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Module Structure

Environment, Ecology and Women: Ecofeminism	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Emergence of ecofeminism. 2. Nature of ecofeminism, and ecofeminist ethics. 3. Different strands of ecofeminism – liberal, radical and, socialist. 4. Ecofeminism in India 5. Conclusion.
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Description of the Module

Items	Description of the Module
Subject Name	Sociology
Paper Name	Sociology of Gender
Module Name/Title	Environment, Ecology and Women: Ecofeminism
Module Id	

Pre Requisites	
Objectives	<p>To make students aware of the interconnection between capitalism, patriarchy and the linkages between women and nature.</p> <p>To make students sensitive to the distinct perspectives within ecofeminism.</p>
Key words	Eco Feminism, Ecology, Ethics, Nature



Environment, Ecology and Women: Ecofeminism

Introduction

The actions of women and men dedicated to the continuation of life on earth, like the Green Belt movement in Kenya where women gathered to plant trees and regenerate the degraded lands, the Chipko movement in India where local villagers protected their forests from the loggers, Canadian women protesting against Uranium processing units near their towns or housewives in the U.S. cleaning up hazardous waste sites, are all termed as ‘ecofeminist’ movements. These actions highlight the close relation between women, nature and the continuation of life on earth. They underline the contradiction between production and reproduction and try to reverse the adverse effects of production on biological as well as social reproduction. In doing so, Ecofeminism highlights the connections between capitalism, patriarchy and the linkages between women and nature.

This unit aims to explain this above association. It begins by sketching out the emergence of ecofeminism. Then it moves on to explain the nature of ecofeminism, and ecofeminist ethics. It proceeds to discuss the different strands of ecofeminism – liberal, radical and, socialist. It discusses ecofeminism in India focussing on the work of Vandana Shiva as well as the alternative conceptualisation to Ecofeminism as put forward by Bina Agarwal. The unit then, after explaining the critiques to the ecofeminist perspectives, ultimately draws a conclusion.

Emergence of Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s with the increasing consciousness of the connections between women and nature. Movements all over the world that are dedicated to the continuation of life on earth, like the Chipko movement in India or Green Belt movement in Kenya, are all termed as “ecofeminist” movements. These movements point to the connections between women and nature.

Ecofeminism emerged in the West as a product of the peace, feminist and, ecology movements of the late 1970s and the early 1980s. The term “Ecofeminism” was coined by the French writer Francoise d’Eaubonne in 1974. It was further developed by Ynestra King in

about 1976 and became a movement in 1980, with the organization, in the same year, of the first ecofeminist conference - “Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 80s”, at Amherst, Massachusetts, US (Spretnak 1990).

According to ecofeminist Ynestra King: “Ecofeminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice...(it sees) the devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors, and the threat of nuclear annihilation by the military warriors as feminist concerns. It is the same masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies and our own sexuality and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its way”(King 1983).

Whenever women protested against ecological destruction, threat of atomic destruction of life on earth, new developments in biotechnology, genetic engineering and, reproductive technology, they discovered the connections between patriarchal domination and violence against women, the colonized non-western, non-White peoples and, nature. It led to the realization that the liberation of women cannot be achieved in isolation from the larger struggle for preserving nature and life on earth. (Rao 2012).

Ecofeminism, includes those perspectives that are usually unrecognized in the mainstream, focussing on the aspect of exploitation of women and nature through male domination.

Nature of Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is based on certain fundamental claims that point to the existence of important connections between the oppression of women and oppression of nature. It is essential to understand the nature of these connections in order to understand the oppression of women and nature, and finally, every feminist theory must include an ecological perspective and vice versa (Warren 1987).

Ecofeminism can be defined as a “value system, a social movement, and a practice... (which) also offers a political analysis that explores the links between androcentrism and environmental destruction. It is an “awareness” that begins with the realization that the exploitation of nature is intimately linked to Western Man’s attitude toward women and tribal cultures...” (Birkeland 1993:18).

For ecofeminists, therefore, the domination of women and nature is basically rooted in ideology. In order to overcome this, one needs to reconstruct and reconceptualize the underlying patriarchal values and structural relations of one's culture and promote equality, non-violence, non-hierarchical forms of organization to bring about new social forms. According to the ecofeminists, one also needs to realize the inter-connectedness of all life processes and hence revere nature and all life forms. Humans should not try to control nature, but work along with it and must try to move beyond power-based relationships. This would mean integrating the dualisms on the polarization of the male and the female in one's conception of reality. Importance should also be given, the ecofeminists argue, to the process rather than only to the goal. The personal is political, and hence the female private sphere is just as important and applicable to the male public sphere. One needs to change the patriarchal nature of the system by withdrawing power and energy from patriarchy. (Gaard 1993: 16-20).

