



## The Manifestations and Symptoms of Ecofeminism

CHEN Ling<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup> School of Commerce and Social Studies, Chongqing University of Science and Technology, Chongqing, China.

\* Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

The article observes the theory and practice of Ecofeminism and tries to reveal the manifestations and symptoms of Ecofeminism. The study finds out that Ecofeminism is a theory as well as a movement. Ecofeminism advocates women's guiding the ecological movement and rebuilding the relationship between humanity and nature as well as between men and women. As a theory, Ecofeminism emphasizes to explore the cause of domination from a social cultural perspective. It believes that the root of natural domination and sexual domination is patriarchy and it advocates eliminating patriarchy to achieve the dual liberation of nature and women. However, Ecofeminism, based on cultural transformation, starts from cultural changes, is not in favor of changing the production relation; therefore, it is impossible to really eliminate all forms of domination and achieves the real liberation of nature, gender, class and race.

**Key words:** Ecofeminism; Nature domination and gender domination; Patriarchy

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### INTRODUCTION

As a combined production of the ecological movement and the women's movement, Ecofeminism not only

collets the theoretical essences of feminism, but also absorbs the theoretical perspectives of ecologism. In addition, it inherits and develops the previous social and cultural critical theories. Based on the integration of these theories and the multi-dimensional perspective of theory, Ecofeminism finds that natural domination and sexual domination are objective facts and natural domination and sexual domination are internally associated. Therefore, they propose the research subject on natural domination and sexual domination and try to conduct researches on the dominant theories from ecological principles and female principles. Ecofeminism advocates that, in the patriarchal society, we should connect natural domination with sexual domination, combine the ecological movement with the women's movement, and solve the ecological crisis and the social crisis in the process of fighting again patriarchal domination.

Whether patriarchy is the common root that causes natural domination and sexual domination and whether the natural liberation and female liberation can be achieved by eliminating patriarchy are the theoretical problems proposed by Ecofeminism. To give scientific answers to the questions, we must carefully observe the theoretical perspectives and the practical movement of Ecofeminism and reveal its manifestations and symptoms.

### 1. THE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES OF ECOFEMINISM

Ecofeminism observes the cause of domination from a social cultural perspective and believes that patriarchy is the common root that causes natural domination and sexual domination and natural liberation and female liberation can be achieved by eliminating patriarchy. This is a theoretical issue proposed by Ecofeminism. In their view, "when 'the four big liberation'—the liberation of gender oppression, racial oppression, class oppression, and natural oppression—theories have finally come together, their power is strong enough to overturn the entire

conceptual basis of oppression” (Plumwood, 2007, p.1), that is, overthrow the western rationalistic cultural traditions and the dualistic ideology which constitute domination, and then overthrow the patriarchal cultural framework. This is the theoretical explanation and theoretical innovation that Ecofeminism has made in terms of domination.

**A. Ecofeminism insists the internal association between the nature and women, reveals the rationalistic cultural tradition of natural domination and sexual domination, proposes to replace the dualism with ecological principles.** Ecofeminism starts with the internal association between the nature and women, and through observing the evolutionary process of natural views, reveals that natural domination and sexual domination are the inevitable result of the technical command of scientific rationality since the Enlightenment. In front of the scientific rationality of instrumentalism, nature and women are objects of human domination and they have only instrumental values. In this sense, the identity of women is the same with the concept of nature, that is, the establishment of women’s status is consistent with the status of nature and they both are the cultural status of the Other. Putting culture and nature, men and women, and rationality and emotion in the opposite position and the former dominating the latter is a reflection of the western dualistic cultural tradition of rationalism. Dualism constructs the cultural concept and status of the center and the edge. Nature and women are constructed as the cultural status of the Other. The center and the edge form a separate and dominant relation whose main feature is the exclusion, opposition and alienation of each other. In other words, the cultural status of the Other of women and nature is an objective product of dualistic logical structure.

Therefore, in order to liberate nature and women, we must overthrow the conceptual framework of dualistic dominant logic. Ecofeminism insists ecological principles, opposes dualism, emphasizes the association between nature and women, recognizes the interactive relationship between the two, and establishes the natural ecological system and social system on the basis of the principle of relationship. Ecofeminism insists the association between humanity and nature as well as between women and nature and effectively overcomes dualistic thinking; it insists linked, holistic and systematic approaches of modern ecology and effectively avoids isolated, reductionistic and analytic approaches of mechanism since modern times; it insists the association between humanity and nature as well as between women and nature and effectively overcomes the dichotomy of facts and values to achieve the unity of the science and the humanities. In other words, Ecofeminism observes natural domination and sexual domination based on the association between nature and women, which essentially is a concrete application of modern ecological theory in feminism. Insisting the internal association between nature and women can effectively overcome natural domination and sexual domination (Zhao, 2006, p.196).

