

## The Metaphysical Foundations of Ecofeminism

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### Abstract

The need for fundamental axioms that undergird human knowledge and practices is quite important. This becomes all the more imperative when it concerns the justification for an ideology and movement that explore the link or intersection between gender and environmentalism: two concepts that have been brought to the front burner in the most recent times. The present investigation on the metaphysical foundations of ecofeminism sets out to examine the ontological status and foundations of ecofeminism. Perceived through the lens of the two different and opposing traditional metaphysical theories of realism and idealism, ecofeminism, it is discovered, is a substantial reality as well as a social-cultural construct undergirded by polarizing or divisive metaphysics or ontology and perfected by logic of domination which justifies the unjustifiable premises that serve to engineer ecofeminism. As a panacea to the above predicament, the present paper calls for a more integrative and complementary metaphysics that harps on interconnectedness, mutual dependence of realities and inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness and polarization. This can serve to create the framework for harmonious and humane inter-relationship not only among human beings but also between humans and non-human entities, and thus ground affirmative ecofeminism. The approach for this study is analytic.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, metaphysical foundation, social construct, patriarchy and equality

### Introduction

The need for fundamental axioms that undergird human knowledge and practices is quite important. This becomes all the more imperative when it concerns the theoretical justification for an ideology and movement that explore the link or intersection between gender and environmentalism. Different strands of ecofeminism have been championed by various activists and authors, all in attempt to address the ugly predicament of domination of nature and subjugation of women. A good number of authors have also explored the intersections between philosophy and ecofeminism. The present paper leans on what they have done to properly diagnose the root cause(s) and to find a lasting panacea to the problems and challenges that engage the ecofeminists. Françoise d'Eaubonne who coined the word 'ecofeminism' clearly perceived that there was a problem on ground and set out to address the problem. She was brilliant enough to link the problem of subjugation of women to that which the environment and indeed other less privileged human beings were experiencing. She boldly pointed accusing finger to patriarchy. D'Eaubonne was militant in her quest for equality and her attack on patriarchy. However, these can best be called misdirected efforts. Even if matriarchy had replaced patriarchy the problems of inequality, discrimination, subjugation or domination could have persisted or even worsened. The root-cause is yet to be properly

addressed. Similarly, other authors such as Carolyn Merchant who tended to be more historical than philosophical; Karen Warren (2000), Val Plumwood, etc, sufficiently x-rayed the philosophical roots of the problem but failed to proffer ontological solution that is integrative and complementary enough.

There is therefore dire need to determine the ontological status of ecofeminism and to address the root cause of the problem that engages ecofeminists by proffering possible solution to the dichotomies that lay at the root of ecofeminism. Yes! The oppressive patriarchal framework has been exposed. The binary thinking or value dualism has been highlighted, including the logic of domination which provides the logical cum epistemic justification for the above ugly and inhuman treatment. The present new challenge lies in not only x-raying the metaphysical foundation of ecofeminism but also finding the ontological panacea to the problematique that engages ecofeminism. This is the very task which the present paper undertakes.

### **The Concept of Ecofeminism**

The term 'ecofeminism' or 'ecological feminism' was coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in the year 1974. It is a compound word comprising of ecology, (the study of living organisms and their environment) and feminism which popularly has to do with advocacy for equality and protection of women rights. Ecofeminism tries to establish a link between exploitation of nature and subjugation of women, between environmentalism and feminism. Karen Waren averres that "Nature is a feminist issue" might well be called the slogan of ecofeminism (20). Agathe Ranc remarks that, the historian Caroline Goldblum had explained that, D'Eaubonne criticized the phenomenon of patriarchy and its thirst for absolute power, as being responsible for both environmental disasters (through overproduction and the capitalist logic) and the subjugation of women (by appropriating women's bodies)"( Agathe Ranc). Ecofeminism is both an activist and academic movement. It is a strand of feminism and a form of theorization that explores the link or intersection between women and nature; the human and the non-human world. It tries to establish that there are connections between the exploitation/degradation of nature or the environment and subjugation of women and therefore, seeks for liberation and better treatment of both simultaneously. It explores the domination which human beings exert over non-human entities.