Ecofeminist Ethics

Many ecofeminists advocate some form of an environmental ethic that deals with the twin oppressions of the domination of women and nature through an ethic of care and nurture that arises out of women's culturally constructed experiences. As philosopher Karen Warren conceptualizes it; "An ecofeminist ethic is both a critique of male domination of both women and nature and an attempt to frame an ethic free of male-gender bias about women and nature. It not only recognizes the multiple voices of women, located differently by race, class, age, [and] ethnic considerations, it centralizes those voices. Ecofeminism builds on the multiple perspectives of those whose perspectives are typically omitted or undervalued in dominant discourses, for example Chipko women, in developing a global perspective on the role of male domination in and the exploitation of women and nature. An ecofeminist perspective is thereby . . . structurally pluralistic, inclusivist, and contextualist, emphasizing through concrete example the crucial role context plays in understanding sexist and naturist practice." (1988:151).

Merchant (2005:196) explains about, a partnership ethic that treats humans as equals in personal, household, and political relations and humans as equal partners with (rather than controlled by or dominant over) nonhuman nature. Just as human partners, regardless of sex, race, or class must give each other space, time and, care, allowing each other to grow and develop individually within supportive non-dominating relationships, so humans must give

nonhuman nature space, time, and care, allowing it to reproduce, evolve and, respond to human actions.

Perspectives of Ecofeminism

The different configurations of ecofeminism reflect the different ways of analyzing the connections between women and nature, as well as the differences in the nature of women's oppression and solutions to them. (Rao 2012).

(a) Liberal

Liberal feminism formed a prominent part of the history of feminism since its beginnings in the seventeenth century until the 1960s. When each individual maximizes her/his own productive potential an optimal society can be made. Thus what is good for each individual is good for society as a whole. Historically, liberal feminists have argued that women do not differ from men as rational agents and that exclusion from educational and economic opportunities have prevented them from realizing their own potential for creativity in all spheres of human life. (Merchant, 2005:200).

Twentieth-century liberal feminism was inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and by Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). De Beauvoir argued that women and men were biologically different, but that women could transcend their biology, freeing themselves from their destiny as biological reproducers to assume masculine values. Friedan challenged the "I'm just a housewife" mystique resulting from post-World War II production forces that made way for soldiers to reassume jobs in the public sphere, pushing the "reserve army" of women labourers back into the private sphere of the home. The liberal phase of the women's movement that exploded in the 1960s demanded equity for women in the workplace and in education as the means of bringing about a fulfilling life. Simultaneously, Rachel Carson made the question of life on earth a public issue. Her *Silent Spring* (1962) focused attention on the death-producing effects of chemical insecticides accumulating in the soil and tissues of living organisms—deadly elixirs that bombarded human and nonhuman beings from the moment of conception until the moment of death. (Merchant, 2005:200).

For liberal ecofeminists (as for liberalism generally), environmental problems result from the overly rapid development of natural resources and the failure to regulate pesticides and other environmental pollutants. Given equal educational opportunities to become scientists, natural resource managers, regulators, lawyers and, legislators, women, like men, can contribute to the improvement of the environment, the conservation of natural resources, and the higher quality of human life. Women, therefore, can transcend the social stigma of their biology and join men in the cultural project of environmental conservation. (Merchant, 2005:200-201).

(b) Radical – Cultural

Cultural feminism developed in the late 1960s and 1970s. Cultural ecofeminism is a response to the perception that women and nature have been mutually associated and devalued in western culture. Sherry Ortner's 1974 article, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" posed the problem that motivates many ecofeminists. Ortner argued that, cross-culturally and historically women, as opposed to men, have been seen as closer to nature because of their physiology, social roles and, psychology. Physiologically, women bring forth life from their bodies, undergoing the pleasures, pain, and, stigmas attached to, menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and, nursing, while men's physiology leaves them freer to travel, hunt, conduct warfare and, engage in public affairs. Socially, childrearing and domestic caretaking have kept married women close to the hearth and out of the workplace. Psychologically, women have been have assigned greater emotional capacities with greater ties to the particular, personal and, present than men who are viewed as more rational and objective with a greater capacity for abstract thinking. (Merchant, 2005:201-202).