Like other radical ecology, Ecofeminism insists on ecological principles. However, not only different from Deep Ecology’s eco-centrism which takes all the world as the same and outward expansive, but also different from Social Ecology’s anthropocentrism which focuses on criticism of social structure and ignores natural domination, Ecofeminism starts from the internal association between nature and women, which overcomes not only the ecological theory of Deep Ecology in the abstract sense, but also the ignorance of Social Ecology on natural domination, so that it finds the social cultural root of natural domination and sexual domination. This analysis of the root of domination takes into account of natural ecological system and social system, makes a unique theoretical explanation of the domination theory, constructs a unique theoretical perspective, and is an interpretation and development of domination based on the previous theories.

**B. Ecofeminism insists the internal association between nature and women and points out that the root of natural domination and sexual domination is patriarchy, it advocates criticism of patriarchy.** Compared with other radical ecology, Ecofeminism introduces female principles and reveals the hidden sexual position and sexual discourse behind domination. Ecofeminism not only notices the anthropocentric standpoint reflected from dualistic domination, but also notices the sexual position in anthropocentrism, that is, anthropocentrism causing domination is essentially androcentrism. In other words, the cultural tradition of dualism internalizes in the social structure and reflects in patriarchy and dominant logic. Patriarchy leads to “sexual politics”, that is, regarding men’s desires and needs as the center, setting ego as men’s outward expansion, and constructing men’s domination of all the Other including natural domination and sexual domination. Therefore, Ecofeminism advocates conducting criticism of patriarchy and changing the worldview and value stand of anthropocentrism and androcentrism (Salleh, 1984).

The patriarchal theory was first introduced into feminist theory by Radical Feminism and it has gradually become a core concept and analytical tool for Ecofeminism to explain gender inequality and gender oppression. Ecofeminism develops the patriarchal theory based on this. Ecofeminism starts from the association between nature and women, and, based on the observation of the evolution of the natural view, points out that patriarchy is rooted in western epistemology and its logic of linear thinking in modern times. Determined by dualism and its way of thinking, the understanding of the natural view has experienced an evolutionary process from an organic natural view to mechanical natural view. Correspondingly, the human society has entered a patriarchal society from a matriarchal society (Merchant, 1980). With the establishment of the mechanical natural view, the human ability and scope of conquering the

nature have increasingly expanded. Correspondingly, patriarchy also has expanded from private patriarchy to public patriarchy. In modern capitalist society, patriarchal authority in private fields relatively declines. Under the influence of commercialism and consumerism, patriarchal authority in the public sphere has been strengthened and further consolidates and strengthens the status of private patriarchy (Ruether, 1975). In the view of Ecofeminism, patriarchy is deeply rooted in the cultural traditions of the western dualism. Dualism inherently contains dominant logic. This dominant logic, not only as an ideology, but also as a structural dominant system, contains a hierarchy with powerful relations and forms a center-edge power structure. Patriarchy is an expression of its specific system and logical framework and the institutional basis for the achievement of anthropocentrism and androcentrism. Patriarchy is a full set of similar structures containing various dualistic dominant forms tightly wound. In the capitalist society, patriarchy is based on the high status of men. Patriarchal culture makes women in a deep-rooted subordinate status of "the Other", not only in the sense of sexual physiology and phenomenology, but also in politics and discourse. The domination-control mode of patriarchy not only applies to women, making women become the Other, but also applies to nature, making nature become the object of domination (King, 1990).

Patriarchy roots in western dualistic cultural traditions; however, once becoming a cultural system, patriarchy in turn further consolidates and maintains dualism, making dualism and the dominant logical framework stable and non-destructive. Patriarchy shows mighty social power, such as political, economic, cultural, discourse, sexual and ethnical system and so on, and it conducts domination to society and ensures the legitimacy and rationality of domination. Therefore, in the view of Ecologism, to eliminate natural domination and sexual domination, we need to not only eliminate dualistic cultural traditions, but also eliminate the patriarchal hierarchal structure and oppose any form of classification (Plumwood, 2007, p.36).

