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Founder Editor, CIJE
(25.12.1932 - 09.01.2019)

Article

Received on 08.04.2022

Reviewed on 13.04.2022

Accepted on 17.04.2022

Women and Nature: A Powerful Moral Connection

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Keywords *Eco-feminism, sacred feminine, women, nature, moral connection etc.*

Abstract

The feminine aspect is deeply connected to life. Planet earth is hospitable to life, and anything that is alive needs to be nurtured and cared for in order to survive and thrive. We call our planetary home 'Mother Earth' because nurture, care, empathy, love and compassion are inherent qualities of the feminine. What can be more sacred than that which has the power to make life possible? And what can be more gratifying than something that can promote peace, contentment and co-operation. We all have 'sacred feminine' i.e immense creative power and potential that is super active in some us and moderately active and perhaps dormant in most-of us. That is why we need to, collectively and individually, reclaim the feminine aspect in all of us, regardless of our gender. Women and nature are linked in 'morally significant ways' that means the oppressed are in solidarity with each other. It's often a cultural myth that women are some how closer to nature than men. However, being relegated to the realm of nature and care taking work does give them an understanding of the ways in which we are all connected to nature. Women understand our material dependence on nature- and the power of nature. The work women are made to do creates sensitivities and empathy. As a result there is a moral knowledge present for women, not because of being in a female body, but because of what female bodies are made to do. The present paper discusses in detail about the powerful moral connection, women and nature share and women leading the change for forest protection.

Introduction

The association between women and nature is a long recognized means by which societies have sought to understand an unpredictable and powerful earth. In Greek mythology, the Goddess Gaia is described as the personification of Earth. In Hindu mythology, She is known as Bhumi or Prithvi.

Women, like the Earth, are reproductive, harboring the ability to give life. In many societies, a woman's domain and work is classified to be within the domestic endeavors as travelling to collect fodder, water or weaving baskets, looking after animals. With this understanding of a feminine nature and women's aptness for the natural world, the destructions, domination and management of Earth is often deeply tied to the marginalization and subordination of women. The issue of critical linkage between gender and environment started an academic, Political and philosophical movement known as 'Eco feminism' in the mid 1970s. Environmental disasters were painful results of deadly events spawned by science and the cost of growth paid by communities and their environment. Women were often the first to speak out about the damage. "These women conceptualized the earth as an oppressed being, which was exploited for the economic and political gain of others. They saw similarities in men's treatment of the earth and their treatment of women" (Harkness). The seeds of eco feminism were planted and have been flourishing ever since, coming to encompass a wide and multifarious range of issues that speak to not just the oppression of women but others marginalized by deeply ingrained social, economic and cultural values. According to the world bank in 1991,"women play an essential role in the management of natural resources, including soil, water, forests and energy.... And often have a profound traditional and contemporary knowledge of the natural world around them".

Women and Ecofeminism

Women are the worst affected by environmental degradation. When we deal with the challenges of water, pollution and waste, the issues of women must be taken into account - for me, that is ecofeminism."

- Sunita Narain (Environmentalist)

Ecofeminism believes environmental degradation and the domination of women are both due to patriarchy and capitalism. This belief argues that conditions in the society and the environment can be improved only by changing our value systems. Ecofeminism highlights values like cooperation, non-violence, caring and sustainability over aggression, might and domination

There are three schools of ecofeminism thought-

1. **Cultural Feminism** – which believes that women, based on their biological powers of procreation and caring, have a special and deeper relationship with nature.
2. **Social ecofeminism** - believes women's links with nature are shaped entirely by social and material factors like education and economic status.
3. **Socialist ecofeminism** - state that the connections between women and nature are based on both biological factors and social facts.

Examples of Ecofeminist endeavors

- a. The famed 1973 chipko movement in Uttarakhand, India, when rural women protected forests from loggers, often by embracing the trees.
- b. In 1977, women united in Kenya to combat desertification by planting millions of trees, creating the Green belt Movement.
- c. In the 1980, women in Harlem united to turn vacant lots into community gardens. This urban greening model spread to other American locations.
- d. In 1994 women in Detroit developed city gardens and called themselves “the Gardening Angels.”

Significance of ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is the field that highlighted the gender dimension to nature, which is crucial. It is a path breaking idea in terms of how it makes people see important linkages between women and nature.

The feminist Scholar, Bina Agarwal, has written on how women across much of South Asia don't have property rights. They often don't have individual property rights, which makes them extremely dependent on men. But crucially, they also lack collective rights – to ponds, commons and forests. Yet, this can be very important in creating Co-operation and renewing the cycles of life there. Pollution, environmental contamination, pesticides

use in agriculture, toxic waste removal etc. raise questions of who exactly faces more physical and psychological long term damage from these decisions. While no one can escape a changing global climate, women are disproportionately affected by the effects of this phenomenon. In India and Africa, since most men travel to work in the city, rural women are forced to grapple with and manage the effects of climate change first hand in their day to day tasks. The arduous undertaking of travelling to obtain clean water is one major way village women bear the brunt of a changing climate.