To cultural ecofeminists, the way out of this dilemma is to elevate and liberate women and nature through direct political action. Many cultural feminists celebrate an era in prehistory when nature was symbolized by pregnant female figures, trees, butterflies, and snakes and in which women were held in high esteem as bringers forth of life. An emerging patriarchal culture, however, dethroned the mother goddesses and replaced them with male gods to whom the female deities became subservient. The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century further degraded nature by replacing Renaissance organicism and a nurturing earth with the metaphor of a machine to be controlled and repaired from the outside. Their ontology and epistemology are viewed by cultural feminists as deeply masculinist and exploitative of a nature historically depicted in the female gender. The earth is dominated by

male-developed and male-controlled technology, science and, industry. (Merchant, 2005:202).

Often stemming from an anti-science, anti-technology standpoint, cultural ecofeminism celebrates the relationship between women and nature through the revival of ancient rituals centred on goddess worship, the moon, animals and, the female reproductive system. A vision in which nature is held in esteem as mother and goddess is a source of inspiration and empowerment for many ecofeminists. Goddess worship and rituals centred around the lunar and female menstrual cycles, lectures, concerts, art exhibitions, street and theatre productions, and direct political action are all examples of the re-visioning of nature and women as powerful forces. Cultural ecofeminist philosophy embraces intuition, an ethic of caring and, web-like human-nature relationships. Women's biology and nature are celebrated as sources of female power. (Merchant, 2005:202).

(c) Socialist / Marxist

Socialist ecofeminism is a feminist transformation of socialist ecology that makes the category of reproduction, rather than production, central to the concept of a just, sustainable world. Like Marxist feminism, it assumes that nonhuman nature is the material basis of all of life and that food, clothing, shelter and, energy are essential to the maintenance of human life. Nature and human nature are socially and historically constructed over time and transformed through human praxis. Nature is an active subject, not a passive object to be dominated, and humans must develop sustainable relations with it. It goes beyond cultural ecofeminism in offering a critique of capitalist patriarchy that focuses on the dialectical relationships between production and reproduction and, between production and ecology. (Merchant, 2005:208).

Socialist Ecofeminism and Production:

As producers and reproducers of life, women in tribal and traditional cultures over the centuries have had highly significant interactions with the environment. Women's intimate knowledge of nature has helped to sustain life in every global human habitat.

Under capitalism, as sociologist Abby Peterson (1984:6) points out, men bear the responsibility for and dominate the production of exchange commodities, while women bear the responsibility for reproducing the workforce and social relations. "Women's responsibility for reproduction includes both the biological reproduction of the species

(intergenerational reproduction) and the intra-generational reproduction of the work force through unpaid labour in the home. Here too is included the reproduction of social relations—socialization.” Under industrial capitalism, reproduction is subordinate to production.

Socialist Ecofeminism and Reproduction:

Socialist ecofeminism focuses on the reproduction of life itself. In nature, life is transmitted through the biological reproduction of species in the local ecosystem. Lack of proper food, water, soil chemicals, atmospheric gases, adverse weather, disease, and competition by other species can disrupt the survival of offspring to reproductive age. For humans, reproduction is both biological and social. First, enough children must survive to reproductive age to reproduce the community over time; too many put pressure on the particular mode of production, affecting the local ecology. Second, by interacting with external nature, adults must produce enough food, clothing, shelter, and fuel on a daily basis to maintain their own subsistence and sustain the quality of their ecological homes. Both the intergenerational biological reproduction of humans and other species and the intra-generational reproduction of daily life are essential to continuing life over time. Sustainability is the maintenance of an ecological-productive-reproductive balance between humans and nature—the perpetuation of the quality of all life. (Merchant, 2005:210-211).

Feminists debate that women’s bodies are being turned into production machines, into sites of experiments with vested interests in order to test birth control techniques and devices, contraceptives, (even those that are declared as unsafe and banned in Western countries), as well as for *in vitro* fertilization experiments and so on. Reproductive freedom means freedom of choice—freedom to have or not to have children in a society that both needs them and provides for their needs.

Like cultural ecofeminism, socialist ecofeminism protests chemical assaults on women’s reproductive health, but puts them in the broader context of the relations between reproduction and production. It can thus support point of production actions such as the Chipko and Greenbelt movements in the Third World, protests by Native American women over cancer-causing radioactive uranium mining on reservations, and protests by environmental justice advocates over toxic dumps in urban neighbourhoods. (Merchant, 2005:212).

