RESEARCH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH (RJOE)
www.rjoe.org.in | **Oray's Publications** | ISSN: **2456-2696**
An International Approved Peer-Reviewed and Refereed English Journal
Impact Factor: *8.373 (SJIF)* | **Vol. 10, Issue 3 (July, August& September;2025)**

Ecofeminism and Eco-Altruism: Reimagining Gender, Nature, and Ecological Balance

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Paper Received on 15-06-2025, Accepted on 17-07-2025
Published on 17 -07-25; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.10.3.187

Abstract:

This paper elucidates the journey from Exploitation to Altruism of women and nature, considering them as an intertwined entity through the lens of Ecofeminism. It scrutinizes ecofeminism as a transformative philosophy addressing environmental and gender-based subjugation. By analyzing the historical roots of patriarchal control over nature and women and advocating for a gender-sensitive ecological ethic, the study argues that ecofeminism offers an altruistic remedy to social, environmental and cultural crises. Drawing on the work of Vandana Shiva, Carolyn Merchant and Maria Mies, and some other poets, this paper examines how an understanding of gender roles, particularly women's traditional ecological knowledge and caring labour, can move humanity from exploitative behavior to regenerative cooperation. Thus, ecofeminism emerges as both critique and remedy – a path from domination to empathy. Focusing on eco-grief or climate-grief, this paper will anticipate both micro and macro ecological interventions, where the dichotomy of exploitation and altruism will be the primary concerns. This research paper enhances the understanding of ecofeminism by defining appropriate definition of gender also incorporates some principles of feminism, aiming to provide support for women.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Altruism, Exploitation, Gender, Environmental, Patriarchal, Ecological knowledge, Cooperation, Eco-grief, Interventions, Vandana Shiva, Carolyn Merchant, Maria Mees, Environment, Ecological Crisis.

Introduction:

In an era that is characterized by ecological degradation, and gender inequalities continue to escalate, ecofeminism emerges as a philosophical response and an activist movement that concerns how women and nature are intertwined and oppressed. Ecofeminism has roots in the feminist movements of the 1970s, and global ecological consciousness shaped it. It scrutinizes the historical and cultural structures

that have subordinated both the environment and the female body within patriarchal dominance. Ecofeminism is not merely a critique of systemic subjugation but a transformative praxis—a remedy that nurtures an altruistic consciousness capable of confronting socio-cultural, environmental, and emotional ruptures. Central to this discussion is the concept of eco-grief or climate grief, which signals the emotional toll of ecological collapse, especially on marginalized communities and gendered bodies.

Vandana Shiva argues that the marginalization of women and the degradation of nature are consequences of the same patriarchal structures that value profit over life, and those indigenous women's ecological practices represent a radical alternative to capitalist development (*Shiva*).

According to Shiva, the mechanistic worldview of Western science devalues what it cannot quantify, as it cannot quantify women's customary knowledge, nurturing roles, and intimate relationship with the earth. She argues that gender influences the ways that people can engage with the environment as more of a socio-political idea since gender is not simply different biologically but instead works toward redefining past patriarchal norms. Ecological wisdom recognition is also stressed now. This wisdom resides in women's everyday lives.

The necessity of critically examining gender as a social construct

Gender includes the socially and also culturally constructed roles and behaviors and also the identities that a society considers as appropriate for either men, women, or non-binary people however gender is still not synonymous with biological sex. Sex is viewed as biological, and gender is social even emotional and psychological. Many people experience a powerful sense for their gender identity that is how they view themselves regardless of their body. For example, someone born with male reproductive organs may feel or even identify as a woman, so this internal sense of identity validates then affects their mental and also their emotional well-being. Gender is not in every case strictly determined via reproductive anatomy. Gender gets determined by one's lived experience in addition to self-expression. Society often imposes rigid gender roles early since it can encourage assertive boys and gentle girls because society links these traits to physical sex. These ideas remain stereotypes not as biological facts. All sexes of people can show a varied range of traits like strength, tenderness, creativity, and leadership.