To conclude, it is insisting the association between natural domination and sexual domination and conducting social cultural criticism of patriarchy that is the most important and prominent theoretical contribution of Ecofeminism and is also the root cause that Ecofeminism is different from other radical theories. When criticizing patriarchy, Ecofeminism insists the ecological perspective; therefore, it is different from general radical feminist theories, and it emphasizes the integrity and the systematicness of ecological system when emphasizing the difference and emphasizes the difference in unity. From this point of view, Ecofeminism is sublating and developing its theory based on radical feminist theory. On the other hand, when conducting ecological social criticism, Ecofeminism insists female perspectives; therefore, it is different from other radical ecological theories. It explores the sexual position behind domination

while revealing natural domination. In this way, Ecofeminism has made unique theoretical explanations of domination based on inheriting social cultural critical perspective of dominant theory, and it has promoted and developed the dominant theory of western culture.

## 2. THE PRACTICAL MOVEMENT OF ECOFEMINISM

Ecofeminism is a theory as well as a movement. Ecofeminism advocates women's guiding of the ecological movement, rebuilding the relationship between humanity and nature as well as between men and women. In other words, Ecofeminism advocates combining the ecological movement with the women's movement to ultimately achieve the dual liberation of women and nature.

**A. Ecofeminism is a new social movement to eliminate gender inequality and strive for women's liberation.** Different from early women's movements which pursue political and economic rights, the Ecofeminist movement is a post-materialism feminist movement. It constitutes the new social movement with the peace movement, the anti-nuclear energy movement, the racial minority liberation movement, the selective lifestyle movement, the tax revolt, religious fundamentalism protest groups, and the third world movement. The new social movement advocates achieving the union through cultural rather than economic connection and it is a new form of political activities. The new social movement points to groups which are excluded and marginalized in different forms in the production and consumption process, including natural, female, racial, and ethnic groups. It takes such marginalized groups as the social subject of the movement and makes them get rid of marginal status and restores equal identity and discourse through the movement (Dobson, 2005, p.199).

Through the efforts of two large-scale women's movements, the status of women has been improved greatly and the consciousness of women has been greatly enhanced. However, compared with men, women are still at a relatively low social status and have a weaker political discourse in political participation, employment, education, health care and family life. In the view of Ecofeminism, the marginalization of women in the process of production and consumption is structural, and thus in the existing social structure, the marginalized status is difficult to overcome. The fundamental reason for gender inequality and gender oppression in social life is ideology and its social cultural system, that is, patriarchy. Only by overthrowing patriarchy and its cultural structure can women obtain fundamental equality. Therefore, for Ecofeminism, in order to get out of gender domination and get identity and social status, we must first insist female principles to conduct women's movements and eliminate androcentrism.

Thus, for Ecofeminism, the women's movement is no longer the economic evolution, nor the political movement for the pursuit of the same and undifferentiated status with men or the radical social movement to completely eliminate gender differences; it is the political movement which recognizes differences and diversity. Ecofeminism emphasizes identity and cultural specificity and advocates conducting the political movement from the experience and perspective of women rather than men. On a practical level, Ecofeminism focuses on a female narrative style and emphasizes the experience of women to construct the discourse system and identity politics of women.

B. Ecofeminism is an ecological movement which opposes natural domination and pursues natural liberation. With the promotion of eco-feminist ideas in the real world, women are actively involved in the environmental protection movement. The feminist environmental movement reflects a distinctive theoretical characteristics of Ecofeminism. In this way, Ecofeminism promotes the women's movement from the ecological perspective, which not only enlarges the scope of feminist social activities, but also avoids the shortcoming of the singleness of the task in the previous feminist movements.

Ecofeminism starts from the association between nature and women, connects environmental protection with the protection of women's production and living way, and opposes the production and living way of androcentrism. Ecofeminism believes that, the living way of androcentrism "is destroying the environment, destroying our flesh and even our genes" (Pant, 1989). Faced with a series of ecological disasters breaking out in the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s in the world, Ecofeminism attributes them to the realistic results of the production and living way of androcentrism. Therefore, Ecofeminism advocates changing social production and living way and promotes the production and living experience of women.

In the perspective of Ecofeminism, to change the social production and living way, we must fully mobilize the social forces of women which are the group of the world's largest number of people. In commodity society, women, not only as an important labor force, participate in social production, but also as a major force in consumption, guide the consumption trend of the society; therefore, in order to conduct a fundamental ecological movement and change the production and living way, we must mobilize women's social forces to play the active role of women in social life.

As an important social force, women participate in the ecological movement and play a unique role in social production and family consumption. In general, in developed countries, with the improvement of living standards, the political goals of the eco-feminist movement have transferred from material concerns to social issues of improving the quality of life. Debating for the "proxy" mother and other issues, living in the tree in order to protect the old tree—all these are their fighting

forms for the improvement of the quality of life. In these countries, water, air and environmental pollution caused by industrialization, urbanization and marketization has made women become the biggest victims; therefore, environmental safety has come into their movement vision. For example, in the 1970s and 1980s, with the rapid economic development in Japan, the society was becoming richer and health and environmental issues began to put on the agenda. As mothers and housewives as well the direct victims of environmental problems, Japanese women began to concern about food and water pollution, and then transferred to political and social problems, which caused a great influence on the society and then promoted the developing process of the ecological movement in Japan (Fang, & Luo, 2009. p.77).