Ecofeminism in India - Vandana Shiva

Vandana Shiva is one of the most prominent ecofeminists in India. Her work can be categorized as belonging to the radical strand of ecofeminism. However, her critique of the entire development model and its effects on the environment places her more on the side of the socialist framework.

Vandana Shiva (1988) analyzes modern science and technology as a western, patriarchal and colonial project, which is inherently violent and perpetuates this violence against women and nature. Pursuing this model of development has meant a shift away from traditional Indian philosophy, which sees *prakriti* as a living and creative process, the “feminine principle”, from which all life arises. Under the garb of development, nature has been exploited mercilessly and the feminine principle was no longer associated with activity, creativity and sanctity of life, but was considered passive and as a “resource”. This has led to marginalization, devaluation, displacement and ultimately the dispensability of women. Women’s special knowledge of nature and their dependence on it for “staying alive”, were systematically marginalized under the onslaught of modern science. Shiva, however, notes that Third World women are not simply victims of the development process, but also possess the power for change. She points to the experiences of women in the Chipko movement of the 1970s in the Garhwal Himalayas – where women struggled for the protection and regeneration of the forests. (Rao, 2012:129)

Further, she argues, along with Maria Mies that whenever women have protested against ecological destruction or nuclear annihilation, they were “aware of the connections between patriarchal violence against women, other people and nature” (Mies 1993:14). These movements were informed by the ecofeminist principles of connectedness, wholeness, interdependence and spirituality, in opposition to capitalist patriarchal science that is engaged in disconnecting and dissecting. It is argued that the ecofeminist position, i.e., a subsistence perspective, is rooted in the material base of everyday subsistence production of women all over the world. This struggle of women and men to conserve their subsistence base can become the common ground for women’s liberation and preservation of life on earth.

However, some scholars have highlighted the problems with Vandana Shiva’s arguments. Gabriel Dietrich (1990, 1992) points out that Shiva seems to presuppose a society that is democratically organized, where people own sufficient land to survive on its produce. She

seems to treat caste factors and political options as non-existent and neglects the realities of hierarchies, subordination, patriarchy and violence within traditional tribal and peasant communities. Meera Nanda (1991) contends that, Shiva has tried to portray the “West” as inherently vicious and the “Third World” as fundamentally virtuous. She attributes the degradation of nature and the subordination of women mainly to the country’s colonial history and the imposition of a western model of development. She, however, ignores the pre-existing inequalities of caste, class, power, privilege and property relations that predate colonialism. In advocating the ecofeminist principles of women’s special relationship with nature, connectedness, wholeness and so on, Shiva and Mies ignore the question of who acquires knowledge, what knowledge and how. (Rao, 2012:129-130).

Alternative Conceptualisations - Bina Agarwal

Bina Agarwal’s “feminist environmental” perspective is rooted in material reality and sees the relation between women and nature as structured by gender and class (caste/race) organization of production, reproduction and, distribution. Bina Agarwal (1992) explains that, women’s relation to the environment is socially and historically variable. Women, particularly in poor rural households, are both victims of environmental degradation as well as active agents in movements for the protection and regeneration of the environment. They act in both positive and negative ways with the environment. The unquestioning acceptance of woman-nature link and the idea that, since women are most severely affected by environmental degradation, they have “naturally” positive attitudes towards environmental conservation is, therefore, unacceptable.

The forests and village commons provide a wide range of essential items such as food, fuel, fodder, manure, building material, medicinal herbs, resin, gum, honey and so on, for tribal and rural households in India. The growing degradation of natural resources, both qualitatively and quantitatively, the increasing appropriation by the state and by private individuals, as well as the decline in communally-owned property, have been primarily for the increased class-gender effect of environmental degradation. The decline in “community resource management systems, the increase in population and the mechanization of agriculture, resulting in the erosion of local knowledge systems, have aggravated the class-gender implications of the environmental degradation” (Agarwal 1992).

Disappearing forests, village commons, shortage of drinking water and so on, have increased women's work as now they have to spend more time and walk longer distances to get fuel, fodder, food and, water. Drying up or pollution of wells accessible to lower-caste women have meant an increased dependence on upper-caste women to dispense water to them. The degradation of forests and the historical and ongoing malpractices and state policies and increasing privatization have restricted the access of villagers to forests and village commons. It has reduced the number of items that women could gather from forests and village commons that has directly resulted in reduced incomes. The extra time spent in gathering has reduced the time available to women for crop production. The little women earn through selling firewood is also reduced due to deforestation. This has a direct impact on the diets of poor households. The decline in the availability of fruits, berries and so on, as well as firewood has forced people of poor households to shift to less nutritious food and eat half-cooked meals or even reduce the number of meals eaten per day. The existing gender biases within the family lead to women and female children getting secondary treatment with regard to food and health care. (Rao, 2012:132).

