

THEORY IN ACTION: UNVEILING THE ROLE OF ECOWOMANISM IN FOSTERING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

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Abstract

Ecowomanism approach is framed on the basis of ecowisdom practiced by the women of African descent, validating their lives, spiritual values and activism. Ecowomanism as Melanie L. Harris explains, centers the voices and perspectives of women from African descent as they engage in earth justices. It honours earth as sacred and ascertains interconnections of the humans, the divine realm and the earth. The theory of ecowomanism identifies the need for race-class-gender intersectional studies while dealing with exploitation, unjust public policies that have negative impact on the environment, affecting the communities of colour. This approach is also influenced by African American cosmologies and advocates a moral command for earth justice. India is a developing country and its developmental vision encompasses diverse facets of development such as economic prosperity, social advancement, environmental sustainability, and effective governance by 2047. The present study will examine the relevance of the ecowomanist theory in the Indian context to achieve sustainable development as per the vision of Viksit Bharat@2047.

Keywords: *Ecowomanism, Interconnections, Empowerment, Earth Justices, sustainable development, Viksit Bharat.*

INTRODUCTION

Ecowomanism is a theory and practice framed on the basis of ecowisdom practiced by the women of African descent, validating their lives, spiritual values and activism. Ecowomanism as Melanie L. Harris explains, centers the voices and perspectives of women from African descent as they engage in earth justices. It honours earth as sacred and ascertains interconnections of the humans, the divine realm and the earth. The theory of ecowomanism identifies the need for race-class-gender intersectional studies while dealing with exploitation, unjust public policies that have negative impact on the environment, affecting the communities of colour. This approach is also influenced by African American cosmologies and advocates a moral command for earth justice. The researcher in this study is applying the Ecowomanistic method to the Indian context of sustainable development. India is a developing country and its developmental vision according to Viksit Bharat@2047, encompasses diverse facets of development such as economic prosperity, social advancement, environmental sustainability, and effective governance by 2047. Environmental sustainability along with development is a big challenge for a country like India. The ecowomanist method deals with environmental issues along with other interconnected issues like gender and racial inequalities in American society. As India too has to tackle social and environmental problems, the researcher is finding the relevance of ecowomanism in the Indian circumstance.

Sustainable development is a global issue and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in September 2015 (sustainable development agenda 2030), has set 17 sustainable development goals for the 193 participating countries across the globe. India is working on all these 17 sustainable goals namely 1.No Poverty 2.Zero hunger, 3.Good health and well-being, 4. Quality education, 5.Gender equality, 6.Clean water and sanitation, 7.Affordable and clean energy, 8.Decent work and economic growth, 9.Industry, innovation and infrastructure, 10.Reduced inequality, 11.sustainable cities and communities, 12. Responsible consumption and production, 13.Climate action, 14.Life below water, 15.Life on land, 16.Peace, justice and strong institutions and 17.Partnerships for the goal. In India the responsibility is handed over to Niti Aayog to coordinate and assist the ministry to achieve each target. To study the relevance of ecowomanism in achieving these sustainable goals, it is important to know the method of ecowomanism. DR. Melanie L. Harris, a professor of Black Feminist Thought and Womanist Theology, after her extensive scholarly research has designed a method of ecowomanism, in her book *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth Honoring Faiths* (2017).

Melanie L Harris defines the Seven Step Ecowomanistic method in the second chapter of the book and the steps are summarised as follows:

1. Honoring experience and mining ecomemory: uncovering the unique history of the relationship that African and African American women have had with the earth historically is the first step of an ecowomanist method.
2. Critical Reflection on experience and ecomemory: parallel oppression shared by African American women and the earth, refers to the paradoxical relationship blacks share with the earth, as one has sacred bond with the earth and as one is forced to bound to earth which speaks of African American sharecropping experiences is important for ecowomanist perspective.
3. Womanist intersectional Analysis: It uses race class gender and intersectional analysis to highlight methods of earth justice that women of African descent have cultivated over the years in response to cases of environmental racism and climate injustice.
4. Critically examining African and African American History and Tradition: it is about colonization of African American women and colonization of ecology.
5. Engaging transformation: commitment of social justice and human rights as well as earthling rights to belong to the earth community.
6. Sharing dialogue: Honouring earth as God.
7. Take action for earth justice: Teaching ecowomanism – is taking action for earth justice by making the link between social justice and earth justice. (8, p- 23-59)

Application of these ecowomanistic steps to Indian context will lead to following ways of sustainable development in Indian society.

1. The first step gives importance to experiences. Respecting the experiences of Indian women and sharing their stories related to earth, exposing the myths and stereotypes about Indian Women and their environmental history. Mining ecomemory will involve going to the Indian root, their experience with the environment and contributions of Indian women in the history of environmental movements in the form of their spiritual insights, relationship with the earth and earth spiritual activism. Sharing a story is a kind of empowerment and women will have equal contribution in environmental discussions leading to 5th SDG gender equality.