Karen Waren (20) writes that, "ecological feminists ("ecofeminists") claim that there are important connections between the unjustified dominations of women, people of colour, children, and the poor and the unjustified domination of nature." Eco-feminists opine that social justice is inextricably linked to environmental justice; therefore one cannot be actualized without the other. Meanwhile, the concept of ecofeminism has been widened as it extends its tentacles to such areas as: social ecology, deep ecology, racism, sexism etc. The broadening of the concept of ecofeminism can be likened to what Waren (20) says of feminism:

What does it mean to say "nature is a feminist issue"? Minimally, something is a "feminist issue" if an understanding of it helps one understand the oppression, subordination, or domination of women. Equal rights, comparable pay for comparable work, and day care centers are feminist issues because understanding them sheds light on the subordination or inferior status of women cross-culturally. Racism, classism, ableism, ageism, heterosexism, anti-Semitism, and colonialism are feminist issues because understanding them helps one understand the subordination of women.

Though there are diverse forms of ecofeminism, one finds some common elements of convergence in their line of thinking. These can be classified as the claims or theses that

ecofeminism generally champions. The arguments of the ecofeminists can be outlined in the following statements:

- i. **Oppressive Patriarchal Conceptual Framework:** Conceptual inter-connections play significant role in articulation of ecofeminist theses or arguments. All ecofeminists agree that there are vital connections between the unjustifiable exploitation of nature and subjugation of women though they may disagree on the nature of the connections. One of the core theses of the ecofeminists anchors on oppressive patriarchal conceptual framework. According to Karen (46) “an oppressive conceptual framework is one that functions to explain, maintain, and “justify” relationships of unjustified domination and subordination. When an oppressive conceptual framework is *patriarchal*, it functions to justify the subordination of women by men.” Accusing finger is here pointed at patriarchal structure of the society and the phenomena of anthropocentrism and androcentrism (human centered and (man-centered) arrangement of the society) which privilege men over women and also serve as the root cause of environmental exploitation. The eco-feminists do not necessarily make case for matriarchy to replace patriarchy rather for equality. In a résumé, oppressive patriarchal conceptual framework with ‘up-down’ structuring favours those at the top (men) and subjugates the others at the down (women and others).
- ii. **Value Dualism or Binary Thinking:** this polarizes realities into two unequal and un-complementing parts. For example:  
 Nature - Culture  
 Reason - Emotion  
 Feminine - Masculine  
 Indeed there is nothing intrinsically bad about nature or culture, reason or emotion or any of the above realities. But there is everything wrong in employing the above binary formulations as tools of oppression by the affirmation of one and negation of the other. For instance, the phenomenon of reason or rationality has been so disproportionately affirmed and exaggerated in Western culture while emotion somewhat relegated.
- iii. **Logic of Domination:** the tool of logic of domination is basically employed in structuring arguments to justify dominance and subjugation. Karen (47) observes that:  
 The most important characteristic of an oppressive framework is  
 is  
 that it sanctions a *logic of domination*, that is, a logical argumentation that “justifies” domination and subordination. Logic [of domination] assumes that superiority justifies subordination. Logic of domination serves as the moral stamp of approval for subordination, since, if accepted, becomes the justification for keeping Downs down.

In a résumé, the logic of domination justifies the unjustifiable domination and subjugation of women and nature.

### What is Metaphysics?

The major task of the present paper is to investigate the metaphysical foundations of ecofeminism. Before delving into this investigation it is good to have a bird’s eyes view of what metaphysics is. In its popular or common parlance, metaphysics is often misconceived to be something occultic, spiritualism, mysticism, idealistic attitude or approach to life or issues, dry and abstract rationalization etc. All these are but mere misconceptions or connotations and

quite different from what the word ‘metaphysics’ stands for in academic philosophy. Etymologically the word metaphysics derives from two Greek words *ta meta* (meaning *after*) and *ta phusika* (*physics/nature*). Literally therefore, the term metaphysics translates “after physics.” The serendipity surrounding the emergence of the term metaphysics is quite interesting. Andronicus of Rhodes (70 BC) while editing and arranging the works of Aristotle discovered an untitled treatise after the treatise on nature (physics). He entitled the treatise *metaphysics* which means “after physics” (as already stated) referring to the *position* of the treatise in the whole compilation. The name later came to be applied to the *content* of the treatise and not just the *position* of the treatise when, during the later classical and medieval era, it became fashionable to discuss/study the topics in metaphysics after that of the physics of Aristotle given that the treatise on metaphysics deals with abstract realities far removed from the physical world of sensory perception and as such more difficult to be understood.

