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Why Ecofeminism Matters

Narrating/translating ecofeminism(s)

Abstract

Ecofeminism is a widely encompassing ideology, touching on subjects as diverse as nature-based religion, women's rights, environmental issues about water, land, and air pollution, wildlife conservation but also the oppression of Third World countries and peoples by Western industrialized nations. A major proposition is that a society based on cooperation and balance rather than dominance and hierarchy is necessary for the survival on this planet of any living being, that is why ecofeminist scholars propose to think about a change in our perspective about a sense of community based on a system of cooperation, ecology, and protection of planet Earth, and not its exploitation and destruction.

As a theoretical and activist movement, ecofeminism emerged in the US context of the 1970s and 1980s from the intersection of feminist studies and the arising movements for social justice and environmental health. It started as a framework that sought to combine, re-examine and widen these movements. Since then, ecofeminism has developed into different directions and spread across the world. When we discuss ecofeminism today we know it is intersectional and global, it shows how women live and act in different geographical, social, political and cultural contexts. My essay wants to examine how ecofeminist ideas have been narrated and translated into various linguistic/cultural contexts since their American beginning and how they have developed, changed and readapted through different textual typologies, from books to newspaper articles, blogs and web publications.

Keywords: *ecofeminism, translation, narration, reception, web publications*

Ecofeminism is a widely encompassing ideology, touching on subjects as diverse as nature-based religion, women's rights, environmental issues about water, land, and air pollution, wildlife conservation but also the oppression of Third World countries and peoples by Western industrialized nations. A major ecofeminist proposition is that a society based on cooperation and balance rather than dominance and hierarchy is necessary for the survival of any living being. Thus, ecofeminist scholars propose that we change our perspective and develop a sense of community based on a system of cooperation, ecology, and protection of planet Earth.

Ecofeminism emerged in the US between the 1970s and 1980s from the intersection of feminist

studies and the rising movements for social justice and environmental health which it sought to combine, re-examine and widen through theory and activism. Since then, ecofeminism has developed into different directions and spread across the world. Today ecofeminism is intersectional and global, showing how women live and act in different geographical, social, political, and cultural contexts.

My aim is to examine how ecofeminist ideas have been narrated and translated into various linguistic/cultural contexts since their American beginning and have developed and readapted through different textual typologies, from books to newspaper articles, blogs, and web publications. Since its start, ecofeminism has conjured up a different view of ecological issues and of women's involvement in them. Moreover, the driving force of translation and reception of texts will be considered in different contexts to demonstrate how translating ecofeminist volumes and narrating both theories and activist positions has allowed ecofeminisms to travel across borders and be widened and adapted to new social and cultural soils. The narration of ecofeminism by non-Western ecofeminist theorists has enlarged and enriched the Western debate and revealed how necessary and urgent it is to fill the gap between theory and practice relating ecofeminist theories to concrete practices that can change our way of living.

This essay is divided into three parts: the first deals with delineating the main ecofeminist theories, the second refers to the translations of two important ecofeminist works, and the third highlights how ecofeminism reaches a wider audience through a re-narration/translation of its major issues in web publications.

1. Introduction: what is Ecofeminism?

Ecofeminism, an umbrella term for many different theoretical and political positions, helps us to understand our social and environmental circumstances and stands as a label for acknowledging how feminism(s) foster a social and political change that involves ecology and the well-being of our planet and ourselves. More than a term, it is a framework for conceiving different feminist activist positions that have inspired different lines of environmental ethics; a framework that examines, combines, and presents environmental feminist movements all over the world. Ecology and feminism are symmetrical in contrasting the oppression of the environment and the oppression of women: indeed, ecofeminism emphasizes the ways both nature and women are unequally treated. This is the reason why ecofeminist movements advocate an alternative worldview that considers the planet as a sacred place to be safeguarded and recognizes human dependency on the natural world. All life and all living beings are equally valuable and should be safeguarded (Gaard 2017; 1993; Griffin 2016; Phillips and Rumens 2015;

Adams and Gruer 2014; Biehl 1991; Diamond and Feman Ornstein 1990; Plant 1989; Caldecott and Leland 1983). As Aaron Stibbe outlines, “one of the aims of ecofeminism is to change society so that the ecological sensitivity gained by women through their practical role in community building is valued and used in rebuilding more ecological societies” (Stibbe 2015, 12). The leitmotif of ecofeminisms worldwide is thus the principle of equality between genders, the revaluation of non-patriarchal or nonlinear structures, a view of the world that respects organic processes and has a strong commitment to the environment.

