UNIT 8  ECOFEMINISM AND FEMINIST ENVIRONMENTALISM

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8.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you should be able to:

- Reflect on the close relationship between gender development and the ‘environment’

- Discuss the core debates within environmental sociology on Gender and Environment

- Explain from a sociological point of view, the complex interplay and linkages between the different dimensions that constitute Ecofeminism and Feminist Environmentalism

- Narrate the work of Vandana Shiva and Bina Agarwal

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8.1 INTRODUCTION

We are living today in a world where it is increasingly being recognised that the survival of the human species is dependent upon a balanced relationship between society and the environment. This balance of life can only be possible when a consciousness arises about the intersection between nature and culture and we understand the different ideas and systems that constitute this reciprocity. Clearly, there are different dimensions to the emergence of such a consciousness in which society and nature are tied together. The need for an ecological awakening as well as the various strategies through which an ecological balance between "us and our world" can be achieved is of paramount importance today.

This unit will address one critical aspect of this relationship and accompanying strategies, namely, the relationship between gender, development and the environment.

We will do this by engaging in a critical examination of the debates on gender environment and development in the following manner: In section 8.2 and its subsections we will define Ecofeminism. Following this we will discuss the relationship between gender, environment and development from an Ecofeminist perspective with the help of the work of Vandana Shiva. And in the final section 8.4 and its subsections, we will look at the critique of Ecofeminism as presented by Feminist Environmentalism with the help of the work of Bina Agarwal.

8.2 WHAT IS ECOFEMINISM

Ecofeminism or ecological feminism is a discourse that has also been called a branch of feminism. The term “eco feminism” was coined in 1974 by the French feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne, and became popular in the environmental movements of the late 1970s and 1980s. Its aim has been to address the ideas that:

- women and nature are deeply entwined and connected in multiple ways
- they are treated similarly and hierarchically by patriarchal structures and institutions across cultures and societies
- women are embedded in nature and thus the exploitation of nature could be or should be seen as an exploitation of women as well
- patriarchal forces dominate, exploit and violate women and the environment in the name of development.

8.2.1 Gender, Environment and Patriarchy

As said, Ecofeminism aims to look at how women and the environment are related in multiple ways. It is important to remember that this relationship is
not new because in almost all cultures, women and nature are recognised as having an intrinsic bond. This bond is found and is represented historically, culturally and mythologically. For instance, in India, women are represented often as “nature” or “Prakriti” in both imagination and practise.

Ecofeminism becomes important as it adds another dimension to this relationship between women and nature, namely, that of hierarchy and domination. By creating this interconnection, Ecofeminism highlights the close connection between the domination of women by patriarchy and the exploitation of the environment by development.

Thus, using a feminist lens, Ecofeminism highlights:

- The many ways in which both nature and women are treated by a patriarchal society
- how social norms exert unjust dominance over women and nature
- the role of development and destruction of nature and the patriarchal exploitation of women as parallel processes.

**BOX 1. Origins of Ecofeminism**

Early work on ecofeminism was devoted to documenting the relationships between women and the environment. An important ecofeminist Rosemary Ruether, insisted that if women wanted to be liberated and free they would have to think of the need to end the domination of nature. This would only happen when women and environmentalists worked together and questioned patriarchal structures and ideas.

By the late 1980s, Ecofeminism had become a popular movement largely due to the work of the feminist theorist Ynestra King who wrote an article titled “What Is Ecofeminism?” King raised questions about how belief systems allow an exploitation of the earth and linked this to the oppression of women. Through work such as King’s article, Ecofeminism came to propose an alternate world view where the earth is valued as sacred, an ecological consciousness is invoked and women and nature are understood as interconnected and entwined in myriad ways.

**8.2.2 Radical Ecofeminism and Cultural Ecofeminism**

As ecofeminism continued to develop, it also branched out and by the late 1980s two distinct schools of thought emerged: Radical ecofeminism and Cultural ecofeminism. Put simply:

- Radical ecofeminists argue that patriarchal society and ideologies of domination, equate nature and women so that both can be oppressed and exploited. This was done by describing both women and nature as “commodities”, thus enabling their exploitation and degradation.
- Cultural ecofeminists, on the other hand, stressed the association between women and the environment as being based on an inherent bond of nurturance that women and nature share. This shared experience makes women more aware and alert to the destruction and degradation of the environment.

Check Your Progress 1

1) Ecofeminism highlights the ………………………. of women by ……………………… and exploitation of environment by ………………………

2) What are the two types of Ecofeminism that developed in the 1980s?

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3) What are three points highlighted by the feminist lens used by Ecofeminism?