Like most terms and concepts in philosophy, there is no generally accepted definition of the term metaphysics. Michael J. Loux and Thomas M. Crisp (xi) affirm that, “metaphysics is a discipline with a long history; and over the course of that history, the discipline has been conceived in different ways. These different conceptions associate different methodologies and even different subject matters with the discipline”. However, metaphysics can be substantively, defined as the study of *Being as Being* (*ens qua ens*). It is a branch of philosophy that studies being or reality in its most extensive or comprehensive scope. It seeks to unravel the *raison d’être* and the true nature of reality. Metaphysics deals not with an aspect but rather every aspect of whatever that exists, material and nonmaterial. The formal object of metaphysics is therefore simply *the act of being*, the act of existence.

The two major branches of metaphysics are ontology and cosmology. Ontology or *general metaphysics* is the study of what there is. Ontology is derived from two Greek words *ontos* (being) and *logos* (study/science). Ontology is therefore study/science of being. It studies being from the most general perspective. There seems to be a peculiar relationship between metaphysics and ontology. In his forward to Piotr Jaroszyński book, *Metaphysics or Ontology*, Robert Anthony Delfino writes that “the proper object of metaphysics is being” (xi). Similarly ontology studies being, which now (in the modern period) includes not only currently existing beings but also possible beings. This partially accounts for the transformation of metaphysics to ontology in the modern period. Hence a good number of authors tend to use the two words interchangeably. On this note, E. J. Lowe avers that “the conception of philosophy that I favour is one which places metaphysics at the heart of philosophy and ontology—the science of being—at the heart of metaphysics (3-4). Our discourse on the metaphysical foundations will toe the above line of thinking.

### **Metaphysical Foundations of Ecofeminism**

As already stated, metaphysics is concerned with what is; what constitutes reality and possibly the *raison d’être* of being or reality. For *Carolyn Korsmeyer* “metaphysics is the study of the nature of reality, and especially the things which constitute it (i.e., ontology). One traditional issue in metaphysics is how to account for the way in which things persist through time (so-called diachronic identity); that is, how they maintain their identity throughout widespread and often dramatic change” (144). A good investigation on the metaphysical foundations of ecofeminism ought to begin by determining the ontological or metaphysical status of ecofeminism. Traditionally, the two contending or opposing lens through which metaphysics perceives reality have been realism and idealism. The question now is: Which of these two better captures or rather represents the phenomenon of ecofeminism? Realists are of the opinion that entities have concrete, ready-made and independent existence. On the contrary,

idealists argue that realities are dependent on the human mind or consciousness. Is the phenomenon of ecofeminism of an independent existence or is it just a product of human cognitive activities? Ecofeminism falls in-between. On the one hand, it is a substantial and real phenomenon; on the other hand, it is a social construction; an ideology and product of human cognitive efforts. Man and woman are real; gender (femininity and masculinity) are socially constructed. The conglomeration of human conditions that cumulatively gave rise to the conception of ecofeminism is real and has objective existence. But this does not negate the fact of ecofeminism being a social-cultural construct. It takes the human mind or consciousness to analyze and interpret the interactions among humans and the relationship between humans and non-human entities. It is on account of this that we have various strands of ecofeminism which emanate from human interpretative efforts. A given phenomenon can be variously interpreted depending on how they are conceived by different peoples and individuals.

It is however obvious that ecofeminism is an off-shoot of an age-long dualistic thinking and its attendant divisive and subjugating effects. The intractable problem of dualism is one that has plagued Western culture and philosophy for a long time. Plato's theory of Forms had subdivided reality into ideal and perfect realities of the World of Forms and the transitory imperfect realities of World of Appearance. This is the virus of dualism that infected Western thinking. The dualistic element in Western thinking got to its apex in Modern period via Rene Descartes who subdivided reality or substance into *res cogitans* (the mind/consciousness) and *res extensa* (the physical world). As simple as the above postulation might appear, it exerts the greatest polarizing effects in Western culture. A closer look at the claims of the ecofeminists shows a common thread that runs through the theses or claims of ecofeminism. This is the dichotomizing or polarizing conception of reality. It is clearly evidenced in the oppressive and hierarchical patriarchal framework, the binary or dualist value system and the logic of domination. The undergirding ontology is simply polarizing. The panacea to its maladies can be found in relational and complementary metaphysics.

