



ECO-FEMINISM AND SUSTAINABILITY OF NATURE

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ABSTRACT

Eco-feminism argues against the damage and destruction of nature in the similar way feminist argues against the discrimination of women by men in a society. The main point of argument from the feminist perspective is that women have their own intrinsic value and they can't be exploited by men. A similar line of argument was brought by eco-feminists when they talk of intrinsic value of nature which can't be exploited by human beings for their benefit. The eco-feminist position shall face a pressing problem when they assign intrinsic value to nature as they assign intrinsic value to women. While, women have their intrinsic value, the same can't be categorically assigned to nature. While assigning intrinsic value to nature is holistic, it faces a lot of criticism. Some other eco-feminists therefore talk of instrumental value of nature. Though this line of talk is taking care of the criticisms that leveled against the intrinsic value of nature, it comes with greater concern of how to protect nature against human exploitation. This has been taken care of by the idea of sustainability which talks of using the resources but not exploiting them. Thus we argue that eco-feminism with instrumental value to nature with a sustainability approach can fruitfully defend against the exploitation of nature than the eco-feminism with intrinsic value of nature.

Key Words: Eco-feminism, women, nature, intrinsic value, instrumental value, sustainable development.



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Eco-feminism consists of two words 'eco' which implies of ecosystem of nature and 'feminism' is a movement that raises the concern against unequal and inferior treatment of women by men. Eco-feminism argues against the exploitation of nature in the same way feminism raises voice against unjustified treatment of women by men in a society. Creating a value system to the nature and its different entities, eco-feminism argues against the massive damage and destruction on nature by human beings. The land, water, air, forest etc. of the earth have been used and resourced by human beings in many forms for different purposes. Eco-feminism feels that too much use of land; water, air etc. are one kind of exploitation of natural resources.

The term ecological feminism or eco-feminism refers to a sensible, an intimation, that feminist concerns run parallel to, are bound up with, or, perhaps, are one with concern for a natural world which has been subjected to much the same abuse and ambivalent behavior as have women. (Cheney, 1987, p. 115).

Eco-feminist philosopher Karren Warren has pointed out that women, in some degree and sense, can feel more sympathy towards such exploitation of natural resources, because they have been historically experiencing such exploitation and 'logic of domination'. (Warren, 2000, p. 343). This logic of domination implies that women have been witnessing various kinds of unjustified social and economic oppressions in the history of human civilization. In the similar lines, eco-feminism argues against any kind of unjustified destruction to natural entities.

Ecological feminism is that it provides a distinctive framework both for reconceiving feminism and for developing an environmental ethics which takes seriously connections between the domination of women and the domination of nature (Warren K. J., 2010, p. 281).

From Karren Warren's assessment of ecological feminism or eco-feminism, it can be seen that it argues from dual perspective of domination of women and domination of nature by human beings.



Feminism raises voice against unjustified treatment of women by men in various realms. Feminism insists that women have their own intrinsic value and their value should be taken care of in all circumstances. Women should not be used in any case simply as a ‘means’ or as an instrumental value. Feminism thus argues to protect the intrinsic value of women at par with men in any society. Intrinsic value implies that each natural thing (living and non-living) has its own value. This intrinsic value is end in itself. Finality and self-sufficiency are the two important features of intrinsic value and rationality, well-being of humans are the loci of such intrinsic value.(Santas, 2003).

Like feminism, some of the eco-feminists also assign intrinsic value to nature. The nature or its sub-systems such as species, ecosystems have their intrinsic value in the sense that as a whole these systems carry some inherent properties like integrity, stability and beauty. Most of the natural resources are used for the benefit of the humankind. But it does not indicate that the natural things which are not used for the humankind have no value. Every natural entity has its own intrinsic value irrespective of its evaluation or benefit. This intrinsic value of natural things is not considered as a means.Karren Warren finds that to claim intrinsic value of nature is to express loving attitude to the nature and its entities.(Warren K. , 2000). According to Chris Cuomo, non-human natural entities have intrinsic value because they have ability to flourish as a whole.(Cuomo, 1998). Carolyn Merchant also insists that nature has intrinsic value simply because it possesses such goods which can contribute to human community in various ways.(Merchant, 1996) These eco-feminists argue that natural entities as a whole have their own intrinsic value. Natural entities can't be simply used as an instrumental value for the benefit of mankind. The intrinsic value of natural entities should be kept intact in order to resist widespread exploitation over nature.Like eco-centric views, these eco-feminists also insist that intrinsic value is one of the important values to protect the natural varieties. Thus these eco-feminists argue to keep the intrinsic value of nature and its different entities. This view of some eco-feminists of assigning intrinsic value to nature is similar to the view of feminism that raises voice against exploitation of women.

Eco-feminists argument that nature possesses intrinsic value can face criticism from diverse viewpoints, primarily from an anthropocentric viewpoint. One of the core issues is that while women have their own intrinsic value, the same argument cannot be assigned categorically



to the nature. In other sense women are living beings and nature consists of both living and non-living things. Logically what can be applicable to women may not be applicable to nature as such.