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8.3 ECOFEMINISM AND THE CONTRIBUTION OF VANDANA SHIVA

Ecofeminism and environmental understanding and theory, received a new lease with the work of Vandana Shiva who addressed this need to question and understand the link between environmental degradation and the oppression of women from a cultural perspective. Her main argument was for the need to have an awareness of the close bond between gender and the environment and the need to adopt an integrated and holistic view of humans and nature. In the following sections, we look at this relationship between women and the environment as discussed by Shiva in her seminal work, Staying Alive, and her other writings on women and nature.
8.3.1 The Feminine and the Masculine Principles

Historically in most cultures women are seen as an embodiment of the feminine principle and a nurturer of life. And yet almost always patriarchal ideology has rendered them invisible and marginalised.

In the Indian context, to understand the position of women and their role as conservers of culture and nature, Shiva examines the relationship between the world of women, environment and the cosmological world. She argues that the connection between women and nature is an ideological one and deeply rooted in belief systems, ideas, values and their cultural representation. The scriptures and other cultural works recognise the interplay between the ideas of creation and destruction and dynamic energy or Shakti. The manifestation of this energy is called Prakriti, the feminine and creative principle which is both animate and inanimate. This exists in conjunction with the masculine principle or Purusha. Together, they create the world (Shiva, 2007:37).

This dialectical unity and harmony between the masculine and feminine principles are the basis of ecological thought and action in India. Thus we see how in Indian culture, the feminine principle is worshipped in many ways and forms, all of which highlight the close and dynamic connection between women and nature.

Shiva defines nature as the “creative expression of the feminine principle”. This embodiment and manifestation of the feminine principle is characterised by (a) creativity, productivity (b) diversity in form and aspect (c) connectedness and inter-relationship of all beings, including man (d) continuity between the human and natural and (e) sanctity of life in nature.

Shiva argues that nature has been treated as integral and inviolable and there is no dualism between man and nature for it is Prakriti that sustains life.

8.3.2 Gender and Environment

The eco-feminist approach establishes the fact that
- women are embedded in nature
- the exploitation of nature could be seen as an exploitation of women
- development and other patriarchal forces dominate and exploit women and nature

Shiva says that cultures recognise that women and nature are powerful, they thus need to be controlled and oppressed. In doing so the patriarchal world underestimates that though they may be victims of patriarchy and exploitation, women can also be agents of change. Because of their close association with nature, women are the more affected by ecological disasters than men, and that is why we find they are everywhere on the forefront of protests against the destruction of nature.
Envisioning Environmental Sociology

Shiva also makes a distinction between an Indian and Western understanding of the above. In simple words, in the western understanding, the relation between women and environment is viewed as primarily material; in the non-western countries, this relationship is considered as ideological and real and women and nature are seen to represent the feminine principle.

**BOX 2 Women and Nature**

Prakriti creates diversity with multiple forms of life and lives in every stone or tree, pool, fruit or animal and is identified with them and by names such as Aditi and Adi Shakti.

In their daily watering and worship women renew the relationship of the home with the cosmos and with the world process. When Hindu women cover the *tulsi* or holy basil plant with a red cloth, they express feminisation of the delicate plant and the closeness of women and nature. This is also seen in how the ficus tree or *peepal* or the banyan tree are worshipped by women across India. Every culture has multiple such examples of the worshipping of nature by women.

8.3.3 Maldevelopment

As an ecofeminist, for Shiva the problem arises from the modern consumerist worldview best illustrated by the patriarchal-capitalist power structure that is central to development. She calls this the western model of “maldevelopment”.

In this model, patriarchal ideology and understanding creates a hierarchical social order across cultures and societies. This inequality is strengthened by the role of capitalism, consumerism and technological development which is aimed solely at the creation and accumulation of wealth at the lowest possible cost and serves the purposes of the owner’s of the capitalist ventures.

This association between patriarchy and capitalism is also built on the hierarchical structure that promotes and justifies the superiority of the masculine and the oppression of the feminine and thus of nature. It is such an understanding of nature as a resource which also lies at the foundation of the paradigm of maldevelopment wherein the world of women, nature and the third world are all exploited by a dominating male colonising world.

Shiva argues that maldevelopment represents how capitalism, patriarchy and exploitation are not only interrelated but also shape the living environments in many places of the world in problematic and devastating ways.

8.3.4 Nature as a Resource and the Devaluation of Women’s Work

The western understanding of the relationship between man and nature as we have seen is built on a dualism that has conveniently allowed the subjugation of nature and the environment by patriarchy and development. This has given
rise to a new worldview in which nature is (a) inert and passive (b) uniform and mechanistic (c) separable and fragmented within itself (d) separate from man and inferior (e) to be dominated and exploited by man. You can see how this is different from how nature was defined in section 8.3.1 by Shiva.

