



## Feminist epistemology and its role in ecofeminism

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### Abstract

Epistemology is the domain of knowledge usually considered to function in isolation of the lived experiences of this world. This knowledge is categorised as unbiased, universal, value-free, objective and so on. Feminist epistemology questions such claims of knowledge by highlighting the impact of our lived experiences on knowledge and the exclusion of women from it. The structure of knowledge has been constructed by the dominant groups of society which largely constitute men. Therefore, in this paper, I endeavour to bring forth the gaps in the traditional structure of epistemology and the ways in which it is deficient. Further, I focus on the role of women in the formation of knowledge and how their proximity with nature makes the inclusion of their experiences a valuable source of knowledge by drawing emphasis on the connections between ecofeminism and feminist epistemology.

**Keywords:** epistemology, ecofeminism, knowledge, objectivity

### Introduction

Epistemology is the field of study of knowledge. It concerns itself with question like, what we know?; what is the truth about the world?; how can we attain true knowledge?; what is the criterion on which we decide that a particular knowledge is better than others? This field of knowledge has mostly been male dominant which means that the knowledge that we have is not the objective truth. It has come out of a patriarchal structure, it is male dominant and has been given by those in position of power and control. So, feminist epistemology studies how the structure of knowledge is patriarchal and has ignored the standpoint of women which plays an equal part in human experiences and lives we live. Furthermore, when we consider the epistemological perspective in ecofeminist studies, we find that women being in close proximity to nature than men can play a massive role in the preservation of the ecology, but their perspectives have been ignored and not given due importance.

So, in this paper I will focus on epistemology from the perspective of women, how their contribution has been ignored in the past despite their active participation. Further, I will try to bring out the significance of women's perspective in the formation of knowledge, and how it can help better in protecting the nature as well as women themselves from being exploited.

### Why is Feminist perspective important?

Feminist epistemology studies the concerns related to how women's view has been excluded from the formation of knowledge, the ways in which the knowledge we have is gendered, and how it influences the knower and the actions they perform. Ecofeminist epistemology extends this work of feminist epistemology to nature. It works on the notion of the knowledge that women hold about the nature due to the women-nature interconnection. Women have been considered more connected with nature by many ecofeminist, they say that women are more concerned about the exploitation and degradation of nature, and the impact of the exploitation of one (nature) can be seen on the other

(women). As the degree to which nature is dominated and abused increases, the suffering of women escalates with it. Ecofeminist believe that no matter to what extent we try to preserve nature in the scientific or the advanced ways that we can find, it will always be far less than what the insight of women about the nature can do. They being closer and more connected with the nature have more insight about nature, its uses, its preservation, its importance and so on. Whereas, the scientific knowledge that we hold about nature majorly constitutes the perspective of the dominant groups, i.e., of males. Therefore, it is only a partial view of nature and not a comprehensive one.

The gap in the knowledge that is professed as universal and the knowledge that is true in real sense has been brought forth by various feminist epistemologists. For instance, Sandra Harding puts forth that all the scientific knowledge that we believe to be objective and Value-Neutral is in-fact value laden influenced by various social factors. The researchers who conduct the result have a historical background which influences the results of the research in numerous ways. She says that all the results are infected by the preconceived notions of the researchers, as it is not possible for an individual to come out of their historicity and give an objective result. Hence, "Sciences that we take as our paradigm for knowledge, is always socially interested and initiated. It does not effectively discard all values, and worse, the values that make it through the net are invisible" (Wall 2012, 3). The value-neutrality of knowledge is a facade constructed by the dominant groups to promote their own interests while ignoring the interests of the marginalised and the oppressed.

Eco-feminism is a personal, spiritual, theoretical, social and even a political movement that tries to condemn the parallel exploitation of women and nature. It moves towards destroying the patriarchal structure that leads to and supports such suppression. It considers women and nature both as beings who are worthy of importance and respect, and hence tries to give women a status in the society where her views and perspective is given value and attention. Without the views of women, result and knowledge will be

partial, biased, incomplete and not as valuable and as helpful for the preservation of both nature as well as women. An ecofeminist, Lori Gruen holds that it is decisive that we recognise the interdependent relation of science and society, emotions and reason, facts and values, if we wish to move in the direction of finding what is legitimate knowledge. In her words, "Ecofeminists recognize that claims to knowledge are always influenced by the values of the culture in which they are generated... ecofeminists believe that facts are theory-laden, theories are value-laden, and values are molded by historical and philosophical ideologies, social norms, and individual processes of categorisation" (Warren 2000, 34). The western notion of objectivity, which renders nature objective is the result of the patriarchal structure whose main aim is to dominate and rule by controlling everything. Therefore, ecofeminist have attempted to highlight the role of women and their contribution in knowledge production.