Shiva argues that gender does not determine one biologically, but instead it constructs a socio-cultural as well as political relationship with the environment. This view resonates with Simone de Beauvoir's assertion:
One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman (de Beauvoir).

Through social conditioning, society imposes the female gender on infants at birth instead of making it a natural essence, and de Beauvoir's words underscore it.

True ecological transformation requires environmental reform plus a rethinking of gender because gender has been manipulated to exclude women from epistemic and environmental authority. This constructed nature of gender becomes much more critical whenever considering ecofeminism, which explores just how patriarchal systems exploit the female body as well as nature through associating both of them with reproduction, passivity, and service. Rigid gender norms start showing their contribution to severe politics with environmental damage. By supporting these assumptions, economic exploitation has also advanced. Therefore, it is essential to understand that gender is a natural given, not a system where roles, responsibilities, and power relate to maintaining all domination structures that harm both people and the planet.

Butler argues that gender is a performative construct, *"instituted through a stylized repetition of acts"* and not an expression of some inner truth (Butler 191).

Judith Butler, in Gender Trouble, argues that gender reflects no natural identity nor something that we are born with. Instead, it is something we perform repeatedly through actions, speech, clothing, gestures, and social behaviour. Biology is not the only reason we seem "male" or "female". We enact behaviours socially learned associated with masculinity or femininity to do so. These performances are not, in fact, freely chosen but instead are internalized through cultural norms along with expectations. Society programs our behaviour so we act like a "man" or a "woman". If repeated with consistency across time, these gendered acts of dressing, speaking, moving, and interacting begin to appear as natural, fixed, and inevitable, though they are entirely socially constructed. This recurs; hiding that gender exists not as a core truth but as a social performance and condition.

Ecofeminism: The Intertwined Oppression of Women and Nature

Ecofeminists focus on interconnections between the domination/oppression of women and the domination/oppression of nature — *Lisa Kemmerer, Sister Species*

At the core of ecofeminism lies the understanding that patriarchal systems have historically viewed both nature and women as controllable, voiceless, passive resources. This dual exploitation stems from such a mindset. Such a mindset regards hierarchy, dominance, and commodification, traits that patriarchal and capitalist ideologies impart. Vandana Shiva argues that the very same logic which marginalizes women likewise devalues nature by reducing it to an object of conquest as well as profit; she is a leading ecofeminist thinker.

The marginalization of women and the degradation of nature are consequences of the same patriarchal structures that value profit over life. (*Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*).

Women have often been symbolically linked with nature as nurturers, life-givers, and caregivers. While these associations may appear empowering, Ecofeminists critique how such symbolic ties have been historically manipulated to

limit women's roles to reproductive or domestic spheres. Nature, likewise, has been feminized in discourse—"Mother Earth," "virgin forest," "fertile soil"—only to be tamed, owned, or exploited. Maya Angelou writes about the sensuality and strength of the female form through the natural elements—sun, grace, rhythm—implying deep-rooted links to the natural world.

It's in the arch of my back,
The sun of my smile,
The ride of my breasts,
The grace of my style.

- Phenomenal Woman (Maya Angelou)

This poem embodies the celebration of the female body—not as an object of male desire but as a source of power, natural beauty, and self-affirmation. Through an ecofeminist lens, these lines can be interpreted as reclamation of womanhood and nature, both of which have historically been suppressed, sexualized, and silenced under patriarchal ideologies. American Philosopher and historian of Science Carolyn Merchant's metaphor brilliantly encapsulate a central tenet of ecofeminism in her The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution, published in the year 1980.

One does not readily slay a mother, dig into her entrails for gold or mutilate her body, although commercial mining would soon require that.
— *Carolyn Merchant, The Death of Nature*

Ecofeminists recognized that life on earth as we know it would be threatened by the military-industrial complex along with its development of nuclear weapons. Chris Domingo's poem "we all live in a tomic submarine" conveys the potential for nuclear weaponry to extinguish every living organism within. It was published in 1981 in Heresies' Special Environmental issue.

The Earth is a woman, gagged and chained,
Her cries dismissed as nature's pain.
Inside this hull of plastic and pride,
Pregnant lungs and rivers collide.
What breathes is silenced, what bleeds ignored,
Till both the mother and the Earth are no more.