This dominant patriarchal perspective of development is rooted in the idea of capital accumulation and it renders both nature’s work and women’s work as invisible and insignificant. This leads to the devaluation and the de-recognition of nature as well as women which has led to the parallel exploitation of both.

This attitude of blindness towards the work done and invisible wealth created by nature and women, by those who have power and dominate, threatens the survival of the species and the ecological balance so necessary for a sustainable life. Shiva argues that this work and wealth in accordance with the feminine principle are significant because they are rooted in stability and sustainability. Sadly, this goes unrecognised and is destroyed and dispensed with through homogenisation and privatisation that reduces nature to raw materials and commodities and women to mere reproducers of life.

It is important for us to understand that when we thus look at nature as a “resource” to be exploited, we are creating a relationship between development and environment which is built on the idea of a “mastering of nature” by the patriarchal/masculine. Shiva says that this not only enables the exploitation of nature but also allows the “death of Prakriti” and the marginalisation, devaluation, displacement and dispensability of women (Shiva, 2007, pg. 41). What Ecofeminism is essentially arguing is that when we destroy nature we destroy women, when we violate nature, we violate women. The role of women in creating and conserving life is lost in an ecologically alienated world which is blind to the role of women and their harmony with the ecosystems. We need to recognise that the partnership between women and nature ensures sustainability and it is this critical partnership that is destroyed when the project of development becomes a patriarchal project.

Remember, maldevelopment is thus a paradigm that sees nature only as a resource and women only as reproducers of life and promotes a culture of destruction. As Shiva says, maldevelopment is not only exploitative but also “crippling” to both women and nature and eventually makes the colonising male the agent and model of development.

Women, the third world and nature become underdeveloped and change will only come when this is interrogated and an ecological way of understanding nature emerges.

8.3.5 Significance of Ecofeminism

The ecofeminists argue that marginalised communities: women, third world, peasantry, tribal etc. are all victims of maldevelopment. But at the same time,
we cannot deny that they are the repository agents of traditional knowledge. They cannot be reduced to mere victims of development by the male world. The marginalised communities are capable of action and questioning exploitation and can pose a challenge to the inequalities created by maldevelopment. What is needed is for us to change the way we think so that a new intellectual ecological paradigm arises.

The significance of ecofeminism can be captured this way: Women have first-hand knowledge of what it means to be victims of violence and exploitation and what motivates them is their direct engagement with the environment. They have traditional knowledge about nature, forests and ecosystems and are deeply rooted in environmental protection and preservation. As they are embedded in nature that they become forerunners in solving the problems related to nature.

It is no wonder, that a perspective like Ecofeminism and women’s ecological movements pose a challenge to the paradigms of patriarchy and maldevelopment.

**Check Your Progress 2**

1) What are the masculine and feminine principles called in the Indian scriptures?

2) Define maldevelopment in a few lines.

3) Describe the critical partnership that is destroyed when development becomes patriarchal.
4) State whether true or false

a) Women are embedded in nature

b) Shiva’s book is titled Staying Alive

c) Development celebrates women’s work

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**BOX 3. Maria Mies**

The role of women in the creating and conserving of life has been called a partnership and a cooperation with nature by the ecofeminist Maria Mies who has worked closely with Vandana Shiva. She argues that women use the environment sustainably rather than for capital accumulation or for profit. It is when we devalue this balanced productivity that we have ecological disruption and crisis. This also reflects the patriarchal beliefs that devalue women and therefore women are seen as incapable of producing wealth. Thus, patriarchy reduces both women and nature to a commodity.

Mies writes that women not only collected and consumed what grew in nature but they made things grow. This organic process of growth in which women and nature work in partnership with each other has created a special relationship of women with nature which is seminal to the work of “Staying Alive”

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PC: gendercampus.ch/en/blog/post/what-can-we-learn-from-ecofeminist
8.4 WHAT IS FEMINIST ENVIRONMENTALISM

Ecofeminist scholars often contend that the great plurality of beliefs within Ecofeminism is one of the movement’s greatest strengths. Although a significant theoretical development in the 1970s and 80s, many remained unsatisfied with what they felt were the limits of the Ecofeminist movement. Of particular concern was the failure of women in developed countries to acknowledge the ways in which their own lifestyles maybe leading to degradation of the environment.

An important critique and alternative perspective came in the form of Feminist Environmentalism. Important here is the work of the economist, Bina Agarwal who presents a critique and remodification of Ecofeminism and of the development paradigm.