Women, have been a part of many movements to save the environment, one of which was "the Chipko Movement. In 1947, northern India, Reni, women came out of their houses and protested against the cutting down of the indigenous tree by the lumberjacks. They formed groups and hugged the trees in circles to prevent them from being cut down. This movement saved a watershed region of around 12,000 square km from being destroyed for the industrial purposes. The reason behind this protest was that the commercial cutting down of trees was harming the indigenous plantation of forests which had huge varieties of multi species trees with wide range of usages for the locals and they were being replaced by the industrialists with the plantations of eucalyptus and teak which held very less value in terms of the benefits they provided. This commercial cutting down of trees impacted women to a huge extent, it led to an increase in the amount of time and effort that women had to spent in fetching woods for the domestic uses, which resulted in the reduction of the amount of time they had to take care of their households. And not just this but this also impacted the work they did staying in the houses to earn a living, like making products from those wood to sell in the local markets. So, the exploitation and degradation of environment, impacted women to a very large extent than it affected men. Women play many essential roles by contributing in various ways in the survival of human kind, but their involvement remained unrecognised as they did not hold the dominant positions. The knowledge that originates from the lived experiences of women is crucial in the production of a comprehensive understanding of nature.

There have been many other movement in different parts of the world where women have come forward to save the environment. This illustrates that it is important that we take the perspective of women while formulating knowledge. Any knowledge which does not include their outlook is incomplete and maybe even irrelevant or false to a large extent. Therefore, ecofeminists challenge views like, "that knowledge is objective; that the "knower" is an objective, detached, independent, and rational observer; and the nonhuman nature is a passive object of knowledge" (Warren 2000, 33). A feminist theorist, Sandra Harding has challenged the objectivity of knowledge that science endorses. She puts emphasis on the "social location of the knower" to better recognise and envisage the claims about knowledge. She feels that it is important to emphasis on the life experiences of the marginalised group (women in this

case) to get a better insight into the problems. It is only by listening to their perspectives will we be able to realise the intensity of problems and discover other possible way of dealing with it. Like in the instance of Chipko Movement, no matter how much knowledgeable the outsiders may be, the knowledge that the local women held about those indigenous forests is irreplaceable, they attained those insight from their lived experiences. And any information or objective knowledge that comes from outside can not compete with the knowledge that one attains from their life experiences.

### **Feminist and Environmental epistemology**

Now, having emphasised on the importance of feminist perspective in epistemology, I will endeavour to show how we can try to include the views of women in order to generate actual knowledge which is unbiased, and is not a result of a patriarchal setup. To do so I will discuss certain condition given by Karren Warren, following which we can move towards a more feminist and environmental epistemology. Firstly, she says, the way feminist epistemology talks about removing androcentric biases, gendered or sexist knowledge from social science and other disciplines, in the same way anthropocentric biases should also be removed from environmental studies and technologies. Because the main aim of ecofeminism is to shun down any activity which is against nature and women, and is termed by those in power as logical on the basis of economic value that it holds. For instance the cutting down of indigenous trees and planting teak or eucalyptus trees because they render more profit.

Secondly, it is very important to place emphasis on the knowledge which is not based on hierarchical relationships. Usually a knowledge claim is understood to be same as an entitlement to power. A relationship based purely on epistemology is the need for hour, that kind of relationship is based on the mutual respect for the knowledge one hold and it is cherished by performing an exchange of information. Epistemology has consequences which are political, so if the knowledge is shared with respect and integrity, the horizon of our skills and information can be broadened to a huge extent. Therefore, trust is a very important factor according to Warren in the formation of true beliefs.

Thirdly, ecofeminism does recognise the difference between humans and those with nonhuman nature. But at the same time it feels that "reason", a characteristic which is used to differentiate us from animal or non-human should not place us on a superior plenum from them, rather it should be the cause of relating us to them. We should not confine ourselves to a particular kind of rationality, rather we should think that other beings also posses some kind of rationality which may be different from the one that we hold. And if we do that then, the category of knowers will be expanded and the kind of knowledge it includes will also shift to some degree. Therefore, an ecofeminist epistemology should be of a kind which includes all the experiential knowledge of beings situated in various places, i.e., it should include all the possible perspectives available to us.