2. The roots of Ecofeminism

The discourse on ecology involved a wider critique of a hierarchical dualist thought and logic of domination towards women and minorities. Because the liberation of women and of the environment from human destruction shared a rejection of global capitalism, ecofeminist theory was connected to practice and activism from the very start.

In *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1980) Carolyn Merchant, one of the most known voices of ecofeminism, opened at the beginning of the 80s a debate on the connection between women and the natural worlds versus a male-dominated science and technology. In *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (1989) she focused on agency, claiming that nature itself is an historical actor and alterations always have a response from nature through ecological changes. In *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (1996) she highlighted once again how nature can strike back at human beings in ways it is not possible to foresee, stressing even more the question of agency of bodies and nature as an active, signifying force, an agent in its own terms and not an object to be subdued. Merchant’s position consists of two main points that will be re-thought and re-narrated by other scholars: 1) the strong connections between the ‘feminine’ and the natural world and the analogy between women and nature drawing on the idea that they are epistemologically, biologically, and symbolically connected; 2) the idea that humans’ alterations to nature always have a response from nature itself through ecological changes, linked to the feminist notion of the ethics of care. Merchant’s fundamental voice in ecological feminism was carried on by other scholars such as Val Plumwood, who in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) showed how the binary thinking permeating Western culture and centering around the human/nature, mind/matter dualisms is not only gendered, raced, and classed but it also constructs a colonialist identity which she has called ‘the Master model.’ In the following decade ecofeminists continued to deconstruct the woman/nature, man/culture duality which according to Merchant has functioned as a discursive anchor tethering women to a subordinate position.

Another materialist feminist, Stacy Alaimo, in *Undomesticated Grounds Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (2000) affirmed that women should deploy discourses of woman and nature to subvert them, thus destabilizing the nature/culture divide. Alaimo's concept of 'trans-corporeality' challenged the debate on ecofeminism making clear how our embodiment intersects with other flows of life, matter and energy. Trans-corporeality shows how the creation of neologisms reinforced ecofeminist thoughts. Using the term 'trans' Alaimo pointed to the bond between the human body in its materiality and the natural universe. Trans-corporeality is thus "the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from 'nature' or 'environment.'" Trans-corporeality, as a theoretical site, is a place where corporeal theories and environmental theories meet and mingle in productive ways" (Alaimo 2000, 238). A decade later, Alaimo and Susan Hekman coedited *Natural Feminisms* (2008), introducing emerging models of materiality in feminist theories: "we need ways of understanding the agency, significance, and ongoing transformative power of the world" (Alaimo and Hekman 2008, 5). Nancy Tuana's notion of 'viscous porosity' also reconsidered the materiality of nature and human beings. Tuana reflects on the impacts of the devastating hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and underlines "the urgency of embracing an ontology that rematerializes the social and takes seriously the agency of the natural" (Tuana 2008, 188), thus calling for an interaction between the natural sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences. Karen Barad's articulation of "how matter comes to matter" and definition of "posthuman performativity" (2008, 10) incorporate both the material and the discursive, the human and the non-human, the natural and the cultural, while challenging these dichotomies. Barad identifies her position as "agential realism" (2008, 11). Referring to Niels Bohr's argument that scientific theories describe "agential reality," Barad defines an epistemological and ontological framework that takes as its central concerns "the nature of materiality, the relationship between the material and the discursive" (103), affirming that agential realism "is a form of social constructivism that does not reduce knowledge to power plays or language, but rather accounts for the material consequences or knowledge" (104). The creation of new words is clearly necessary for a new ontological framework.