BOX 4: Questioning Ecofeminism

Many ecofeminists were also concerned with what they saw as a heterosexual bias in the movement insofar as ecofeminism appeared to privilege the experience of heterosexual women. Overtime arguments emerged that emphasised the need to incorporate the tenets of other communities into the precepts of Ecofeminism. It was said that if Ecofeminism is committed to fighting against systems of oppression and domination, then the movement must also acknowledge the ways in which sexuality—and, more specifically, responses to that sexuality—also figure as oppressive mechanisms. In other words, understanding of women’s roles and opportunities must also include a valuing of sexual differences as well as differences in race, class, and gender.

For instance, Greta Gaard an ecofeminist, pointed to how sexuality and gender identity were used as tools of domination and oppression in societies. The procreative and male-controlled heterosexuality appears as the one and only natural sexuality, pushing women into economic dependency and compulsory motherhood and indirectly denying them their role as producers in balance and harmony with nature.

8.4.1 The Work of Bina Agarwal

As representing Feminist Environmentalism, Agarwal reiterates many of the arguments made by ecofeminists such as Shiva, particularly

- that violence against women and against nature are linked ideologically, symbolically and materially.
- that the destruction of nature meant a destruction of women’s sources for “staying alive”.
- that the western maldevelopment model and the modern science which are patriarchal projects ignore the traditional knowledge of women on nature which is particularly prevalent in the 3rd world.
that an answer lies in a continuity between a women’s movement and an environmental movement for the need for an egalitarian society

Agarwal in support of Shiva says that she takes us beyond western ecofeminists by

- exploring the links between ways of thinking about development
- examining change and the impact of these on the environment
- pointing out that development is a patriarchal project that marginalises and undervalues women and nature

Agarwal says these are critical arguments about the important connection between the domination and exploitation of nature and women by how patriarchy. This domination can be seen as ideological and rooted in a system of beliefs, ideas, values that places women and non-human world hierarchically below men and the world of culture.

8.4.2 A critique of Ecofeminism

Nevertheless for Agarwal the Ecofeminists arguments are problematic on several counts:

- Ecofeminists looks at ‘woman’ as a unitary category and fails to differentiate among women by class, race, ethnicity etc. Agarwal argues that the idea that there is a different kind of relationship between women and environment that must be viewed in terms of how the third world women are the victims of environmental degradation is ignored
- Shiva’s examples on rural women are primarily drawn from north-west India but she generalises all third-world women into one category
- Ecofeminism largely talks about the domination of women in terms of gender and patriarchal ideologies and neglects otherwise material sources of domination which includethe economic and political
- Ecofeministsoveremphasise the ideological aspects of domination of nature and women and ignores women’s material relationship with nature

8.4.3 Feminist Environmentalism

According to Agarwal, what we need is an explicit analysis of the structural causes of environmental degradation, its effects and responses to it. She thus suggests an alternative framework which has been termed as Feminist Environmentalism.

This alternative approach incorporates many elements of Ecofeminism and highlights certain issues which are missing from the Ecofeminist approach. Agarwal argues that we need to go beyond this ideological construction of gender, environment and inequality highlighted by Ecofeminism and examine the relation of women with nature more closely. We need to take into account
the material realities in which women of different classes, race respond differently to the environment and its related issues.

The central arguments of Feminist Environmentalism are as follows:

- recognise that gender relations are rooted in material reality and influence access to resources
- recognise that women are victims of domination but also repositories of traditional knowledge systems that enable them to resist degradation and exploitation
- recognise and re-examine the appropriation of resources and their unequal distribution and access in local regions
- recognise that increased degradation of resources and the environment are the result of privatisation and state encroachment or statisation
- recognise that environmental destruction is also the result of an erosion of traditional arrangements and community cooperation
- recognise that population growth impacts lives and the work of women and also impacts their health, education, and life span
- recognise that erosion of local knowledge systems by invisibilising women leads to a devaluation of indigenous knowledge systems
- recognise that gender and class impact on resource access and distribution

Feminist Environmentalism thus raises critical questions about the role of the state in environmental destruction and its failure to address gender issues as it has a reductionist attitude and commercial approach to the environment. Most development policies are extractive and destructive rather than conserving and regenerating.

It also provides a framework for bringing together people, the environment, gender, class power and economy leading to grassroot transformation.

Feminist Environmentalism thus reiterates the need to recognise the critical role of local communities as agents of change and grassroots movements like Chipko which highlight the role of women in resisting deforestation and destructive development processes and emphasise the close link between the material aspects of nature, human sustenance, and sustainable environmental protection.