Assigning intrinsic value to nature is a holistic one. Holistic in the sense that on the basis of intrinsic value, whole natural entities should be taken care of. Holistic perception implies that non-humans entities have their intrinsic value for the cohesive and integrative capacity. J. B. Callicott argues that natural ecosystem as whole has its intrinsic value, because it is an evolutionary and integrated community. Based on Leopold's land ethic, Callicott also argues that land and natural ecosystem as a whole is to be considered as a community rather than as commodities.(Callicott, 1989). Holmes Rolston III also insists that nature and its various species and ecosystems have their intrinsic value. This intrinsic value is inherent in the natural entities.(Rolston iii, 1999). Thus these ecocentric philosophers find that intrinsic value is the sole basis for the preservation of nature and natural varieties. This way ecocentric views that based on the intrinsic value of nature is holistic in nature and fall in similar lines to that of some of the eco-feminists. However, this holistic intrinsic value of nature is criticized by various other philosophers. Antony Weston does not support intrinsic value of objects.(Weston, 1996). He says that intrinsic value is something of an abstract kind of value which has no existence in concrete situation. Intrinsic value of an being which consists of finality and self-sufficiency is not dependent on other beings or entities for its value. According to Weston, an entity that is not related to other things or beings can't be valued. So, the very term of intrinsic value has no significant meaning. It is merely an ideological concept and of a primitive kind. Similarly, B. G. Norton argues against intrinsic value of nature. Norton insists that humans are the locus of intrinsic value and all other natural entities have only instrumental values.(Norton, 1991) His position is that natural resources are meant for human beings and there is no such intrinsic value at all. All the natural entities are for use and utility of human beings and therefore all the natural resources are instrumental in nature. Without human beings, mere natural entities have no values at all. All values are related to the human beings. Human beings use natural resources as a means and not as an end.

Thus, assigning and acknowledging intrinsic value to nature has its limitations which are being criticized by thinkers like Weston, Norton and others. Their criticisms are leveled against



the eco-centric position that tries to acknowledge the intrinsic value of nature. Eco-feminists though talk of exploitation of nature by human beings; often share the same idea of assigning and acknowledging the intrinsic value of nature. These criticisms against intrinsic value of nature need to be addressed by eco-feminists as well. Some other eco-feminists therefore talk of instrumental value of nature. Instrumental value is the value assigned to an entity or being as it can be used as solely as a means to achieve a desired result. If x is natural entity, then if x is used for some purposes such as making household items, then it has an instrumental value. Sometimes it is also referred as economic value of the object. If any natural entity can be used as a means for some other means or for some other result, then that natural entity is said to possess an instrumental value. Marxist eco-feminists argue that nature and its different entities have not only intrinsic value, but also have instrumental value. (Merchant, 2010). Nature can be used for the economic benefit of human beings in the form of agriculture, farmland, minor industries etc. Human usually depend on nature and its different entities. So, some natural entities are used as an instrumental value for the benefit of humankind. But once nature is conceived to be used as an instrumental value in terms of various purposes, human beings use these natural entities as much as possible. Thus it leads to exploitation over natural resources.

To overcome this idea of using natural resources as instrumental values but without exploiting nature is a difficult idea to reckon with. While thinkers like Merchant talk of instrumental value, they understand the instrumental value with some limitations. Instrumental value need not immediately be implied to be leading to excessive exploitation. They also insist on the equal and moderate use of natural resources. Equal and moderate uses of natural resources indicate avoiding any kind of massive destruction and exploitation of natural resources. But, how do we engage in natural resource use without engaging in exploiting them. This takes us to the idea of sustainability. In this regard, eco-feminism conceives the idea of sustainable use of natural resources.

The sustainable idea implies that natural resources should be used in such a manner, so that such natural resources are not in shortage for the fulfillment of demand of the future generations. Thus this sustainability insists on the use of natural resources, but not indulges in excessive exploitation. The sustainability report says that meeting the present need without hampering the need of demand of future human beings can be a mark of moderate



use.“Sustainability development is a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (Brundtland, 1987, p. 43). While assigning an instrumental value to nature and natural entities, one inevitably takes an anthropocentric position. However, anthropocentrism can be of two types with respect to how one interacts with nature, that is, strong and weak anthropocentrism. The strong anthropocentric argues that natural resources are to be used for the present human only. B. G. Norton appeals for a weak anthropocentric position for environmental ethics. Weak anthropocentrism is a position which insists on the resource preservation for the future people. What he insists on is the weak anthropocentric position for natural resources. (Norton, 1984). Norton bases his position on the considered preference rather than felt preference.(Norton, 1984). The felt preference implies the immediate use of the natural resources as much as possible for the present living people without thinking about the future use. This felt preference leads to the strong anthropocentric where people do not think about future need of the resources. Instead of that weak anthropocentric bases its argument on the considered preference which deals with rational and economic use of the natural resources and thus preservation of some amount of resources for the future people. His contention is that value to the nature and other natural entities are to be considered on weak anthropocentric perspective. Natural value should be considered neither on the intrinsic value nor on strong anthropocentric perspective.

This idea of sustainable development is found in eco-feminists ideologies and also in their movements. Eco-feminist movements oppose the major destruction and damage of nature and its different entities like trees, rivers etc. In this respect, Indian Chipko movement for trees can be pointed out. The Chipko movement was initiated by 28 Indian women against the commercial plantation of eucalyptus in 1974. Chipko implies the hugging of the tree. (Warren, 2000). The Chipko movement tried to protect the indigenous trees and other faunas against the monoculture of eucalyptus plantation. This way the women try to sustain the local trees and forest for their own livelihood. Thus eco-feminism tries to sustain the natural capitals in the form of trees, forest and other flora and faunas. The nature and its different entities are for the minimal and equal use for both men and women. The nature and natural entities are not for the commercial use for a few rich human beings.(Shiva, 2006)



The eco-feminists who assign on the instrumental value of nature are more pragmatic than the eco-feminists who assign intrinsic value on nature. Thus it is seen that eco-feminist movement with instrumental value to nature with a sustainability approach can fruitfully defend against the exploitation of nature than the eco-feminism with intrinsic value of nature.

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