



Theorising Environmentalism and Caregiving: A Critique of Ecofeminism

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Abstract— *The paper focuses on the conceptualization of care giving during ecological disasters from a gender perspective. There has not been adequate research on care from a socio cultural context (T. Revenson, 7). The cultural context of care is important as it helps to understand the different dimensions of caregiving and the experience of caregivers. The research documented by Heller and Rowitz in 1997 shows that majority of the caregivers are women especially mothers. In a cultural setting of home, it is normative for women to invest themselves in the role as a caregiver. Caregiving is perceived as a self sacrificing role that women are expected to undertake because of moral responsibility (Lefley, 443). The ethic of care is an important part of the ecofeminist practice. Women's role as a caregiver also positions them as natural environmental carers. With reference to the socio-cultural background in the selected eco-narratives, the study intends to make a critical appraisal of the ecofeminist theory in order to understand its relation between women and nature. The study further examines how such a relationship reinforces the gendered nature of care and its impact on women at a cultural level.*

Keywords— *Care, culture, ecofeminism, gender studies, nature.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The term "Ecofeminism" was put forth by Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, as she sees parallels in the oppression faced by both women and nature and attempts to liberate them from unjust discriminations. This parallel connection arises from the notion of a metaphorical connection between woman and nature based on the assumption that women are essentially or biologically closer to nature. Ecofeminists argue that feminine traits such as care and nurturing should be a part of an ecofeminist environmental ethics as it perpetuates the claim that women are most qualified to be in charge of preserving nature – thus, fulfilling the traditional role as nurturing mothers (Archambault, 21). Sherry Ortner (1974) brings in the nature/culture debate and argues that women are symbolically tied to nature while men are associated with culture. There is no logical explanation behind attributing activities closer to nature as feminine or activities in the public sphere as masculine. The nature/culture bifurcation is not applicable to all cultures and therefore, is not

universal (p.71). Even then, several ecofeminists in the West assume women's connection to nature stemming from their biology. For instance, Agarwal notes that ecofeminists like Ariel Salleh connect women's consciousness to nature based on their biological capabilities. Salleh argues "Women's monthly fertility cycle, the tiring symbiosis of pregnancy, the wrench of childbirth and the pleasure of suckling an infant, these things already ground women's consciousness in the knowledge of being coterminous with nature" (121). However, according to Carolyn Merchant, the connection between women and nature posits an ambivalent imagery. This divergent imagery identifies nature as a nurturing mother on one hand; on the other hand, nature is juxtaposed as a wild and uncontrollable woman. The arguments put forward by western feminists are problematic in several ways. First, they generalize the oppression faced by woman as a unified group without differentiating them by class, race or ethnicity. Second, many ecofeminists talk about the domination of women in

ideological terms without elucidating the actual issues. Third, they do not take into consideration the real life experiences of women but only describe what they have conceptualized from it (123).

The paper intends to focus on the Ecofeminist theory in the context of India and tries to explore whether the functioning of an Ecofeminist principle in a regional context work towards promoting the gendered notion of care in a domestic household.

II. SELECTED TEXTS AS GENDER NARRATIVES OF STRUGGLE AND RESILIENCE

The autobiographical narratives of women activists in Kerala like Mayilamma and Leelakumari Amma have made significant contribution to the discourse of environmental justice. Leelakumari Amma of Peria Village is an environmental activist who struggled against the spraying of Endosulfan pesticide on the cashew plantations in Kasaragod district, which was causing serious health problems and birth malformations in the local population. Mayilamma is a tribal activist in Plachimada whose anti-Cola campaign against the Coca-Cola Company created a global resistance against environmental pollution. Through their stories, the study tries to understand if the struggles of these women activists are rooted in the patriarchal construction of a special connection between women and nature that reinforce the ideologies of mothering and caregiving. The paper does not intend to criticize the Ecofeminist theory but highlights the major elements of Ecofeminism that essentialise women based on gendered assumptions. Some of the principles of Ecofeminism tend to impose a 'compulsory altruism', a term that defines caregiving as a normative expectation imposed upon women by oppressed ideologies. Women in Kerala are considered to be the major agents of caregiving. The burden of caregiving is shared equally among men and women but in a gendered manner. The public sphere is mostly male dominated. Men are only expected to provide financial stability for care to take place while women are directed into the private space of domesticity and household; mothers are the prime agents of caregiving in families (Devika, 756). This 'compulsory altruism' framed by oppressive structures could be characterized as an internalized altruism embodied by women; the locus of selflessness stems from the socially constructed notion that women have a natural inclination towards care (Chakravarti, 18).