Ecofeminism is thus 'translated' and narrated through linguistic choices starting from two premises: 1) we need neologisms to talk about new ideas, and 2) we must use language in a sustainable way. Ecofeminists use new forms of language that can inspire people to protect the natural world while exposing the causes of ecological destruction. For this reason, ecofeminism has been considered as a branch of ecolinguistics which comprises many approaches to language and ecology. Not only have ecofeminists clarified how language shapes discourses and

narrations about the natural world, they have also paved the way to trans-disciplinarity leading to a 'holistic' worldview where any living element is interconnected with nature. Ecofeminists follow a philosophical approach which, as Door and Madsen underline, considers "the earth, Gaia, [as] a living unity and a complex system" (2007, 268).

The importance of language and how we use it is even more evident if we look at how and when ecofeminist theories have been translated into other languages. It is through the translation from English—the main language used by ecofeminist scholars—that ideas have travelled, hybridized the discussion, and enlarged the debate beyond the Western world.

3. Rachel Carson's not so silent spring

Carson can be considered as the 'mother' of ecofeminism, as the role and legacy of *Silent Spring* in contemporary ecofeminism around the world are undeniable. The reading and reception of *Silent Spring* in the US and other parts of the world allowed ecofeminist issues to emerge and circulate. As a pioneer of environmentalism, Carson paved the way for environmental and social activism, highlighting that the protection of the environment is a moral duty. Her seminal text anticipated many ecological issues of the following years.

Carson's avant-garde ecofeminism, calling for education and action to raise awareness about environmental and gender issues, has been a pivotal reading for future action in feminist environmental battles. Her voice echoes in the work of Carolyn Merchant, Val Plumwood, Stacy Alaimo, Susan Hekman, Karen Barad, Vandana Shiva, and it is retraceable also in the voices of young ecofeminists such as Nigerian ecofeminist Oladosu Adenike, leader of ILeadClimate, a grassroots movement advocating the restoration of Lake Chad and youth involvement in climate justice through education, and Ruth Nyambura, founder of the African Ecofeminists Collective. Carson's words have been translated and read in various cultural, social, and political contexts, have grown and adapted to new milieus, inspiring scholars and activists but also 'common readers' and the wider public which thanks to her work has been able to understand environmental concerns from another perspective. She has made a fundamental contribution to the popularization of ecological matters thanks to her communication skills (Griswold 2012). More than 50 years after its publication, *Silent Spring* remains a significant piece of environmental literature and its author a forerunner of the ecofeminist debate.

At the time of its publication it had a massive impact in the US and became the book that changed the world. As Mark Stoll demonstrates in his 'virtual exhibition' about Rachel Carson's legacy (Stoll 2012), abridged selections of the work appeared on the pages of popular periodicals so that hundreds of thousands who never picked up the book could read Carson's words on the

pages of the popular French magazine *Paris-Match*, the Italian journal *L'Europeo*, the Dutch weekly newspaper *Elseviers Weekblad*, the Swedish magazine *Vi*, and *Helsingin Sanomat*, the largest Finnish newspaper. Carson's message permeated European media and was also widely reviewed in major magazines and journals, so that its echo has been long-lasting.

As Stoll affirms, Carson's message acquired a special place in popular culture, politics, and science. Al Gore, vice-president during Clinton's mandate, affirmed that "Rachel Carson's book provides undeniable proof that the power of an idea can be far greater than the power of politicians" (Springer 2017, 64) and recognized the importance of the book in his own life. Through abridged selections, reviews, and rewritings in popular texts such as comics, Carson's ideas have been reframed making *Silent Spring* an iconic book. While Stoll (2012) underlines a difference between the influence of Carson's ideas in the US and Europe, it is undeniable that the strength of her message stems from the widespread nature of the text through translations into different languages. Since its publication it became quickly available in Europe and worldwide, being published in more than fifteen languages across Europe, the Americas and Asia. As Stoll underlines, translations were published in German, French, Swedish, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, Icelandic, Norwegian, Slovenian, Chinese, Thai, Korean, and Turkish. While devaluated as a scientist and criticized in many ways, Carson became a central figure in the environmentalist debate; her ideas and narration of what ecofeminism would become reverberated around the world. Her work deeply influenced feminist and environmental movements in the US, planting the seeds for a critique of racial, class, gender differences and making people aware of men's dominion of the natural world.

