

Status of Women in the Politics of Sexuality: A Journey from Feminism to Ecofeminism

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Abstract: Ecofeminism comes from feminism, and it connects nature with women. Both the subjects are important for the development of the human civilization. Male-ego, gender discrimination, material benefit, environmental pollution is damaging the world badly. Now, both women and nature become the issues of politics and discourse. This article highlights the connection between women and nature regarding the importance of having knowledge and ethics for the sustainable development in the future. This article also explores some major problems in the growth of rights and justice of women including the safety of nature.

At present, ecofeminism is a popular subject of discourse among the academics. Ecofeminism is a movement where maintaining the balance between nature and women is emphasized for the sustainable development of the society. Status of women varies from society to society and from culture to culture. And this is natural to have the differences. Women empowerment is a major topic of discourse both in the academic and the non-academic world for many reasons, and side by side various barriers make crisis in the development of women. Some issues are vital regarding the status of women such as economic crisis, social crisis, gender discrimination and so on. Specially, the economical discrimination hampers deeply in the subject of women empowerment. In this way, various discourses emerge in the academic world frequently. According to Pramod K. Nayar, feminism is both a political stance and a theory that focuses on gender as a subject of analysis when reading cultural practices and as a platform to demand equality, rights and justice. Feminism's key assumption is that gender roles are predetermined and the woman is trained to fit into those roles. This means that roles like 'daughter' and 'mother' are not natural but social because the woman has to be trained to think, talk, and act in particular ways that suit the role. (Nayar, 2010: 83)

The status of women is low especially in the third world countries. Usually, men are superiors and women are inferiors – these false images are dominant in the psychology of the common people. In this matter, Nayar said that feminist theory argues that the representation of women as weak, docile, innocent, seductive or irrational – sentimental is rooted in and influences actual social conditions, where she does not have power, is treated as a sex-object or a procreating machine, has fewer political and financial rights and is abused. (Nayar, 2010: 83)

Pramod K. Nayar also asserted that feminism explores the cultural dimensions of the woman's material life. Feminist literary-cultural critics assume that cultural texts such as cinema, TV soap opera, music, painting *parallel* and *duplicate* real-life power struggles

between genders. Cultural texts naturalize the oppression of women through their stereotypical representation of women as weak / vulnerable, seductress, obstacle, sexual object or a procreating device. (Nayar, 2010: 83)

Feminism's key political and theoretical stance is this: The inequalities that exist between men and women are not natural but social, not pre-ordained but created by men so that they retain power. Religion, the family, education, the arts, knowledge systems are all social and cultural 'structures' that enable the perpetual reinforcement of this inequality. (Nayar, 2010: 83)

Women's studies has focused on, and built upon, three key areas in feminist theory:

- Feminist critiques of knowledge (where knowledge is seen as generated and controlled by men and which excludes women's knowledge),
- The recovery of women's texts, modes of knowing and experiences, and the reevaluation of existing epistemological, pedagogic and cultural practices and
- The shift from liberal feminist views to more socialist and radical views of gender roles and culture. (Nayar, 2010 : 84)

Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) rejected the established view that women are naturally weaker or inferior to men. The unequal nature of gender relations, she proposed, was because the lack of education kept the women in a secondary position. Wollstonecraft also proposed that women must be treated as equals because they play a crucial role in society, namely, bringing up children. Women themselves should strive to become 'companions' rather than mere wives to their husbands. For this change in status and role, women should acquire an education. Wollstonecraft also noted the significant contribution of the socialization process in the subordination of women. She was one of the first thinkers to propose that gender roles are not natural but social. Thus, the love of finery (jewellery and fashion), romance or beauty in women was not natural. The women has been socialized and trained to believe that these are what make her truly feminine. (Nayar, 2010: 85)

Like Wollstonecraft, Margaret Fuller believed that education was the means of emancipation for women. Education, employment and political rights were Fuller's key planks, and she championed these throughout her life. Unlike Wollstonecraft, Fuller, however, did not support specific gender-roles. She believed that women need not be confined to the domestic duties, and there are no 'feminine' roles. Fuller was also a radical thinker in that she questioned the categories of gender. There cannot be a completely 'masculine' male, just as there is no truly 'feminine' female; each contains a bit of the other, argued Fuller. (Nayar, 2010: 86)

Virginia Woolf explored gender relations in her text *A Room of One's Own* (1929) clearly. She is one of the first writes to develop a woman-centric notion of reading and education. Wool argued that the patriarchal education systems and reading practices prevent women readers from reading as women. They are constantly trained to read from the men's point of view. Aesthetics, values, literary merits and traditions are adopted by 'male' literary authors and critics within the patriarchal institutions. These aesthetics, values and merits are then touted and promoted as universal even though they are clearly male-centered. The women are also trained to adopt these aesthetics, values and merits as universal. The effect is that woman's experience does not ever inform the reading. Women's texts, when available, are rejected by the male critics as minor or domestic without any virtue. Women readers, following in and trained within the male-defined forms of reading, agree with this

assessment. As a result, Woolf notes, women's texts do not survive except as the poor cousins of the male authored texts. (Nayar, 2010: 87)