Many prominent Ecofeminists embrace the natural disposition of women to caregiving in a positive manner and claim that it helps women to develop a

nurturing attitude towards the environment. They attempt to empower women by emphasizing the connection between "mothering and earth care" (Devika, 762). Ecofeminists like Vandana Shiva believes that the caregiving practiced by non western rural women or grassroot women are less likely to be "contaminated than that practiced by the modernized housewife" (p.759). She foregrounds her ideology based on the fact that caregiving practiced by rural women is pure and ideal as it is closer to nature. In her book *Staying Alive*, Shiva tries to link the sacred connection between women and nature by illustrating the worship of Tulsi plants in Indian households. Tulsi is the symbol of cosmos and by watering the plant, women renew their relationship with the cosmos and with nature (56). Rural women naturally acquire knowledge of nature because their identity with nature is authentic and organic (7). The lines, "nature herself is an experiment and "women are traditional natural scientists" (58) support this statement. However, there is no logical evidence that suggest a connection between these women and nature as pure, feminine, or maternal (Devika, 763). The insights that women acquire from nature are passed down by generations in female line and not stemming from women's way of knowing or any unique experiences. This so called 'unique experiences' are part of women's daily routine and domestic life and emerge from the burden of being the major caregivers of the family; projecting them as pure, unique or feminine is unsubstantiated (Devika,763). For instance, the character of Pappammayi in Mayilamma's narrative is a midwife who has assisted the childbirth of many girls in the colony. She disapproved of going to the hospital and instead, preferred the use of medicinal plants like pepper. She was familiar with many medicinal herbs in the forest. Mayilamma recollects how when someone caught a cold or fever, she would put castor leaves in steam water and make them inhale it. These insights of Pappammayi were acquired from years of being a midwife and the knowledge she gained from the time spent working in the forests to make a livelihood. Mayilamma was coerced to drop out of school and work in the forest at a young age. She recounts how her parents sent her to the forest to graze cattle and cut grass. Cutting the grass consisted of hardwork that required a lot of practice (27). She remembers how they used to catch crabs and fish in the forest. "Catching crabs is an interesting art. When we put our hands into their holes, the crabs would pinch us. After getting two or three pinches, we would grab them in a single smart lunge" (30). Mayilamma narrates how crabs can be used for medicinal purposes too. Crabs mixed with coconut milk helps to remove mucus from chest (31). Such instances show how the knowledge of the forest was not naturally acquired but generated from

years of experience in the forest. Ecofeminists like Shiva, purposefully ignore the knowledge and contributions of rural men (Dechamma, 102). In Mayilamma's narrative, the lines "It was not just women, but men were also familiar with the ways of the forest" (Pariyadath, 26), suggest that most rural men and women who lived in the vicinity of the forests had ecological knowledge of nature and its processes. The lines, "Our grandfathers, great grandfathers and grandmothers knew the names of a lot of medicinal herbs" (27), also suggest the same. The lines, "It was during the time of Pappammayi's parents that the ways of the forest came to be replaced by the ways of the city" (16), expresses Mayilamma's concern that people no longer prefer traditional methods but rely on modern medicines. This concern does not evoke a special connection towards nature, but rather arises out of her familiarity with herbal medicines. Leelakumari Amma narrates the experiences during her childhood that helped her gain more insights on nature and farming. Her mother was in charge of looking after the farm. She followed traditional methods of farming that she inherited from her family and now passed down to her children. It did not require the use of fertilizers but only cow dung and other natural manure. Their experiences were part of their daily labor in the farm.

While the strategy of Ecofeminists to romanticize women environmental activists as 'earthcarers', a term used by Carolyn Merchant (1995) or 'grassroots women' might evoke a connection between woman and nature, such a connection does not politicize caregiving or empower women in any way but rather coerces women to take up environmental caring in addition to the list of domestic chores (Devika,764). Women enter the environmental struggle because their livelihoods were affected and not because of any special connection to nature (763). For instance, women like Mayilamma and Leelakumari Amma lived in close vicinity of the corporation and were personally affected by the disaster. In Mayilamma's narrative, there is an instance where many mothers gathered in front of the local anganwadi when their children started falling sick. It was women who took their children to school and prepared food for them. Naturally, they were the first to notice the issue of contaminated water in the anganwadi when their children got sick (Madhavan, 9). Mayilamma along with other women in the colony struggled to supply water to the anganwadi everyday so that the care centre would remain open and the children's education wouldn't be affected. The womenfolk made sure that rice gruel and uppuma were distributed and that the children received immediate vaccination shots (Pariyadath,25). Mayilamma's struggle against the company and her decision to act as a caregiver

to the community does not link her to Earth care; it is merely a role that was imposed upon her by the oppressive patriarchal structures. Devika argues that even though women enter the political struggle, they still have many patriarchal obligations; they are still obliged to fulfill domestic chores and caregiving duties. (14)

In Mayilamma's narrative for instance, majority of the people in the protest pandal were women, the men of the village had to leave the settlement to work in the rice paddy fields. Mayilamma recalls that women had to do multiple tasks while protesting in the pandal. A kitchen was set up in the corner where women cooked lentils and rice. They also had to bring their children to the protests and look after them as their husbands were out in the fields. Pariyadath,61; Ferman, 32) In Mayilamma's words, "Palana's girl Bhagyam, is preoccupied in removing the leaves from the drumstick stalks. Her little son Aneesh would run out on the road the moment we took our eyes off him. Two people were needed to keep a constant eye on the children coming to the pandal" (Pariyadath, 33)