**ACTIVITY 1**

You can look at examples of environmental movements led by women from across the world. Besides Chipko with which you would be familiar, you can also look at for instance the role of Brazilian women in conserving their forests.
8.4.4 Significance of Feminist Environmentalism

In conclusion, for Bina Agarwal, the Feminist Environmentalism perspective is rooted in material reality and in the relation shared by women and nature as structured by gender and class organisation. It helps recognise that environmental degradation has specific class-gender implications for livelihood and knowledge systems and helps question the development paradigm. Longstanding issues such as development, redistribution and institutional change are re-examined just as the role of the marginalised as agents is recognised. Thus, Feminist Environmentalism becomes:

- an alternative way of thinking and acting about gender and environment,
- an alternative approach that provides a new way of understanding ecological questions.

Bina Agarwal is of the view that the ones affected by environmental degradation mainly the state and the people, respond to it in a different way. The state responds to it through a piecemeal approach and is often criticised for the same as most of its policies do not benefit the people and have been a cause of resistance. They adopt a reductionist perspective, looking at the environment only in terms of development and exploitation and does not take into consideration the agency of women who have led many ecological movements other than the famous Chipko movement.

She argues that we need to recognise the role of women’s participation in solving environmental problems as this would then give a new understanding to the issue of development and degradation.

If Ecofeminism raises critical questions and provides us with a panoramic view that helps us understand the relation of gender environment and development culturally, Feminist Environmentalism engages with differentiations across class, caste, ethnicity etc, to have a holistic understanding of the environmental problems and to create environmental consciousness and an ecological balance, ideas that we discussed in section 8.2 and 8.3.

Check Your Progress 3

1) Does Bina Agarwal support the ideas presented by Ecofeminism? Write your answer in 3 points

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- ........................................................................................................................................
- ........................................................................................................................................
2) State any four central arguments of the Feminist Environmentalism perspective.

8.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have looked at some of the critical debates on the relationship between gender, environment, development and patriarchy. We looked specifically at the role of maldevelopment and the exploitation of women and nature with the help of the work of Vandana Shiva and Ecofeminism.

We then examined the critical perspective of Feminist Environmentalism and the work of Bina Agarwal that emphasised the need to broaden our understanding of the material realities and exploitative and destructive role of development on the lives of women.

The unit has also highlighted how the work of the Ecofeminist raises thought provoking questions about environmental issues and the ecological crisis. It has also addressed the issue of how the work of women and the environment are highly devalued and rendered as only a resource or entirely invisible.

You will also have learnt with the help of Feminist Environmentalism that it is not only important to take into consideration the world view of women for our understanding of nature but also critically examine the role of inequalities and intersectional differentiation so as to gain a holistic understanding of the relationship between gender, environment and patriarchy.

8.6 REFERENCES


Check Your Progress 1

1) domination of women by patriarchy and the exploitation of the environment by development

2) radical ecofeminism and cultural ecofeminism.

3) Using a feminist lens, Ecofeminism highlights:
   - the many ways in which both nature and women are treated by a patriarchal society
   - how social norms exert unjust dominance over women and nature
   - the role of development and destruction of nature and the patriarchal exploitation of women as parallel processes.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Prakriti and Purusha

2) When patriarchal ideology creates a hierarchical social order and this inequality is strengthened by the role of capitalism, consumerism and technological development that promotes and justifies the superiority of the masculine and the oppression of the feminine and thus of nature, we have maldevelopment.

   In other words, maldevelopment represents how capitalism, patriarchy and exploitation are not only interrelated but also shape the living environments and impact on women in many parts of the world in problematic and devastating ways.

3) In an ecologically alienated world which is blind to the role of women and their harmony with the ecosystems we need to recognise that the partnership between women and nature ensures sustainability. It is this critical partnership that is destroyed when the project of development becomes a patriarchal project aimed at exploitation and destruction of the environment and women.

4) State whether true or false
   a) True
   b) True
   c) False

Check Your Progress 3

1) Yes, Agarwal supports many Ecofeminist arguments such as violence against women and against nature are linked ideologically, symbolically and materially; that the destruction of nature meant a destruction of
women; that the western maldevelopment model and the modern science which are patriarchal projects ignore the traditional knowledge of women on nature which is particularly prevalent in the 3rd world.

2) Four central arguments of Feminist Environmentalism are:

- Recognise that increased degradation of resources and the environment are the result of privatisation and state encroachment or statisation
- Recognise that environmental destruction is also the result of an erosion of traditional arrangements and community cooperation
- Recognise that population growth impacts lives and the work of women and also impacts their health, education, and life span
- Recognise that erosion of local knowledge systems by invisibilising women leads to a devaluation of indigenous knowledge systems