Simone De Beauvoir (1949) argued that men are able to mystify women. This mystification and stereotyping, she argued, was instrumental in creating patriarchy. She argued that women, in turn, accepted this stereotype, and were thus instruments of their own oppression. She further argued that women were always the negative of the men, where man was the ideal, the norm and the woman the deviant or the Other, who sought perfection by trying to be as much like the man as possible. Women are measured by the standard of men and found 'inferior'. This is the process of Othering where women will always be seen, not as independent or unique but as a variation and flawed version of the Male. Men and Women are, therefore, constantly engaged in this Subject-Other relation where the Man is the Subject and the Woman is the other. It is based on this myth of the women as inferior Other that gender inequalities are perpetuated in society. De Beauvoir's major insight was that there is no 'essence' of a woman; a woman is constructed as such by men and society. Her main thesis is that biological sex and social gender are not accidental: Patriarchy makes use of sexual difference so as to maintain an inequality between men and women. De Beauvoir argues that while sexual difference is real and unalterable, it cannot be the grounds for injustice and inequality. (Nayar, 2010: 88)

De Beauvoir proposed that women must take charge of their own choice. Instead of being the negative, inferior other, they must become Subjects in their own right. They need not be restricted by or to the roles and identities fostered or imposed on them by patriarchy. As a true existentialist De Beauvoir was arguing a case for women being responsible for themselves – a process that might require some socialization among women. Simone De Beauvoir offers feminism in two key ideas: (i) the social construction of gender where women accept their men-oriented roles as women and (ii) the necessity for women to take responsibility and choose for themselves. When women choose for themselves they choose for the entire society. Thus, the woman's choice is about social transformation. (Nayar, 2010: 88)

According to W.R. Goodman (2005), the term 'woman' incorporates a number of diverse groups of women. The tension between, on the one hand, the politics of feminism, which assumes women's shared oppression, and, on the other, the realization that woman can no longer be discussed as a homogeneous term, has resulted in the production of much complex and existing work. Angela Davis (1982) asserted that when nineteenth-century feminists raised the demand for 'voluntary mother-hood', the campaign for birth control was born. Its proponents were called radicals and they were subjected to the same mockery as had befallen the initial advocates of woman suffrage. 'Voluntary motherhood' was considered audacious, outrageous and outlandish by those who insisted that wives had no right to refuse to satisfy their husbands' sexual urges. Eventually, of course, the right to birth control, like women's right to vote, would be more or less taken for granted by US public opinion. Yet in 1970, a full century later, the call for legal and easily accessible abortions was no less controversial than the issue of 'voluntary motherhood' which had originally launched the birth control movement in the United States. (Davis, 1982)

Angela Davis (1982) also said that birth control – individual choice, safe contraceptive methods, as well as abortions when necessary – is a fundamental prerequisite for the emancipation of women. Since the right of birth control is obviously advantageous to women of all classes and races, it would appear that even vastly dissimilar women's groups

would have attempted to unite around this issue. In reality, however, the birth control movement has seldom succeeded in uniting women of different social backgrounds, and rarely have the movement's leaders popularized the genuine concerns of working-class women. Moreover, arguments advanced by birth control advocates have sometimes been based on blatantly racist premises. The progressive potential of birth control remains indisputable. But in actuality, the historical record of this movement leaves much to be desired in the realm of challenges to racism and class exploitation. (Davis, 1982)

In addition, she said that if women remained forever burdened by incessant childbirths and frequent miscarriages, they would hardly be able to exercise the political rights they might win. Moreover, women's new dreams of pursuing careers and other paths of self-development outside marriage and motherhood could only be realized if they could limit and plan their pregnancies. In this sense, the slogan 'voluntary motherhood' contained a new and genuinely progressive vision of womanhood. At the same time, however, this vision was rigidly bound to the lifestyle enjoyed by the middle classes and the bourgeoisie. The aspirations underlying the demand for 'voluntary motherhood' did not reflect the conditions of working-class women, engaged as they were in a far more fundamental fight for economic survival. (Davis, 1982)

At present, environmental crisis, social crisis, and economic crisis are common in all the societies all over the world. But gender discrimination is playing the major role as a big barrier in women empowerment. Side by side, economic discrimination also creates depression among the women. Crisis of contemporary society is maintaining unstable development in the condition of women. Just like - environmental crisis creates problems in nature, and gender discrimination hampers to establish women's rights and growth. In this way, feminism and ecofeminism are connected together in the subjects of women and nature. We need to stop social domination on women, and need to give them proper rights for the development of the society. On the other hand, it is essential to minimize environmental pollution to protect nature and its balance for the future human civilization. In this way, women and nature become the topic of discourse in the academic and non-academic world.

Male dominated society play the dominant role to control women. Usually, men want to dominate women. This is a common psychology. Even some women think that this psychology is normal. In this way, men become superiors and women's passive psychology regarding consciousness create their negative images in the minds of the people. Actually, gender discrimination starts its own journey from the families. Though some issues are debatable but domination is harmful both for women and nature. In any case, unstable society and scattered development are not desirable. We need to review the politics of sexuality for the betterment of human civilization.

Women existence should be meaningful. It is important to improve the status of women both in culture and society. The right sense and understanding on feminism and ecofeminism will enlarge our ideas regarding women and nature. Basically, ecofeminism does the comparative study between woman and nature. To have better understanding of the value of nature, it is essential to have both knowledge and ethics. Similarly, if societies want to give respect and value to women, at first sufficient knowledge and ethics are needed badly. Without having the proper education, we cannot establish the rights of women. Just like this, we cannot protect the nature from the environmental pollution without having the realization of its value. Now the question is – 'Is a woman only mere instrument of production?'

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