- We all live in a tomic submarine (Chris Domingo)

The "toxic submarine" becomes a powerful symbol of patriarchal civilization—sealed, artificial, and inherently destructive—cut off from the nurturing, living world it relentlessly plunders. Within this metaphor, motherhood and the Earth are deeply fused, both enduring the consequences of militarism, technological domination, and ecological neglect. Just as Earth is stripped, poisoned, and exploited, so too are women's bodies subjected to control, violence, and marginalization. The submarine, in this sense, encapsulates a world where the life-giving forces of both nature and

femininity are suffocated under systems that prioritize power over care, and conquest over coexistence. Between 1951 and also 1962, more than 100 nuclear tests in the atmosphere did then occur at the Nevada Test Site; radioactive fallout drifted right across Nevada, Utah, Arizona, along with other areas. This exposure created serious health risks, most notably for pregnant women since radiation levels throughout early pregnancy increased the chances of fetal malformations plus miscarriages plus stillbirths plus low birth weight plus developmental delays plus birth defects. There also have been studies that show women are around 37 to 52 percent more susceptible than are men to cancers that radiation induced. This affects in a particular way the thyroid together with the breast as well as organs for reproduction, which highlights that gendered vulnerability prior to the face of nuclear testing as well as environmental toxicity. In these situations, it's unavoidable to skip the theory of Maria Mies to view the world as divided into two parts, as she mentions.

The division of the world which followed defined certain parts of the world as 'nature' and women of the working class were defined into nature as mere breeders and rearers of the heirs of the capitalist class **(**Mies).

Patriarchy, Capitalism, and the Ecology of Violence

The interlinked structures of patriarchy and capitalism have for a long time maintained social inequality and degraded the environment, scholars say, which causes the ecology of violence. This concept underscores how gendered and economic hierarchies, in particular systemic power imbalances, do contribute to the exploitation of women and also nature's destruction. This violence ecology is not incidental in ecofeminist discourse but a structural result of a world order that privileges profit, dominates, controls rather than coexists mutually, sustains, and cares. Patriarchy is not merely a cultural pattern but an institutionalized system that perpetuates gendered oppression across generations (Firestone).

Patriarchy as a system institutionalizes male dominance over women with feminized bodies. It is what rigid gender roles are created by, and women are often relegated to both unpaid and undervalued care giving and reproductive labour. This marginalization mirrors how people treat nature: people expect both women and the environment to nurture and then produce without recognition from compensation. Vandana Shiva, an important ecofeminist theorist, states that "the marginalization of women and the destruction of nature stem from the same patriarchal logic of domination" since both are viewed as resources for exploitation and control rather than respect and care.

Salleh offers a Marxist-ecofeminist critique, linking gendered labor, ecological degradation, and capitalist production.

The logic of capitalist patriarchy is extractive and alienating—it separates humans from nature and devalues reproductive labor, especially that done by women (Salleh, Ariel).

Capitalism strengthens this violence. Life has decreased its market value because of it. Ecological destruction is justified as economic development, and natural resources—rivers, forests, minerals—are commodified under capitalist logic now. Likewise, some industries turn women's labour and bodies into commodities. These industries range from fashion to surrogacy. In tandem with patriarchy, the capitalist system externalizes costs onto women and the environment because it treats both as infinite reserves for extraction. When the environment degrades because of deforestation and because of pollution, it disproportionately affects women, particularly in marginalized communities in which they rely on the environment for sustenance and survival. Industrial agriculture, as well as mining and militarism, can show the ecology of violence. These sectors often displace Indigenous communities, in addition, pollute ecosystems, and disrupt local economies. The consequences also disproportionately affect the women. Environmental destruction often causes women to lose access to clean water and arable land with safe housing. That is especially valid there. They are indeed at the very forefront with respect to ecological resistance movements. Women acted to protect the earth from the Chipko Movement in India to water protectors in Standing Rock, asserting gender justice and environmental justice are deeply connected.
The rise of capitalism required transforming the body into a work machine and the earth into a resource bank (Federici 141).

