



Self and Identity: An Eco-feministic Viewpoint

Dr. Vandna Kaul

Assistant Professor, Institute of Integrated and Honors Studies, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra, Haryana
Vandnakaul01@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

The present paper attempts to analyse the related notions of the female self and identity, articulated in reaction and in opposition to the dominant conception of the male self within patriarchal society from an eco-feministic perspective. The relation between nature and feminine self is supposed to be binary with culture and the masculine self respectively. Eco-feminism reveals its sensitivity towards environment by advocating a harmonious relationship between human beings and environment and voicing concerns about disasters, dominations, displacements and divisiveness between these binaries. Its basic idea is that a patriarchal society will exploit its resources without regard to long term consequences as a direct result of the attitudes fostered in a hierarchical patriarchal society. It is not to mention that masculine terms are privileged over the feminine in our society. The paper is a discussion about the need for that conscious mindset and that self awareness which assist in eradicating the gap between the male and female self, and to appraise the power of unlimited universe which keeps and nurtures us like a mother. Women's closeness with nature does not make her weak and secondary but brings her in harmonious relation with man and our stereotyped culture with a mutual understanding because man and culture are also the product of nature.

Keywords: nature, female, feminine, masculine, existence, hierarchy, identity

From time immemorial a woman is identified with her emotional quotient of love, care and nurturing. She is defined by her body and emotions more than her mind and intellect. Though the concept of female self is socio-cultural but so is the male self. A woman faces discrimination on the basis of gender at the hands of our patriarchal society and that puts a question mark on her existence and identity. She is also compared with mother nature because of the similarity in their essential nature of being the way they are. Women have many things in common with nature like, sharing, caring, loving, healing, sympathizing and nurturing apart from reproducing and life giving.

In 1974, an influential essay by Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" sought to explain in terms of structuralist anthropology the presence, in diverse cultures, of the idea that women were subordinate to men. The underlying idea, Ortner discovers, is that woman is closer to nature. This helps to explain the key insight of eco-feminism that as a society we accept the general logic of human domination of nature. Beliefs that legitimate the oppression of women also legitimate environmental degradation.

Feminist environmental justice campaigners, such as Vandana Shiva, point out that women and children are disproportionately vulnerable to environmental hazards. Picking up on the life-giving powers of women and nature, eco-feminists set out to give content to how we can create an understanding of ourselves as continuous with nature. Women are worshipped in the form of Goddesses and so is the case with nature. This aspect of spirituality and the feminine offers a unique understanding of human connection with the natural world. "Such a positive appraisal of the feminine is often found in literature on Goddess spirituality, which represents one strand within cultural eco-feminist thought" (Marincowitz 43). The positive valuation of the female principle instills respect and brings about a relation of care towards nature and thus transforming our treatment of the natural environment.

Ancient societies worshipped the Goddess of nature and spirituality as the giver of life and creator of us all and fascinatingly structured a more peaceful and just society for which we now strive for. They were the societies that had what we call today an ecological consciousness: the awareness that the earth must be treated with reverence and respect.

And this reverence . . . was rooted in a social structure where women and feminine values such as caring, compassion and non-violence were not subordinate to men and . . . , the life giving powers incarnated in women's bodies were given the highest social value. (Eisler 23-24)

Some eco-feminists argue that the identification of women with nature should now be seen as a source of strength. Others, such as Janet Biehl, are wary of any strategy that, by accepting women as essentially less estranged from nature than men, and problematising rationality too prohibitively risks leading women back into the old cultural spaces.

Theories of the body are particularly important for feminists because historically the body has been associated with the feminine, the female, or woman, and denigrated as weak, immoral, unclean or decaying. A woman's identification with maternity and her physical self in itself has been made ambiguous by some theorists due to their gender politics and also by the society and culture. According to Julia Kristeva women develop a depressive sexuality because of their identification with maternal body. She insists on the need for having a new discourse of maternity that acknowledges the

importance of the maternal function in the development of subjectivity and culture and thereby in nature. She questions the Freudian-Lacanian notion that paternal threats cause the child to leave the safe haven of the maternal body. She suggest that: “real female innovation will only come about when modernity, female creation and the link between them are better understood”(Kelly 150).

The eco-feminists like Charlene Spretnak associates the motherhood with something sacred and pure as in nature with some elemental power of the female. This power finds its expression in her potentiality to grow people of “either sex from her flesh, to bleed in rhythm with the moon, to transform food into milk for infants”(Spretnak 116). Moreover, the earth body and the female body are depicted connected because the land is represented as female and the image of nature strongly emulates the given description of the female body.

Spretnak opines that a woman often experiences a sense of limitlessness because of her close connection with nature in the form of menstruation and pregnancy. Women’s sexuality, according to her, expresses the “essential holistic nature of life on earth”(129). Whereas a man in comparison being excluding from this process of giving birth has paid attention to the other aspect of the cycle— death and destruction, for instance, hunting of a large animal, killing of a large fish and domestic violence. The difference in experiences of men and women has a significant bearing upon their perception of the world. Dodson Gray views women as having a definite advantage as her bodily experiences give her predominance over men because of their feeling of fulfillment and freedom over lack and limitation. However, Gray considers that the male perception should not be rejected. She asserts the need for a balance in the perspective of both, male and female.

Cultural eco-feminists presumes that the ecological appeal of a female self lies in a connectedness to nature through biological capacities that are distinctly female. Women’s experiences of their body bestow upon them a different consciousness that generates the establishment of a relationship with nature that is marked by care and compassion. As nature is also depicted as female, it follows that women occupy a privileged relation to nature: one that is based on women’s identification with nature through the female body. And this association with nature makes her more powerful, boundless, incredible and joyful as a human being should be. Her self and identity coexist not only with nature and her environment but also with man as a human being not as a separate entity.

References:

-
- Eisler, R. “The Gaia Tradition and a Partnership Future: an Ecofeminist Manifesto.” *Renewing the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*. Eds Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein. Sierra Club Books, 1990.
- Gray, E. Dodson . *Green Paradise Lost*. Roundtable Press, 1981.
- Kelly, Oliver. “Politics in the age of Propaganda.” *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-Bind*. Indiana Univ. Press, 1994.
- Marincowitz, Friedl. *Towards an Ecological Feminist Self Beyond Dualism and Essentialism*. A Thesis. Uni. Of Stellenbosch. October 1998.
- Ortner, Sherry B. “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?”. *Feminist Studies*. Vol.1.2 *JSTOR*. P.5-31. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3177638>>. 30 June, 2021.
- Spretnak, C. “Toward an Ecofeminist Spirituality in Judith Plant” ed. *Healing the Wounds*. New Society Pub., 1989.