Compared with the practice of Ecofeminism in developed countries which connects the ecological movement with the improvement of the quality of life, the practical experience of the third world countries is usually faced with vital issues like life or death. Ecofeminism in the third world countries believes that, the western social economic development mode is the expansion of patriarchy in nations and it is the fundamental guarantee of neo-colonialism. The western social economic development was built on the domination of women, nature and other cultures in a disadvantageous position. The economic growth mode is a neo-colonialism and is the way in which social elites of developed countries plunder the natural resources of the third world and shift the ecological crisis to the third world through modern technologic strength and means for the benefit of the country. Therefore, Ecofeminism in the third world advocates "anti-development", opposes the expansion of western economic growth mode in the world, calls for support for women's production and living way in the third world, and promotes women's production and living experience in the third world, among which the most representative third world eco-feminist movements are the "Chipko" movement of Indian women and the "green belt movement" of Kenyan women.

The Chipko movement initiated by Indian women to oppose predatory logging activities is essentially parallel with the promotion of western development concept in the whole world. The Chipko movement is a practical measure that Indian women conduct to boycott western development concept and its economic way. In terms of time, the Indian Chipko movement is earlier than any organized and large-scaled environmental movements of western countries. In fact, the green-peace movement which later develops worldwide largely learns or even copies the specific experience of the Chipko movement in both ideological concepts and organizational forms. The Kenyan women's "greenbelt movement" to protect the forest resources is an environmental protection movement initiated by Wangari Maathai, the Deputy Minister of Environment and Natural Resources of Kenya at that time. She leads the environmental organization "Green Belt"

to plant over 30 million trees in Africa. This action has greatly improved the ecological environment and ensured the ecological basis for sustainable development (Fang, & Luo, 2009, p.76).

C. Together with the peace movement and the anti-nuclear movement, ecofeminism advocates properly handling the relation between peace and development and it essentially is a world peace movement led by women. Ecofeminism starts from the association between women and nature and promotes to rebuild the relation between humanity and nature, among people and between people and the society, that is to say, to rebuild the relation between natural ecological system and social system, which is properly dealing with the relation between social development and environmental protection. According to the views of Ecofeminism, the root of ecological crisis and social crisis is patriarchy and its cultural construction. The dominant logic and hierarchal mechanism that patriarchy itself contains has caused the opposition between humanity and nature, among people and between people and society, resulting in predatory social production and living ways as well as high tension of social relation and international conflicts. The ecofeministic movement has opened the prelude of large-scale environmental and peace protest movements in the western world. The most representative activities include the movement of American women legally challenging a large nuclear power plant, the anti-militaristic “women pentagon action” organized by the “anti-nuclear clamshell alliance” and the movement of “for a diverse variety of women” initiated by Siva. Ecofeminism opposes patriarchy, all forms of domination, and war, militarism and hegemony. It strongly advocates peace, strongly urges the world to maintain a peaceful and stable situation, creates the basic premise for the humanity to eliminate dualism and for the peaceful development, and actively plays its social role as peace envoys.

### 3. THE THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL “ABSENCE” OF ECOFEMINISM

Conducting the ecological criticism from the social gender perspective and insisting on the association between natural domination and sexual domination to achieve the elimination of patriarchal, this social cultural critique are the most unique theoretical contributions of Ecofeminism and also the theoretical solutions that Ecofeminism provides for the “domination-liberation” issue in the ecological movement.

However, Ecofeminism emphasizes the association between women and nature and conducts analysis from the cultural perspective, which also easily leads to the denounce of essentialism. Therefore, even within the eco-feministic school, there are huge differences of their recognition, among which the Cultural Ecofeminism and Radical Ecofeminism advocate the association between

nature and women; however, for Social Ecofeminism, it advocates weakening the association between the two. Obviously, the diametrically opposite claims and views of the association between nature and women has eliminated the theoretical basis of Ecofeminism.