We must take apart capitalist and patriarchal frameworks to address violence ecology. It calls for shifting away from domination logic to interdependence and care logic. Ecofeminism can offer up an alternative kind of worldview. That worldview is centered on the values of nurturance and sustainability with reciprocity. This does not mean idealizing women as intrinsically nearer to nature. Recognizing those most affected by ecological and gendered violence are also those most capable of envisioning holistic, inclusive solutions.
The ecology of violence is rooted in capitalist patriarchy's exploitation of both reproductive labor and natural processes (*Mies and Shiva 14).*

Ultimately, patriarchy with capitalism's violent ecology cannot be treated separately from environmental or gender crises. They must be seen inside that framework. The framework is because of the same structural problem. We can move in the direction of a more just and sustainable world that respects human life by examining these systems.

Indigenous Knowledge and the Feminine Principle

The synergy between indigenous knowledge and the feminine principle represents a vital counter-narrative to the dominant Western, patriarchal, and capitalist paradigms that have long dismissed alternative epistemologies and the role of women in ecological stewardship. From an ecofeminist perspective, Indigenous worldviews—often centred around cyclical time, communal survival, and Earth

reverence—embody the essence of the feminine principle, which prioritizes relationality, nurturance, and interconnectedness over control, conquest, and fragmentation. This feminine epistemology is not simply about biological women but about a mode of knowing that resists linearity and hierarchy. Indigenous knowledge systems, as outlined by scholars like Bina Agarwal, are embedded in daily practices, oral traditions, and spiritual cosmologies that emphasize sustainability, reciprocity, and respect for the non-human world. Agarwal argues that rural and indigenous women in South Asia possess a deep ecological wisdom grounded in everyday interaction with natural resources, especially in contexts where they manage forests, water, and agricultural systems collectively (Agarwal 1992).

Their lived experiences form a body of knowledge that Western science often fails to recognize because it is informal, decentralized, and non-institutional. Similarly, Winona LaDuke, a Native American ecofeminist, emphasizes that Indigenous women act as "guardians of cultural memory and biodiversity," holding seed knowledge, environmental rituals, and oral histories that resist the commodification of nature (LaDuke 1999).

For LaDuke, the feminine principle is not metaphorical but embodied in the political struggles of indigenous women protecting sacred lands from industrial expansion, uranium mining, and oil pipelines. Their resistance is not merely environmentalism but a reclamation of cosmological order—what many Indigenous cultures see as the Earth is out of balance due to the patriarchal disruption of traditional matrilineal systems. Moreover, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, a Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, critiques Western knowledge frameworks for their colonial violence and calls for a resurgence of indigenous ways of knowing, which are inherently relational and gender-balanced. According to Simpson, indigenous knowledge is transmitted through stories, songs, and land-based practices that cannot be abstracted into Western academic formats without losing their ethical and communal roots (Simpson 2014).

This epistemic resistance aligns with ecofeminist critiques of reductionist science and technological domination. Indigenous feminine principles, in this view, are not passive or merely reproductive; they are intellectually rigorous, spiritually grounded, and politically defiant. Paula Gunn Allen, a Laguna Pueblo poet and scholar, also draws attention to the centrality of women in indigenous cosmologies, noting that in many Native American traditions, creation myths are matrifocal, and the feminine principle represents creative power, not weakness (Allen 1986).

Allen's work dismantles the colonial narrative that equates femininity with inferiority, showing instead that Indigenous cultures often elevate female deities, clan mothers, and spiritual guides as central figures of wisdom and leadership. In African indigenous contexts, scholars like Ifi Amadiume have highlighted how colonialism

introduced rigid gender binaries and patriarchal hierarchies into societies that were once structured around complementary gender roles. In her seminal work *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, Amadiume discusses the Igbo people's fluid gender systems where women held ritual authority and land rights, challenging the Eurocentric idea that patriarchy is universal (Amadiume 1987).