4. Carolyn Merchant's role in the ecofeminist message

In Italy the publisher Editrice Bibliografica released in March 2022 a new publication of Carolyn Merchant's *La morte della natura*, translated for the first time by Libero Sosio for Garzanti in 1980. Merchant's book is another touchstone volume for the narration of ecofeminist issues. At the beginning of the 1980s Merchant took further Carson's idea of exploitation of the natural world and showed the image of a helpless and exploited nature.

The translation and reception of Merchant's *The Death of Nature* paved the way for one of the most important and controversial issues of ecofeminism: the interconnectedness between women and nature. Showing how nature is metaphorized as a goddess in various cultures, Merchant elucidates the changes of both women's role and the image of the Earth in the passage from matriarchal to patriarchal societies. Through the centuries, nature has been transformed from a living organism into a silent and passive element in opposition to humans. The idea of

men's exploitation of both women and the Earth was criticized for its 'essentialist' position, exemplified by Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (2016):

there stands a very intimate connection between women and the earth. Women reproduce offspring and the earth bears all things, so they share the experience. Women are the earth, and vice versa. Due to the particularity of women, they can better understand the nature. And nature talks to women just as nature does to itself, while women understand nature also like knowing themselves. (Griffin 2016, 9)

If Merchant's coupling of women and nature developed into other theories and positions that highlighted the exploitative relationship that men establish with women, Chun-hua and Ziyan claim that Merchant's legacy went even further:

She also examined evolution of nature in the historical setting of science, culture and economic systems; meanwhile, she weighs the nature from the static object to a living, dynamic changing process. Nature in history has experienced a transition from an organic and vivid image to a silent and disorderly mechanical one. The very view of nature inspires us that nature possesses past and present. Certainly, it also has future, but the development totally depends on human behaviors. Only by reconsidering, amending and developing the value judgment of the scientific revolution, shifting the binary mode of thinking to the holism thinking, constantly adjusting the attitude and behaviors towards nature, mankind is likely to change from the other to the unity of man and nature as a whole. (Chun-hua and Ziyan 2018, 1660)

Merchant's work was also influenced by the thoughts of other ecofeminists participating in the ecological debate. In *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World* (2005), she dedicates an entire chapter to ecofeminism and its various movements, recognizing the strong relationship between theories and practices and the necessity to apply these ideas to society. Merchant refers to the Green Belt movement in Kenya, the Chipko movement in India, the ecofeminist battles in Sweden, Canada and the USA outlining how women all over the world propose solutions to the many contradictions resulting from pollution, radioactivity, plastic use and many other issues connected to ecological matters.

5. Narrating Ecofeminism beyond the Western world

Other schools of ecofeminism have developed theories beyond gender. Vandana Shiva, an Indian environmentalist and author, has developed a framework that adopts a postcolonial analysis describing race-based and imperialist acts of domination as derivations of historical oppositional dualisms. Shiva also chooses specific words to define the role of women in ecological battles: they are the "safeguards" of natural resources needed to sustain the family and community and

thus are more exposed than men to the effects of natural disasters and environmental degradation caused by capitalist markets.

The idea of Shiva and other non-Western ecofeminists is that the arguments of white ecofeminism seem to overlook that nature, culture, and gender are “historically and socially constructed and vary across and within cultures and time periods” (Agarwal 1992, 123). This position was seen as ‘essentialist,’ considering women as a homogeneous and unique category across nations, thus failing “to differentiate among women by class, race, ethnicity and so on” (Agarwal 1992, 122). If ‘white ecofeminism’ was seen as functioning on a theoretical level, but difficult to apply empirically, non-Western positions function as a framework for explaining concrete examples of activism. Encompassing many movements and views, ecofeminism as a whole needs to be intersectional and capable of analysing the differences among women worldwide.

It is undoubtable that for non-Western ecofeminists the publication of their work in English and subsequently their translation into different languages has been fundamental to widen the debate and reach a wider public beyond Western boundaries. In her Introduction to the special issue of *DEP*, Bruna Bianchi (2012) emphasizes Shiva’s role in the delineation of industrial power and “maledevelopment” in the Indian subcontinent and makes clear that the translation of her volume has been central to the western perception of the Indian situation.