Women in poor rural households are the major victims of environmental degeneration, in gender specific ways. This is because women are more prone to illness than men due to exposure from water contamination in wells and ponds with pesticides or fertilizers due to the gendered nature of their work. Women have to fetch water from ponds and canals for various domestic purposes such as cooking, cleaning, feeding cattle or washing clothes (Bina Agarwal, 144). Mayilamma narrates how the impact of the contaminated water from the Coca Cola Company is reflected more on women in rural households than men. This is because women mostly stay indoors while their men folk worked outside the settlements. She says that the drinking water in their wells was contaminated by the dirty water that came out of the Coca Cola Company. Many women complained that their fingers burned and itched when they used water to clean the vessels. Hence, water could not be used for cooking or cleaning purposes. Due to the issue of the contaminated water, the womenfolk of Plachimada colony had to travel two and a half kilometers everyday to fetch water. Because of this, they were not able to go for work and earn their daily income. The burden of providing food and caregiving of children and elderly is another task conventionally entrusted among women (Agarwal, 14; Chakravarti,15; Gillian Dalley,p; Madhavan and Narayana et. al, 9).

Women are more affected by disasters due to their role as caregivers. They are confined to their households as public space is mostly male dominated. While women's access to public spaces is limited and dependent on their social need, men actively engaged in

social activities. It was mostly men who organized groups and participated in protests while women had to undertake the responsibility of care giving for affected children (A.K Jayashree, 6). Women are associated with nature as “something is lacking in females” (Ortner, 25), while men are identified with culture. Culture is regarded as superior to nature; this makes women inferior to men in their position in the society. The claim that women are associated with nature ensues from their physiological differences regarding pregnancy and child birth which places them closer to nature. This limits woman’s access to the public space and associates her to the subordinate domestic household context (Ortner, 38). If culture is considered as superior to nature, the identification of woman to nature seems contradictory as it concurs to the argument that the social role of a woman indeed lies in caregiving (Merchant, 14).

Govind Kelkar and Dev Nathan (1991), in their study of the tribes in the Jharkhand region in Central part of India, notes that the distribution of labour between men and women is determined by cultural factors rather than biological factors. The division of labour is not a voluntary action but a law forced upon as a social norm. It could be the identification of women’s role as child bearers and caregivers that ensued in their gender being confined to the domestic space (14). Through their study they point out that in the earlier period, both men and women participated in hunting activities. While the task of childcare and preparation of food was solely the responsibility of women, men also take part in gathering of food and fodder (35). There is a further division of labor in the gathering of forest produce. In the case of collecting fruits, flowers and seeds from trees, the role of men is to shake the trees while women and children gather them. Gathering of firewood and leaves is the responsibility of women (57). Generally, the burden of work is more on women than men as men get more leisure time in the evening to relax and engage in politics or other activities while women are pressured to engage in domestic household work (59).

For instance, the lines “Women in the huts would bear children every year” (Pariyadath, 26), delineates how the task of providing caregiving to the younger children falls naturally upon older girl children. Mayilamma was forced to discontinue her education as she had to look after her younger siblings as her mother had to work in the fields to feed her family. The narrative exposes the deep rooted patriarchal notions ingrained among men and women. Mayilamma’s desire to study was disapproved by her father who trivialized it with the simple question, “why do girls need to study?” (27). She says that girls were not allowed to swim in the lake. Her father made her collect the river water in a vessel and take bath. As a result, most

women did not know how to swim. There are other instances in the narrative that point to the conventional notions internalized among women. For example, Mayilamma talks about the various games that she and her friends played during her childhood days. Some of the games they played such as pounding rice, making rice and curry, etc resembled their daily chores (32).

III. CONCLUSION

The selected primary texts take an ethnographic perspective and looks into the cultural constructions of environment that directed women’s domestic role as a caregiver. The maternal archetype is a culturally constructed image in the Ecofeminist discourse that aligns women with the notion of ‘care’ based on the symbolic connection between the fertile woman and the fertility of the land. This connection is based on the affirmation that both women and nature are life givers. By establishing an interconnection between the feminine principle and environmentalism, the Ecofeminist paradigm tends to depict nature as maternal. This depiction of nature as a maternal presence and further attribution of inherent qualities such as benevolence and nurturing capabilities parallels to the patriarchal expectations that society attribute to an Indian woman. In a traditional Indian society, women are expected to be perpetual caregivers; they have to constantly cater to the needs of their husband, children and other family members. Thus the Ecofeminist conception of the nature-woman affinity results in the glorification of archetypal motherhood trope---an image of a self sacrificing, enduring and devoted Indian woman (Swanson, 36).

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