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### **Breaking the Chains, Embracing the Earth: A Study on Shiva's *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* and Plumwood's *Feminism and Mastery of Nature***

**Thakur Prasad Dhungel**

Mphil, PhD Scholar

Associate Professor (English)

Kailali Multiple Campus, Far Western University, Nepal

Email: thakurprasaddhungel@gmail.com

#### **Abstract**

This is an article on literary criticism. It explores ecofeminist literary criticism by analyzing two lines of critics led by Vandana Shiva and Val Plumwood. Shiva shows that there is some connection between the destruction of nature and the oppression of women. For her, it is capitalistic consumerism that is the root cause of this exploitation. Women and nature both have nurturing qualities, and they should be understood in this way so that they can fight against the patriarchal capitalist framework. Contrary to this, Plumwood opines that connecting women and nature as nurturing things is the patriarchal formation of discourse that keeps men at a superior level and women and nature at an inferior level. This is the creation of binary opposition or dualism and this discourse should be rejected. In these two lines of discourse, the paper will explore the differences in their line of thinking and the point of consensus in ecofeminist literary criticism. With this, the article concludes with the idea that the chain created by traditional patriarchal exploitative binary system should be broken by establishing a new earth centered system based on egalitarianism where both women and men work together with nature in harmony.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, nature, binary opposition, exploitation, patriarchy

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## **Introduction**

Ecofeminism, initiated by French philosopher Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, continues to dig the field with its fertility showing its interconnection between the human species (especially women) and nature. Françoise used the term “ecofeminism” to explore the concern between feminism and ecology. She imagined that a parallel struggle between women and the natural world is needed for the resistance against their exploitation and domination (n.p.). Slowly, ecofeminism as a movement started growing in its height as a reaction against “the association of women with nature and men with culture and reason” (Plumwood, 1993, p.19). Previously the Western patriarchal tradition placed women and nature as only the nurturers in society, and on the other hand, men as the source of thinking and the designer of the culture. This traditional thinking created dualism in society and also created the binary opposition classifying superior and inferior groups in the social system. This creation of binarism is an issue of objection for the ecofeminists and they express their ideas against it.

Expressing their ideas against patriarchal oppression and exploring the ground for equality and emancipation are common issues for almost all feminists. However, their ways of concluding their issues are different. Some ecofeminists see equating women with nature and its qualities as a way to empower women. They opine that there are certain characteristics and qualities that match the qualities of nature with women. For them, thus, these qualities should be the guiding principles in the process of ecofeminist struggle. Contrary to this, some other ecofeminists reject the aforementioned opinions and views that equating women with nature and natural qualities marginalizes and impacts women in their attempts to achieve self-realization. In these two lines of ecofeminist thinking, in this paper, I will mainly take two major ecofeminist philosophers (along with others) in my development of argument: Vandana Shiva with her focus on Prakriti as a source of power, and Val Plumwood with her position of rejecting the direct association of women with nature and its qualities. By observing these two different lines of perspectives about the relationship between women and nature, I seek to answer the following questions: what is the ecofeminist struggle for them? what are the differences in their understanding of the women/nature connection? and how do they make common ground on the issue of the voice of women and nature?

### **Shiva: Partnership between Women and Nature**

In her widely read work on ecofeminism *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (1988), Vandana Shiva equates Prakriti (nature) with Shakti (power) which is the divine feminine energy. With Shakti, Prakriti is able to express herself in different ways. Exploring the power of Prakriti as Shakti, Shiva (1988) writes, “Without Shakti, Shiva, the symbol of the force of creation and destruction, is as powerless as a

corpse” (p.37). For her, Shakti, a feminine force is necessary to activate the masculine power of Shiva, the God of creation and destruction in Hindu mythology. It shows that the Prakriti that represents the feminine realm is the reservoir of Shakti, and even lord Shiva, a male representative of power, needs the power of Shakti for his realization of power. Confirming this view, she further adds that “nature as Prakriti is inherently active, a powerful, productive force in the dialectic of creation, renewal and sustenance of life” (p.37). In this way, Shiva clearly equates nature with the Shakti of Prakriti, a real feminine force, and seems to show that women have many similarities with nature and we have to accept this fact. Her claim is that we have to accept that nature as Prakriti has unique Shakti and she has the capacity to sustain life on this earth. She is all-powerful and other beings need her power to run the life on this planet.