In addition, ecofeminism conducts social cultural criticism based on the association between nature and women, which obviously cannot grasp the essential root of domination. This is also the common theoretical predicament that cultural critical theories face. Ecofeminism’s interpretation of domination from the dualistic knowledge traditions and the technical rationalization process of the society can only be a exogenous analysis and an analytical way rising from ideology to material, that is, attributing the root of domination to cultural control based on technical commands, while failing to start from the inherent contradiction of social life and the interests of people to carry out social criticism and so failing to capture the essential root of domination. Thus, Ecofeminism can only attribute the root of domination to patriarchy. Ecofeminism reveals natural domination and sexual domination by using patriarchy, which also easily causes the criticism of essentialism. In the perspective of anti-essentialist theory, patriarchy ignores the difference of manifestations of gender inequality in different historical periods and different cultures. Patriarchy cannot explain the oppression issue of men. It cannot provide a satisfactory response to the phenomenon of the oppression of women in the third world as well. Clearly, patriarchy is aimed primarily at the dominant issue of western white middle class women, that is to say, patriarchy is not universal; on the contrary, it is restrictive and it has a scope. Therefore, Ecofeminism’s using patriarchy to analyze domination can only reveal one side generated by domination and cannot include the entire contents of domination.

In the practice of social movement, Ecofeminism advocates eliminating patriarchy and emphasizes the role of women’s experience in the ecological movement and concerns about differences and diversity. This is not only an elimination of the “identity” discourse of modern instrumentalism, but also a sublation of the “non-identity” discourse of post-modern deconstructionism, that is, recognizing the “non-identical identity” in the process of criticizing “identity”, so as to provide specific and unique practical experience for the “domination-liberation” issue in the ecological movement with the hope for the rebuilding of the new relation between humanity and nature, among people and between people and society.

However, in new social movements, the social movement is more in pursuit of a nominal social equality rather than the real changes on the social structure and concrete life. Ecofeminism also causes the same criticism. In the perspective of critics, “women, environmentalists, pacifists, homosexuals and etc. do not have an inherent identity as a social movement” (Dobson, 2005, p.199).

They do not have common interests or a common identity; therefore, they cannot act consistently and cannot reach a consensus or realize a common goal.

On the other hand, the long-term position and the actual role of middle-class women in the ecological movement have been questioned. It is difficult for middle-class women to become the historical agents of this social transformation. Middle-class women actively participate in the ecological movement and the most direct effect is the establishment of many NGOs mainly composed of women and their participants increase fast. "The Women's Environment and Development Organization" was established in 1989 by the American Women's Foundation. It has developed into the most active and influential women's environmental protection organization in the world. In the ecological movement, many women come into the fore and some women even enter the parliament. For example, German women actively established "the Greens". Women's participation in politics has gradually changed the original social structure, which not only improves the social status and social presence of women, but also improves the environmental discourse of women and the environmental awareness of women. "Women in Development" (WID) has been brought into the agenda. Various countermeasures have begun to emphasize the positive role of women in the ecological movement.

In 1994, the United Nation approved the "United Nation Convention to Combat Desertification". As the only multilateral agreement processing environmental and social gender issues, the convention clarifies the role and task of women and affirms the role and life experience of women. Opponents argue that, compared with the practice of Ecofeminism in developed countries which connects the ecological movement with the improvement of the quality of life, the practical experience of the third world countries often faces a vital issue of life or death. Middle-class women "are not the worst victims of mechanized work, dangerous working conditions, a seriously polluted environment, scattered communities, deprivation of popular culture, dehumanization from bureaucrats and the hypocritical groups of politicians" (Dobson, 2005:198); therefore, it is hard to see the economic interest basis of middle-class women's concerning about environment. It is the same that it is difficult for middle-class women to reflect the true appeals of social members in the ecological movement.

## CONCLUSION

Insisting on the association between natural domination and sexual domination and conducting social cultural criticism of patriarchy are the most important and prominent theoretical contributions of Ecofeminism and they are also the fundamental reasons that make Ecofeminism different from other radical theories. Ecofeminism advocates connecting natural domination

with sexual domination in patriarchal society, combining the ecological movement with the women's movement, and solving ecological crisis and social crisis in the process of opposing patriarchal domination. The practical result of combining the women's movement which pursues women's equal rights with the ecological movement which coordinates scientific technology, social responsibilities and political mechanism is far beyond the protection of environment. It is to ensure and enhance the ecological basis for sustainable development, to combine the protection of human rights with sustainable development, to enhance the social awareness of environmental protection and women's rights, and to enlarge the basis of social subject and forces which oppose starting a war to compete for resources. However, Ecofeminism ignores national and international economic control and political power and their decisive role in economic development and environmental protection; meanwhile, as a new social movement, the exclusion of class of the social subject of women is not in favor of the realization of the true liberation of women and nature, that is to say, Ecofeminism, based on cultural transformation, starts from cultural changes, not advocating changing the production relation; therefore, it cannot really eliminate all forms of domination to achieve the true liberation of nature, gender, class and race.

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