### **Towards a More Integrating and Complementary Metaphysics**

A people's general view of reality shapes the way they live and interact not only with each other but also with every other entity around. An atomized and static conception of reality, that is, an atomized and static ontology results to acute individualism. A polarizing and elitist ontology as evidenced in Plato's World of Forms. Aristotle's affirmation of substance over accident and Descartes' prioritizing of mind over body (consciousness or reason over emotion) can only result in not only binary or divisive relationship but also superiority-inferiority dichotomy. This is the affirmation of one and the negation of the other. This is the root cause of manifold problems that plague humanity such as predatory relationship as evidenced in colonialism, racism, better-than-thou attitude etc. This is also the root cause of the challenges which ecofeminism is facing. As a panacea, there is a dire need for integrating and complementing ontology.

Dynamic, integrating and complementing ontology constitute the bedrock the African philosophy and other similar philosophies: Innocent Asouzu's complementary ontology which perceives every existing entity as a *missing link* of reality; Godfrey Ozumba's and Jonathan C himakonam's Integrative Ontology, Chimakonam's Nmekoka Ontology, Pantaleon Iroegbu's *Uwa* ontology to name but few. The peculiarities of the above mentioned ontologies lie in their understanding of reality as dynamic, dependent and interdependent, relational and complementing rather than atomized and isolated. There is no doubt the above ontologies will yield complementary and inter-dependent relationship among people. Men need women and women need men. The black need the white just as the white need the black. The human beings

need the non-human entities just as the non-human entities need human entities. They all complement each other in a common universe shared by all. The above relational ontology or metaphysics partly account for the communal existence that obtained in the traditional African world. This runs contrary to polarizing ontology at the root of ecofeminism and can serve as a panacea to the problem which engages ecofeminism.

George E. Tinker, (as interviewed by Sabine O'Hara and cited in William E. Gibson, 150) paints a graphic picture of the above African ontology even though he references what obtains in the Indian world:

In the Indian world we understand the difference between maleness and femaleness, and we also understand the different gifts that come with that, the different gifts that women have and men have. But we also know that there is a male and a female inside each one of us, that the world is constructed as constant reciprocation between maleness and femaleness. That's why God is called on quite often (I use the word God loosely here) as grandfather and as grandmother.

The same manner of interdependence and interconnectedness undergird human relationship with non-human entities. As ecofeminism embraces not only humans but also non-humans, it is the thesis of the present paper that the African relational and complementary ontology can fecundate the humane relationship which the ecofeminists so much desire.

### **Conclusion**

The present paper is an investigation on the metaphysical foundations of ecofeminism. The motivation is not only to broaden the theoretical foundation of ecofeminism but also to find a *sanatio in radice* (healing from the root) to the dualism and dichotomizing ontology that serve to give rise to ecofeminism. The concept of metaphysics and the inextricable link between metaphysics and ontology are explored. The paper then x-rays the metaphysical or ontological status of ecofeminism. The discovery is that ecofeminism simultaneously stands as a substantive reality and a social construct. This underscores the fact of its varied forms and reaffirms the conviction of its being subject to modifications. Socio-cultural constructs are subject to change just as culture itself changes.

A critical look at the concept of ecofeminism and the claims of the ecofeminists brings to the limelight the dualistic and dichotomizing ontology which ran like a thread along the claims of the ecofeminists. This serves as the virus that fecundated the ugly conditions of inequality, discrimination, domination and subjugation which ecofeminism contends with. Of course, there are numerous claims and arguments of the ecofeminists but the present paper limits itself to the core three of the claims. To find a panacea to the above predicament, the paper resorts to integrating and complementary ontology as found in African philosophy. It is the firm belief of the present paper that a good application of the above metaphysical framework can serve to fecundate harmonious and humane relationship not only among humans but also between humans and non-human entities.

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