Shiva's comparison of the power of Shakti and Shiva, her emphasis on female power over male power assumes that she is “reconnecting with a source of empowerment by restructuring images... derived from a tradition...” (Orenstein,1990, p.282). By connecting female power to the traditional mythological concept, Shiva attempts to highlight the relation of female power that is connected to nature. For her “[a]ll existence arises from this primordial energy [Shakti] which is the substance of everything, pervading everything. The manifestation of this power, this energy, is called nature (Prakriti)” (Shiva,1988, p.37). It shows that Prakriti is the manifestation of the primordial feminine Shakti which is the creative force of the diversity of this universe and all living forms. Through nature, the divine force materializes its energy and that energy is expressed in feminine form. She is Shakti that gives Prakriti the power to move ahead. It means the primary force that runs this universe and all living forms including men is the feminine force. For Shiva, only from the power of women that the system functions properly.

Taking the example of the sacred plant tulsi which is planted in almost every household in Hindu families, Shiva further attempts to show the feminine principle in nature. She states that “[t]he tulsi is sacred... the symbol of the cosmos. In their watering and worship renew the relationship of the home with the cosmos and with the world process. Nature as a creative expression of the feminine principle is both in ontological continuity with humans and above them” (Shiva, 1988, p.38). By referring to the example of tulsi, Shiva depicts nature in terms of the creative expression of the feminine principle and highlights the importance of feminine power for the continuity of worldly beings and its connection above them. To run the world creatively, female power is necessary, and this power can connect us with the divine power above. Carolyn Merchant (1990) also holds a similar view to Shiva. She verifies this concept and states that “[a] vision in which nature is held in esteem as mother and Goddess is a source of inspiration and empowerment for many ecofeminists”(p.101).It shows that equating nature with

mother and Goddess is a source of inspiration, and also a source of empowerment for human beings (especially women). For her, it gives women confidence in the process of expressing their voice in the front. So, nature has feminine qualities and this should be taken as the source of power.

By referring to the mythological references, Shiva wants to depict that there is a deep-rooted relationship between women and nature and that we have to accept it. The connection of the qualities of nature with the qualities of women doesn't weaken them but instead empowers them. For her, the connection between women and nature is an organic one. She views "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..." (Shiva, 1988, p.41). As both have similarities in their characteristics, women and nature should work in partnership and develop a special relationship to work together. Especially, "... an empowered, agentic nature provide[s] a source of authority for the women..." (Bruckner, 2011, p.25). As Bruckner suggests an agentic nature can provide strong and powerful agency to the women, and they both can express their voice strongly.

Now, the question is: why should women and nature be united? Why should they work together? What is the fear to them that only in a united they can express themselves strongly? The answer is a modern capitalistic patriarchal society. According to Shiva, modern capitalistic patriarchal society has a corrupted definition of development that always marginalizes women and exploits nature. She contends that "the dichotomized ontology of man dominating woman and nature generates maldevelopment because it makes the colonizing male the agent and model of 'development'. Women, the Third World and nature become underdeveloped, first by definition, and then, through the process of colonization, in reality"(Shiva, 1988, p.40). It means that Western society has created a clear dichotomy where men are the colonizers and others are colonized. And the others are shown as underdeveloped by definition and colonization. They are shown as underdeveloped because their ways of production don't match the capitalistic modes of production. In this system of production, it seems that "the very structures of Western thought ... yoke women and nature together as objects of man's use, possession, and pleasure" (Munroe and Laroche, 2011, p.1). In the mass production system of patriarchal capitalism, women and nature only become the men's source of use, possession, and pleasure. Men take them as insignificant and only the instrument for their satisfaction. And "ecofeminism challenges all relations of domination"(Starhawk, 1990, p.76).

So, it is the androcentric worldview that is the main source of the suppression of women and the destruction of nature. Ecofeminism seeks to dismantle this worldview that is masculinist and seeks to remain in a privileged position thereby keeping others in the underprivileged situation (Kheel, 1990, p.129). For this process of dismantling the androcentric worldview "... partnership between women's and nature's work..." is

necessary (Shiva, 1988, p.44). Shiva is very clear in her understanding that women and nature have a very close relationship and they should work in partnership for survival. As men focused on the capitalistic ways of mass production, women alone remained there for the protection of organic nature. Showing women's association with nature, Judith Plant (1990) mentions that "[w]omen have long been associated with nature: metaphorically, as in 'Mother Earth' as well as with the naming of hurricanes and other natural disasters! Our language says it all: a 'virgin' forest is one awaiting exploitation, as yet untouched by man..." (p.156). This quote also helps us to get the idea that earth is like our mother, and if the forest is dense, it is virgin, and that they are the men who destroy the virginity: either of a female or of the forest. So, "what patriarchy sees as productive work, is, in ecological terms highly destructive production" (Shiva, 1988, p.8). And such a system of production that is destructive should be replaced by "a redefinition of growth and productivity as categories linked to the production... of life" (Shiva, 1988, p.12). She suggests that the androcentric definition of growth based on mass production is related to destruction, so an organic model of growth and productivity should be developed so that we can sustain life properly on this planet.

