part of the framework of the hierarchical dualism. “The patriarchal value –that hierarchical thoughts lead to domination logic, a kind of ..... thought, which explains and maintains the obedience of the “inferior” group to the “superior” group. It also argues for the phenomenon to prove that it is reasonable” (Warren, 1987). According to the logic of dominance, for ecofeminists, all related oppression and domination systems are homologous in the framework of mind, which are a kind of “the presence of men”.

Plumwood holds that the identification of female identity is in relation to the rationalistic concept which is dominant in Western thoughts. Rationality shaped women’s political identity, “rationality provides a contrast which can define itself for the nature, just like the concept

of husband defining wife, the concept of owner defining slave.” (Plumwood, 2007) In a wider range of view, patriarchy is regarded as a subset of “the philosophical dualism which has been diffused prevalently in the Western thoughts” (Pepper, 2011). The different forms of the dominations have similarities in logic or symbolic structure, and the contemporary global ecological crisis and various forms of domination phenomena are the inevitable result of domination of patriarchy. The existing system has a structural problem, and if ecological health and social justice want to be truly realized, reformation of patriarchy is necessary, that is to say, male chauvinism must be disintegrated, and emancipation of the nature and women must be realized.

### 3. BASIC PRINCIPLES OF ECOFEMINISM

Ecofeminism aims to reveal the intrinsic link between the natural domination and gender domination, to achieve the dual goal of the liberation of nature and women. Ecofeminism applies the relationship theory between female and nature into a variety of social structures, emphasizes the analysis of ecology, gender, class, and race, investigates the essential origin of domination system as a whole, and admits the different voices from women of different races, classes, and ages. The emphasis on differences formed the cultural diversity of its theory. In this cultural diversity, the basic feature of ecofeminism has been demonstrated as female principle and ecological principle.

Karen (2002) reflected female principle and ecological principle into the core assumption of ecofeminism, and elaborated the core assumption. Specifically, the core assumption of ecofeminism includes the following four aspects, (a) oppression of women and oppression of nature have important links; (b) understanding of essence of these connections are necessary to fully understand the oppression of women and nature; (c) theory and practice of feminism must include the ecological perspective; (d) resolution of ecological problems must contain the feminist perspective. The above can be concluded as the following principles:

Ecofeminism is “female”. Ecofeminism has the female perspective and orientation. Ecofeminism emphasizes gender differences, and pays more attention to gender discrimination and unequal treatment suffered by women in social life. Specifically, women’s values are ignored, housework devalued, and women are excluded from public domains. Through exploration of the construction of female concept in culture and investigation of differences and diversities between the sexes as well as within women, ecofeminism finds that women are not and cannot be composed of a single category, and all those theories aiming at reducing female dominance to a single interpretation would like to exclude the experience of most women around the world, and ignore the complexity of the lives

of women. That is to say, mechanistic, reductionist, simple way of thinking way will inevitably lead to a common female feature, and will inevitably simplify the cause of female being dominated. Most importantly, this cultural value establishes a social power structure as a “natural” fact. From the perspective of female, Ecofeminism reveals the root behind gender domination, power structure of hierarchy of human society, and the operation mechanism of power inequality. From the gender perspective to examine the relationship between human and nature, homology of natural domination and gender domination can be found, that is to say, gender perspective not only examines the relationship between people, but also reflects the relationship between people and nature, and finds the internal link between the two kinds of domination.

Ecofeminism also has to be “ecological”. Ecofeminism has an ecological perspective. Ecology emphasizes the mutual dependence of elements of ecosystem, which should reflect a balance, organism and integration. At the same time, ecology also pays attention to interactions and differences of individuals in the system. Ecofeminism admits all lives in the nature are linked, and the values of lives lie in the diversity and abundance of life forms. Therefore, ecofeminism opposes mechanical, reductionist, and separated dualistic thinking way, encourages related, multi-dimensional, and integrated thinking way. The view of relation means that the relevance between people and nature has been emphasized so as to avoid the confrontation and split between man and nature; the view of multi-dimension revives organism tradition and avoids monism and dominance relationship; the view of integration encourages to treat the relationship between the individual and the whole dialectically, and opposes the abstract individual view.

Thus, criticizing ecologically from the perspective of social gender, adhering to the link of natural domination and gender domination, and eliminating social and cultural criticism of the patriarchy are the unique theoretical contribution of ecofeminism and the theoretical answer for the issue of “domination – liberation” in ecological movement by ecofeminism.

### CONCLUSION

Ecofeminism claims to eliminate patriarchy, emphasizes the role of women experience in ecological movement, and stresses that ecological movement should closely connect with regional and global women liberation movements in order to realize women’s liberation; ecofeminism pays attention to the difference and diversity, adheres to actively absorb the latest achievements of ecological theory in addition to feminist principles, and combines with regional and global ecological movements, makes great efforts to resolve ecological

crisis, and reconstructs a new relationship between people and nature, people and people, and people and society.

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