This fluidity aligns with ecofeminist theories that reject essentialist definitions of gender while affirming the importance of feminist and ecological alliances. The feminine principle in Indigenous knowledge also implies an ethic of care, as theorized by Nel Noddings, where moral reasoning is grounded in empathy and relational understanding rather than abstract rules or utilitarian calculations (Noddings 1984).

Though Noddings is not an Indigenous scholar, her feminist ethic of care resonates with how many women approach environmental ethics—not as resource management but as kinship-based responsibility. Similarly, Deborah McGregor, an Anishinaabe scholar, asserts that Indigenous environmental knowledge is holistic, integrating spiritual and material realities, and emphasizes that women's roles are crucial in maintaining this harmony because they are often responsible for water protection and food sovereignty (McGregor 2004). In the Andean cosmovision, the Earth is known as *Pachamama*, a living being with whom humans must coexist in harmony; indigenous women, particularly in Bolivia and Peru, conduct rituals of reciprocity to maintain this balance, seeing the feminine not as subservient but as central to ecological and spiritual health. This worldview contradicts capitalist logic that separates subject and object, human and nature, and man and woman.

As Ariel Salleh notes, such divisions are artificial constructs used to justify exploitation, whereas Indigenous feminine ontologies see all life as interconnected and reciprocal (Salleh 2009).

The Western project of modernization has systematically undermined these worldviews through land dispossession, knowledge extraction, and the erasure of women's roles in ecological memory. However, despite centuries of epistemic violence, indigenous women continue to practice, preserve, and adapt their knowledge systems in the face of global climate threats. In this sense, the feminine principle is not only a philosophical concept but a mode of survival and resistance. Moreover, Indigenous feminist scholars like Kim Anderson have explored how reclaiming traditional roles can empower contemporary Indigenous women to challenge both internalized patriarchy and external colonial oppression, advocating for a return to ancestral values where the balance between masculine and feminine energies ensures the well-being of the community and the environment (Anderson 2010).

This balance is central to ecofeminist praxis, which seeks not to reverse power hierarchies but to dissolve them, creating new systems where care, sustainability, and justice are prioritized. As the planet faces ecological collapse, indigenous knowledge—embodied, feminized, and spiritual—offers a pathway to regeneration. It teaches us that environmental healing is not possible without social healing and that the feminine principle is not a relic of the past but a blueprint for the future.

Altruism as an Ecofeminist Ethic

Ecofeminism, as both a philosophy and a movement, emerges as a powerful healer in an era marked by ecological devastation and social fragmentation. Central to this healing vision is altruism—an ethic of care, empathy, and selfless responsibility toward all forms of life. Ecofeminism challenges the hierarchical binaries of man/woman, culture/nature, and reason/emotion that have justified the exploitation of both women and the environment under patriarchal capitalism. In place of domination and profit, it proposes a life-centred ethic rooted in compassion, community, and mutual flourishing.

Altruism, in this context, is not a passive sacrifice but an active commitment to nurturing relationships—between humans and nature and among diverse communities. It recognizes interdependence as strength rather than a weakness. As ecofeminist theorist Ariel Salleh notes, women's labour—often invisible and unpaid—embodies a form of metabolic care that sustains life itself (Salleh 2009). Such labour includes seed preservation, care giving, food production, and ecological rituals, many of which are rooted in Indigenous traditions that value reciprocity and balance.

Ecofeminism, therefore, does not seek to reverse power dynamics but to dissolve the structures of domination through an ethic that heals rather than harms. It re-centers the feminine principle as a symbol of life-regeneration and Earth-consciousness. In doing so, ecofeminism not only addresses the environmental crisis but also reweaves the social fabric torn apart by violence, inequality, and alienation. Altruism becomes the thread that connects justice with ecology, ethics with activism, and healing with hope. By envisioning a world where care replaces conquest, ecofeminism offers not just critique but cure, not just resistance but restoration—a radical reimagining of life on Earth.