It is the emphasis of Vandana Shiva, therefore, that the connection of women with nature has a deep-rooted relation from time immemorial. From tradition, we can see that the association of women with nature has given them real power. Because of this association, women got a chance to express their power in many instances. So, in modern times also, it is beneficial for women to have an association with nature. Associating with the qualities of nature doesn't undermine the power of women, instead, it increases their power.

### **Plumwood: Construction of Liberatory Narratives**

Vandana Shiva explores the feminine characteristics in nature and sees that Prakriti has the source of Shakti for women, and this Shakti should be acknowledged. Quite the contrary, Val Plumwood opposes this view and says that equating women with nature is the labyrinth created by Western patriarchal society to marginalize and subdue women and exploit nature. This equation, for Plumwood, impacts women in their attempts to express their voice and identity. This is the trap or snare set by patriarchal society to create a safe zone to fulfill their capitalistic greed of gaining power and wealth. In her book *Feminism and Mastery of Nature* (1993), Plumwood reviews how the patriarchy demonstrated the relationship between women and nature and prepared a safe ground for male domination over females:

That women's inclusion in the sphere of nature has been a major tool in their oppression emerges clearly from a glance at traditional sources: 'Woman is a violent and uncontrolled animal' (Cato 1989:193); 'A woman is but an animal

and an animal not of the highest order' (Burke 1989:187); 'I cannot conceive of you to be human creatures, but a sort of species hardly a degree above a monkey' (Swift 1989:191); 'However man rules in science and in art/The sphere of women's glories is the heart' (Moore 1989:166); 'Women represent the interests of the family and sexual life; the work of civilisation has become more and more men's business' (Freud 1989:80); 'Women are certainly capable of learning, but they are not made for the higher forms of science, such as philosophy and certain types of creative activity; these require a universal ingredient' (Hegel 1989:62); 'A necessary object, woman, who is needed to preserve the species or to provide food and drink' (Aquinas 1989:183). Feminine 'closeness to nature' has hardly been a compliment. (p.19)

For Plumwood, from past to present, the feminine closeness to nature has been depicted as a source of oppression to women and nature both. On the surface, by connecting women with nature, it seems that patriarchy is romanticizing this relationship. But, in reality, it is the means by which they became able to marginalize women by keeping them in the sphere of nature. When women are kept in the sphere of nature, men lie automatically in the sphere of culture and reason. And this is the intentional desire of patriarchal psychology to do this so that they can remain in the ruling position thereby marginalizing women and nature.

Keeping women in the sphere of nature and men in the sphere of culture and reason is, for Plumwood, the creation of dualism, and Western patriarchy has created this dualism to dominate women and exploit nature. Greta Gaard (1993), demonstrating the tasks of ecofeminists in terms of rejecting this dualism, insists that "[o]ne task of ecofeminists has been to expose these dualisms and the ways in which feminizing nature and naturalizing or animalizing women has served as justification for the domination of women, animals and the earth" (p.5). The patriarchal society has equated women with nature and even animalized them. And the creation of this image has played a role in the domination of women and nature. So, this narrative must be changed so as to create an equal society where all beings are treated in an egalitarian way. The narrative "...of nature as animal and of nature as feminine - continues to operate, to the disadvantage of women, nature and the quality of human life" (Plumwood, 1993, p.21). This narrative must be changed into a new narrative, as Ariel Salleh (2017) suggests that "[w]omen are not 'closer to nature' than men in any ontological sense. Both women and men are in/with/of nature..." (n.p.). It is the patriarchal mindset that has kept women closer to nature but in reality, both women and men are human beings and equally closer to nature, if any. So, women's closeness to nature and exclusion from culture is the creation of a patriarchal narrative that should be challenged and revised in terms of equality.

In fact, if we make a closer look at the patriarchal history, we find that by showing  
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women closer to nature, men have created a strong master narrative rooted deeply in the psychology of both men and women. Because of this master narrative, in some cases, women also accept the idea that they are closer to nature, without knowing that they are being brainwashed by the patriarchal ideology. So, it is the position of critical ecological feminists that they "... should reject the master model and conceive human identity in less dualistic and oppositional ways; such a critical ecofeminism would conclude that women and men are part of both nature and culture" (Plumwood, 1993, p.35). So, the master model which keeps women and nature in an inferior position should be rejected. This is the negative narrative created by male psychology that creates clear binarism between men and women/nature. Erasing this binarism is necessary so as to 'conclude that both men and women are part of both nature and culture'.