2. The shared ecomemories and experiences need to be critically examined to find out the kind of relations Indians and Indian women have with the earth and to understand any parallel oppression shared by Indian Women and the earth. A lot of research work needs to be undertaken to examine the shared environmental experiences of Indian Women. This examination may help in understanding the logic of domination. Ecowomanism gives importance to agricultural knowledge and Indian women possess great agricultural knowledge and knowledge of nature, which will be a key aspect in sustainable development.

3. Caste class gender and intersectional analysis to highlight methods of earth justice that Indian women have cultivated over the years in response to cases of environmental racism and climate injustice should be recognized and practiced to have a healthy and peaceful society. In attaining SDG 13.Climate action and 5.Gender equality, this ecowomanistic approach will be helpful.

4. The themes like experiences of Indian Women and Colonization of ecology should be carefully studied. There are a lot of differences in western environmental methodology and Indian indigenous thoughts. Vandana Shiva rightly mentions 'scientific forestry' is actually a narrow, reductionist view of forestry that has evolved from the western bias for maximization of profits whereas 'Chipko' is an indigenous response of women to ecological issues. This step will merge theory into practice. It will lead to finding many native practices of conservation and sustainability.

5. Engaging transformation is about commitment of social justice and human rights as well as earthling rights to belong to the earth community. Indian women thinkers and environmentalist's works should be studied to examine 1. How Indian women think about the environment and attach spirituality to it. 2. The special power of their faith on earth inspires them to be bold and speak the truth for earth justice, and 3. The unique resources found in Indian religious tradition that supports the models of spiritual activism for environmental justice. India being a land of multi-religious and multiculturalism, it will put forward different viewpoints of earth justice.

6. Sharing dialogue is exchanging information with the people of different religions and traditions, along with respecting eco-spiritual thoughts of Indian Women. It incorporates attention to globalization, postcolonial theory, interdisciplinary approaches, and interreligious dialogue. This step will allow the Indian women to share their knowledge across the globe and to learn the valuable practices of others. In short it will contribute to achieving the goal of education and awareness.

7. The final step is taking action for earth justice. Teaching ecowomanism – is taking action for earth justice by making the link between social justice and earth justice. The action can be taken in many ways like exposing the agencies spreading myths, opposing the exploitation and abuse of any form, and replacing truth, love and respect in its place. This step also speaks about the pedagogical methods of teaching ecowomanism, its basic themes and ways of presenting them.

Examining Indian setting we have women like Vandana Shiva, Medha Patkar, Sunita Narain, Radha Bhatt, Maneka Gandhi, Saalumarada Thimmakka, Shehla Masood, Sugathakumari, Gauri Devi and Indira Jaising who has spoken about and worked for environment and justice. Vandana Shiva, a prominent ecofeminist and renowned environmentalist has spoken about the fundamental link between the oppression of women and the degradation of the environment in her work 'Staying Alive'. Shiva criticizes the modern developmental models of income generations which ignore environment and social justice. Her belief is a holistic and sustainable approach that respects the interconnectedness of nature and human society. She has sowed revolutionary ideas in the field of agriculture by advocating seed sovereignty. Along with writing and speaking for the environment she has also worked on the ground as an environmental activist to protect local ecosystems, promote sustainable agriculture, and resist the exploitation of natural resources.

Another example of Indian Ecowomanism is the work of Kiran Bedi in Tihar Jail. She became India's first Inspector General of Prisons and was assigned to the infamous Tihar Jail, a large, internationally notorious facility, containing nearly 10,000 inmates, including men, women and their children, and youth. In this prison, people were often detained for years without trial, and living conditions were deplorable, including lack of water and basic sanitation to contaminated food, issues of gang-related violence, drug addiction, and untreated disease. (Layli Maparyan pp. 48-63). The transformation that she brought into the lives of inmates with the beatification of surroundings and to their behaviors is the power of Indian women's ideology.

The famous social activist and environmentalist Medha Patkar has also led a movement called Narmada Bachao Andolan with environmental and human rights concerns. She advocates for sustainable and equitable development that respects the rights and livelihoods of local communities. She is also known for fighting for forest, land and farmers rights.

Indian environmental ethics of Saalumarada Thimmakka from Karnataka has been recognized worldwide. She has planted and nurtured a long line of banyan trees along a stretch of about 4 kilometers between Hulikal and Kudur in Karnataka. This green canopy, often referred to as the "Thimmakka's avenue," serves as a living testament to her dedication to environmental conservation. These examples of Indian women displaying commitment to the environment and fighting against injustice can be studied along with Indian historical, spiritual and cultural practices to arrive at an innovative solution which can be offered to the world from Indians.

CONCLUSION

The study reveals that Indian women have environmental wisdom and strong connection with nature. They have responded to ecological issues around them efficiently and successfully. Ecowomanistic methods like Sharing experiences, critical examination of shared memories, Caste class gender and intersectional analysis, focusing on history and traditions, being committed to environment, social justice and human rights, interfaith knowledge sharing, and taking action for earth justice can support the SDG challenges which India is trying to overcome by 2047 with the vision of Viksit Bharat @ 2047.

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