Rewriting the Narrative: A Gendered Vision of Sustainability

Mainstream narratives of sustainability have often been shaped by technocratic, market-driven approaches that prioritize economic growth over ecological well-being and social justice. These frameworks tend to overlook the gendered dimensions of environmental issues, ignoring how women—especially those from marginalized communities—are disproportionately affected by ecological degradation while simultaneously playing vital roles in environmental protection. Rewriting the narrative of sustainability through a gendered lens means shifting away

from anthropocentric and patriarchal models toward a more inclusive, life-affirming vision that values care, interdependence, and ecological balance.

A gendered vision of sustainability acknowledges that women are not merely victims of environmental harm but are crucial agents of ecological knowledge and resistance**.** From indigenous women safeguarding ancestral lands to rural women leading grassroots conservation efforts, their contributions often go unrecognized in policy and academic discourse. Feminist scholars such as Bina Agarwal and Leanne Simpson emphasize that women's everyday interactions with land, water, and biodiversity generate forms of knowledge that are practical, relational, and deeply sustainable. These practices reflect an eco-social ethic grounded in reciprocity, community well-being, and long-term thinking—values often absent from corporate environmentalism.

Rewriting the narrative also entails challenging the masculinized language of domination, control, and "saving" the planet**,** replacing it with a vocabulary of coexistence, nurturing, and co-evolution**.** It calls for reimagining sustainability not as a technical fix or green capitalism, but as a profound cultural and structural transformation rooted in gender justice and environmental harmony**.** A gendered vision of sustainability insists that the health of the planet and the well-being of all its inhabitants are inseparably linked. It urges us to listen to silenced voices, reclaim feminist and indigenous wisdom, and build a future grounded in equity, care, and collective resilience**.**

Conclusion: Toward an Eco-Altruistic Future

By tracing the interwoven oppressions of women and nature—from the historical erasure of women's ecological knowledge to the commodification of the Earth under patriarchal capitalism—ecofeminist thought invites a reimagination of both human and planetary relationships. It offers a holistic framework in which environmental sustainability and gender justice are mutually reinforcing rather than separate domains.

At the heart of ecofeminist praxis is the recognition of gender as a constructed category—an evolving performance shaped by social, cultural, and political systems. Thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler have revealed that gender is not a fixed biological destiny but a fluid, performative identity that is continuously reinforced through societal expectations. This understanding is essential to dismantling the hierarchies that link femininity with passivity, service, or naturalness—associations that have been historically weaponized to justify the subordination of both women and the environment. As ecofeminism shows, the very logic used to dominate nature is the same logic used to restrict and exploit women.
The role of indigenous knowledge and the feminine principle, as this paper outlines, becomes crucial here. From Pachamama in the Andes to matrifocal cosmologies in Native American traditions, indigenous worldviews emphasize the sacredness of life,

the interdependence of beings, and the moral necessity of reciprocity—values often overlooked in Western capitalist models of development.

Figures like Vandana Shiva, Carolyn Merchant, Maria Mies, Winona LaDuke, and others have powerfully illuminated how women's ecological knowledge—often derived from everyday experiences of caregiving, farming, and community building—offers pathways to ecological regeneration. These insights are not nostalgic retreats to tradition but living, dynamic forms of resistance and creativity that can inform new policies, practices, and philosophies for a just and sustainable world. Altruism here is not an abstract virtue but a concrete political strategy—a way of organizing life around the principles of empathy, interconnection, and justice.

Patriarchy and capitalism together produce an *ecology of violence* that fragments societies, degrades ecosystems, and silences the most vulnerable. This violence is not incidental—it is systemic. It is found in nuclear testing, industrial pollution, climate displacement, and the daily invisibilization of women's work and voices. To move from this ecology of violence toward an ecology of care, we must dismantle the logic of domination and extractivism that lie at the heart of modern civilization. Ecofeminism challenges these logics by centring a gendered vision of sustainability—one that sees ecological well-being not as a technical outcome but as a relational and ethical practice.

Ultimately, ecofeminism offers a worldview toward healing more than a critical lens. We can move toward that future in which the dignity of its people is inseparable from Earth's health via embracing a feminist ethic of care, indigenous wisdom, as well as altruism. This very intersectional approach could be just about our most promising path forward in this time of climate breakdown as well as social fragmentation. It is a route to survival and also renewal.

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