The displacement of people due to large dams or large-scale deforestation, etc., has led to the disruption of social support networks within and between villages. Women, particularly of poor, rural households, who depend largely on such networks for economic and social support, are adversely affected. (Sharma 1980). It has also eroded a whole way of life and has resulted in alienation and helplessness (Fernandes-Menon 1987). The dominant forms of development have led to a devaluation and marginalization of women's indigenous knowledge and skills that they have acquired through their everyday interaction with nature. Simultaneously, they are not trained to use the new technologies and are excluded from the planning process. With degradation and privatization of natural resources, the material base of women's knowledge is declining.

Critiques

Various feminist scholars, such as Cecile Jackson (1993), Janet Biehl (1991), Meera Nanda (1991) and Bina Agarwal (1992) have pointed out, this ecofeminist perspective is "ethnocentric, essentialist, blind to class, ethnicity and other differentiating cleavages, ahistorical and neglects the material sphere" (Jackson 1993: 398). (Rao, 2012:128).

Ecofeminist literature portrays the historical exploitation and domination of women and nature as going hand in hand, and both are seen as victims of development. It is taken as self-evident that any harm to nature harms women equally, since women are seen as closer to nature than men. None of the ecofeminist literature attempts to establish this linkage through concrete evidence or strong argument. It is very anecdotal and takes its position as self-evident. It locates the domination of women and nature mainly in ideology, thereby neglecting the “interrelated material sources of dominance based on economic advantage and political power” (Agarwal 1992: 122) as well as the gender division of labour and distribution of opportunity. These ecofeminist images of women, in fact “retain the patriarchal stereotypes of what men expect women to be. “(They)...freeze women as merely caring and nurturing beings instead of expanding the full range of women’s human potentialities and abilities” (Biehl 1991:15). “The use of metaphors of women as ‘nurturing’ – like the earth, and of the earth as female abound are regressive rather than liberating women” (Biehl 1991:17-19). They only reinforce stereotypes.

What these arguments seem to overlook is that concepts of nature, culture and, gender are “historically and socially constructed and vary across and within cultures and time periods” (Agarwal 1992:123). This essentialism presents women as a homogeneous category, both within countries and across nations. It “fails to differentiate among women by class, race, ethnicity and so on” (Agarwal 1992:122).

Ecofeminist essentialism fails to put forward any account of historical change in society. Critics like Susan Prentice (1998) argue that emphasizing the special relationship of women with nature and politics imply that what men do to the earth is bad, unlike women, thereby ignoring the fact that men too can develop an ethic of caring for nature. It also fails to analyse capitalism and its domination of nature. Hence, it cannot develop an effective strategy for change, since it ends in polarizing the worlds of men and women while essentializing the two categories. Historically, women’s intimate knowledge of nature has helped to sustain life. With colonial intervention and capitalist development, production in traditional societies was disrupted.

Conclusion

Issues of environment and ecology entered the mainstream discourse on development and social movements only after the Conference on Environment and Development, at Stockholm in 1972. It highlighted the differential rates of consumption of natural resources by the developed and Third World countries, i.e., issues of global political economy.

Protest movements against environmental destruction and struggles for survival highlight the fact that caste, class and gender issues are deeply enmeshed in it. It is the poor, lower class and lower caste, and within them, the peasant and tribal women, who are worst, affected and hence, they are the most active in the protests. Women, therefore, cannot be homogenized into the category (as the ecofeminists tend to do), either within the country or across the globe. Women as women have a special relationship with nature as ecofeminists argue, is proved wrong when one analyses the various protest movements. Women's interaction with nature and their responses to environmental degradation must be analysed and located within the material reality of gender, caste class and race based division of labour, property and power. Women are victims of environmental degradation as well as active agents in the regeneration and protection of the environment. The adverse class-gender effects of these processes are reflected in the erosion of indigenous knowledge systems and livelihood strategies on which poor, rural women depend. (Rao, 2012:138).

The nature and impact of the processes of environmental degradation and the appropriation of natural resources by a small minority are based in the dominant ideas about development, gender division of labour, as well as on differentials of property, power and, so on. Hence, there is growing opposition to such inequality and environmental degradation, as reflected in widespread grassroots resistance movements. Environment and gender issues need to be taken together. (Rao, 2012:138-139).