The highest concentration of a potentially harmful substance in our environment ends up being concentrated in the female body, within the child rearing relationships more specifically. As a movement, ecofeminism does not merely seek to identify and articulate these issues. It is also a call to action. As Mies describes, "whenever women acted against ecological destruction and/or the threat of atomic annihilation, they immediately became aware of the connections between patriarchal violence against women, other people and nature, and that ; In defying this patriarchy we are loyal to future generations and to life and this planet itself" (Mies). Women who are at risk see environmental injustices first hand every day and ultimately have more to lose.

Ecofeminism asks us to re-evaluate, to look at issues we have examined for decades, through a different lens. It challenges us to reconceptualize our thinking about an oppressed earth by looking closely at who and what creates and perpetuates harmful mores and whose bodies suffer the most at the hands of these perpetrators. In turn, it also seeks to empower and mobilize those who have been mistreated by calling attention to their potential power as leaders in ameliorating these concerns.

Ecofeminism plays a phenomenal role in awakening a deeper consciousness. For instance, in the 1980s, fisherfolks' movements across India raised the problem of trawlers fishing too close to the coast, devastating the marine ecology which small fisherfolk actually protect. But another issue that came up alongside was that their goods were sold by women. However, fisher women were not allowed to board state transport buses as people objected. Therefore, they had to walk miles each day. It took organized protests by women before many states rethought. Finally, the authorities came up with new ways to let the fisherwomen, ride state buses. It is extremely important therefore to understand that production, gender, dignity and nature always go together.

Women Leading the Change

- I. SAALUMARADA THIMMAKKA a 100 year plus environmentalist, began planting banyan trees with her husband, both turning their sadness at not having children into care for nature instead. Thimmakka grew, nurtured and guarded over 8,000 trees. She, now called 'Saalumarada' or 'rows of trees', was awarded the Padma Shri in 2019.
- II. JANE GOODALL is an iconic anthropologist who has studied chimpanzees and ecology for over six decades. Starting in the 1960s, in 1977, she founded the Jane Goodall Institute which works strenuously to protect threatened Chimpanzee habitats. In 1995, she was made a commander of the British Empire.
- III. ALETA BAUN, Mollo tribal in the island of Timor, was raised to respect nature as a sacred, life- giving shrine. In the 1980s Aleta organized villagers to oppose the ecological destruction to cut marble from the mountains in the Mollo areas. She persevered her weaving occupation involving hundreds of women sitting on the marble rocks, weaving their traditional cloth. By 2010, mining at these sites was stopped.
- IV. Russian Scientists OLGA SPERANSKAYA'S environmental activism began in the 1990s, after Soviet Union split up, learning thousands of tons of harmful chemicals distressed across Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and central Asia, percolating into groundwater, poisoning the environment and harming ecosystems. Olga helped civil society networks push governments to tackle hazardous chemical pollution. For her activism empowering over 70 movements she received the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2009 and is a UN Environment Champion of the Earth.
- V. TULASI GOWDA from Karnataka, began planting trees from her childhood onwards studying their needs and habitats. She has planted over 1,00,000 saplings and helps the local forest department grow trees since decades. She is now called an 'encyclopedia of forest knowledge'. For her extraordinary contribution towards conserving and rejuvenating the environment, she has been honoured with a Padma Shri in 2020.

Conclusion

The feminine aspect is deeply connected to life. It is sacred because it has the power to make life possible. To acknowledge and reawaken the sacred feminine is to reconnect to life and living, and this is with reference to not just human beings but all species, the planet and everything on it. Once this sacred feminine Principle is acknowledged and respected in all, and its potential is brought to the fore in our daily actions, as it has been in the lives of the numerous ecological and creative individuals, then we will all do Mother Earth proud. Reclaiming our sacred feminine will ensure that the Earth and its beings not only survive but thrive. The sense of connections to nature must ground any ethical sensibility and moral knowledge. Without the connection, to nature, there can't be any energy, care, inspiration. We have to foster the appreciation of life forms we cultivate and nurture.

Women hold the key to manage climate change as the education of girls could be a breakthrough in protecting the world from more climate change. Project Drawdown, helmed by environmentalist Paul Hawken, quotes estimates that by investing in girls' education, the world could reduce up to 51.48 giga tons of emissions by 2050. This improvement can come from better family planning and women- who are, as project Drawdown says, 'more effective stewards of food, soil, trees and water'- being involved meaningfully in decisions on optimally using nature's resources, and rejuvenating these.

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