Shiva widely analysed women’s involvement in the Chipko movement of the 1970s in the Himalayas (Shiva 1988) as an expression of women’s special relation to nature. The Chipko movement emerged as a protest against access to the forests being granted to commercial timber operators and being denied to the local people who wanted to make agricultural implementations. Women were more concerned with the long-term gains of saving the forests as well as the environment, subsistence, and survival issues. The scope of the movement then broadened and involved other issues such as male alcoholism, domestic violence, women’s representation in village councils, and mining in the hills. This is an example of how environmentalist women and women representing minority cultures have worked to establish their own sense of ecofeminism to include local cultures and spirituality, a celebration of their roles as mothers and caretakers, and a recognition of the ways in which Western colonization has compromised those beliefs. Women from developing countries pointed to the effects of commercial food production, sweatshop labour, poverty, and the appropriation of indigenous cultures. Widening worldwide, the narration of ecofeminist issues has made clear how activism is part of ecofeminist action.

6. The narration/translation of Ecofeminism on the web

What do people understand with the term ecofeminism and how is it used outside academia? Ecofeminism has reached various audiences through specific narrations and ‘translations’ of feminist ecological issues in online publications dealing with ecofeminist practices all over the world. Ecofeminisms are many and varied, they have fertilized each other through translations and intersectional dialogues, they have become known to the majority of people through abridged selections, extracts, and interviews to major scholars in international journals and magazines. Moreover, much of the ecofeminist message has been reframed on the web.

Ecofeminism in the last three years has included publications related to websites dedicated to labour or human rights such as for example *Equal Times*, specific websites like Reuters, or websites connected to the work of ecofeminists (nonprofit organizations like wecf: www.wecf.org/about-us/). Using ‘ecofeminism,’ ‘climate change’ and ‘sustainability’ as keywords, the major results are related to the African context, especially on Wangari Maathai’s legacy and the Green Belt movement or the younger activist Oladosu Adenike, who defines herself as an ecofeminist, climate-justice activist, and eco-reporter. The ecofeminist message on the web is thus strictly related to activism, education, and awareness of women’s environmental rights in conflict zones. Articles referring to Nigerian ecofeminist activists aim at explaining to a wider public their role in organisations struggling for both gender equality and ecology. Interestingly, in many articles the connection between women, nature and the possibility of a more equal world is brought back but also re-narrated from a more practical angle, that is women’s role in engaging against toxic waste, pollution, and in favour of food security, biodiversity preservation and much more. Even more intriguingly, these articles show African ecofeminists’ role in changing not only the African context, but the entire world. Headlines report titles such as “Why the world needs an African ecofeminist future” (Kelleher 2019) and most online articles focus on major women figures who are fighting against capitalism. For example, Ruth Nyambura of the African Eco Feminist Collective uses radical and African feminist traditions to critique power, challenge multinational capitalism, and re-imagine a more equal world, while entire organisations like African Women Unite Against Destructive Resource Extraction (WoMin) campaign against the devastation of extractive industries.

Common strategies aim to convince the reader that a feminist response to climate change is necessary and fundamental. “Climate change is a man-made problem and must have a feminist solution” is the headline of an article quoting Mary Robinson’s words in a speech where the former Irish president and U.N. rights commissioner focused on climate action and women’s role in it. In many of these narrations, women are given a central role in the forefront of climate

action and ecological matters. Political figures such as Natalie Samarasinghe, executive director of Britain's United Nations Association, are mentioned to suggest that women are on the forefront of climate action, reiterating the idea of ecofeminist activism.

Web publications explain ecofeminism as a way to allow for the coordination between the feminist and the environmental fight and as an important and strategic way for achieving a collective and more effective voice against capitalist systems.

On the web, ecofeminism reaches a wider audience adapting its theories to practice and showing how these theories have been applied to different economic, social, and cultural contexts acquiring new nuances and highlighting the necessity for action. The narration, re-narration, and translation of major topics together with an explanation of ecofeminism and its main figures permit the common reader to grasp its content, force and aims.

The re-narration of ecofeminism is a long and diverse one. However, through the decades the ecofeminist message has been enriched and widened with new voices reiterating its major aim, that shows the centrality of women in ecological battles for a better and equal world.

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