If we take the example of biblical narratives, it gives us a picture of a perfect world where man and woman lived in perfect balance with nature. "The biblical society explicitly tells us there was an earlier time when woman and man (Adam and Eve) lived in harmony with one another and with nature" (Eisler 1990, p.27). In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve lived in perfect balance, but later they were punished and thrown away from heaven to earth. "This punishment of Eve for her refusal to acknowledge Jehovah's monopoly of the tree of knowledge is a mythical device to justify male dominance and authoritarian rule" (Eisler, 1990, p.28). It means the balanced world of Eden was disturbed by the authoritarian rule of Jehovah, a male. And from that time to the present, women were and are marginalized, and they were and are, at the same time, resisting it, in the forms of Eve and ecofeminists. And in the modern world, this struggle for resistance is led by ecofeminists, and they are devoted to rewriting the narrative that equates all beings on this planet. In this way, "ecological feminists are involved in a great cultural revaluation of the status of women, the feminine and the natural..." (Plumwood, 1993, p.8). They have to work hard for this revaluation of culture that is devalued by the male authoritarian master narrative.

From the reading, we see that Plumwood is against associating women with nature the way traditional patriarchal society did it. Such association of women with nature only denigrates them to an inferior position. So, the way Vandana Shiva relates Prakriti with the source of Shakti for women by relating conventional examples is a source of stereotyping for Plumwood. It dominates and marginalizes women and plays a role in the exploitation and destruction of nature. For her, it is necessary to develop narratives in such a way that liberates women from their marginalized position. Therefore, a new definition is needed that depicts positive connotations while showing the relationship between women and nature.

## **Conclusion**

While analyzing Plumwood and Shiva, they take their issues from different contexts. Plumwood focuses on Western patriarchal orientation in relation to showing the mastery of nature. By taking Western philosophical and cultural context, Plumwood examines the roots of the mastery of nature and explains its impact on women, the environment, and other marginalized groups. Contrary to her, Shiva takes the context from the Indian rural agricultural system and attempts to connect it to globalized agribusiness. It is because of globalized agribusiness that has really affected local and organic agriculture primarily led by women. And it has become the cause of the marginalization and the domination of women, and the exploitation and destruction of nature. In this way, Plumwood explores the domination of women and nature in Western thought whereas Shiva explores the consequences created by industrial agriculture on the life of women and nature, and strongly critiques the impacts of globalization over agriculture taking the context of India.

Though Plumwood and Shiva differ in the context, perspective, and background of analysis, they have similarities in the context of challenging the dominant narratives developed by Western capitalistic patriarchal society. They both focus on the role of women and nature in the recovery of the damage made by the capitalistic system. Plumwood (1993) focuses on challenging the dualized conception created by Western patriarchy, and that it should be done by both men and women. She mentions, "[w]omen must be treated as just as fully human and as fully part of human culture as men. Both men and women must challenge the dualised conception of human identity and develop an alternative culture which fully recognises human identity as continues with, not alien from, nature" (p.36). For Plumwood, the treatment of women as a human is the primary condition for the change in dualistic thinking, and this should be done by both men and women so that they can bring out an alternative culture in harmony with nature. Vandana Shiva (1998) has also expressed similar views in the context of creating alternative ideals. She asserts that "[t]he recovery of the feminine principle allows a transcendence and transformation of these patriarchal foundations of maldevelopment. It allows a redefinition of growth and productivity as categories linked to the production, of life" (p.12). Similar to Plumwood, Shiva (1998) also focuses on the recovery of women's power to bring change in society and nature. She sees that there is "ecological crisis" because of "the death of feminine principle" (p.40). And it is the globalized capitalistic patriarchal production system that has played the main role in this death of feminine principles.

Therefore, as Plumwood, Shiva, and other ecofeminists suggest, a new alternative principle must be established by challenging patriarchal essentialism. As Lee Qinby (1990) suggests "ecofeminism as a politics of resistance forces us to question the



categories of experience that order the world and truths we have come to know...” (p.127). It means ecofeminism is a movement of resistance and it should resist and question the existing patriarchal categories of experience that are based on domination, marginalization, and exploitation. By resisting and questioning these principles, ecofeminists can establish a new system that is based on egalitarianism where both women and men work together with nature to establish and maintain harmony and balance in the system of nature and culture. For this, they must break the chain of patriarchy and embrace the diversity of the earth.

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