Fourthly, in opposition to what traditional epistemology believes in, i.e., objectivity of knowledge, an ecofeminist epistemology should value and believe in the changeability of knowledge with time. For instance, "as the historical and material realities of women's lives change and as more is

learned about women-nature connections and the destruction of the nonhuman world”(Wall 2012, 4). At the same time, Warren highlights the importance of believing in the first person perspective and the knowledge it provides. She says that its not necessary that all valid or reliable knowledge should be obtained in the laboratories, personal experiences form a very important basis for good and reliable knowledge and gives various ways to reflect on how the world appears to different people.

Fifthly, ecofeminism is all about the experiences of the women who encounter the domination of nature by the male and powerful and how this exploitation of nature has been tied with the oppression of women. So the ecofeminist epistemology ought to consider the experiences of those women at the same time maintaining a difference in their inputs and those provided by others. Though a good epistemology should include the voices of all who exist but the language barrier creates a problem to access the experience of some beings who are a part of the environment. Ecofeminism attempts to minimise the difference between the nature/culture divide which put some in the category of reasonable and other in the category of irrational or emotional. But at the same time it is difficult to include the experiences of those whose language we do not speak, because all the conclusions that we will make will be from our perspective, and interpretation can never be completely accurate. Therefore, this remains a difficult task at hand for the ecofeminist epistemologist.

Sixth point stated by Warren is quite similar to the fourth point mentioned above. It stated that, “ecofeminism makes no attempt to present an objective point of view” (Warren 1995, 187) and “fully recognises the circumstantial rootedness of the twin domination of women and nature” (Wall 2012, 5). Therefore, a good ecofeminist epistemology should also consider the relativity of knowledge and should not aim at providing objective knowledge. Knowledge is circumstantial, one should not fall in the trap of objectivity because its nothing more than an illusion. So Warren suggest to value subjectivity as the integral part of knowledge.

“Stories identify, unify, give meaning to. Just as music is noise that makes sense, a painting is colour that makes sense, so a story is life that makes sense” (Wall 2012, 6). True knowledge can not be constructed without including the perspective of all beings, learning from outside by considering others as the passive object of study results in the knowledges which is objective for name sake or in Harding’s words it is “weak objectivity”. All the results arrived at by the scientific researchers as well are influenced by their social historicity or effected by the political environment prevailing at the time of research. Hence, no result in its true sense is objective. Harding puts forth, “Objectivism result only in semi-science when it turns away from the task of critically identifying all those broad, historical social desires, interests, and values that have shaped the agendas, contents, and results of sciences much as they shape the rest of human affairs” (Harding 1991, 143). Only when the perspective of the marginalised is given due importance and values which affect the research in so many ways are included in the research study for knowledge, can we arrive at what she calls “strong objectivity”.

## Conclusion

Women play a very active role and have a major contribution in how environment is at present. It is essential that we consider their perspective as valuable and give it due importance. I believe that this association of women with nature has its roots in historical social conditions. Women since ancient time have been restricted to the houses, they have performed the role of caretakers for everyone, be it children, husband or other family members. They have been given the status of primary caregivers. And with the process of globalisation and industrialisation, men got more and more drifted away from nature. They joined the race of economisation, and started associating themselves more with the new standards of life. Women on the other hand stayed in homes for a very long time, it was only with time that women joined men in this whole process of industrialisation. Women therefore, because of the nature of work they did and the life they led needed to rely more and more on nature for subsistence and hence their life experiences taught them and gave them a lot of insight into how nature is and made them realise its importance. Whereas, the scientific knowledge that is given the status of objectivity is a result of the study which is done considering nature as a passive source of knowledge, nature is identified as an object of knowledge and nothing more. But this knowledge which claims to be objective has come out of a gendered structure which is biased and does not give importance to all the factors which are important for the formative of knowledge.

The scientific experiments that are done are hugely effected by the political surrounding they are conducted in, the people holding power have the strength to influence the results. Even the biases of the researchers are not entirely excluded from the process as Harding has highlighted in her work on feminist standpoint. Therefore, every knowledge we have is relative and is the result of a particular social condition. Hence, there arises the need for feminist epistemology to raise their voice against the domination that women suffer, no research which is done by those situated outside the realm of study can arrive at the truth. It is the true lived experiences of women which can be the best story teller of their situation. As Warren states, “the job of scientists, philosophers, and theorists is to provide knowledge claims and accounts which are relationally “situated” in important social and material contexts” (Warren 2000, 34). It is only feminist epistemology that will address these concerns and will bring to light the true justified beliefs. The human/nature dichotomy has left women and nature outside the domain of active subjects to be considered relevant in the quest for knowledge. Women to a large extent are affected by the scientific researches and the development it brings in our lives. It becomes very important that their situations, conditions, the environment they reside in are taken in to the purview of the research. And to do so, it becomes a necessity that we listen to their side of stories. But instead of doing so, they are given the status of mere objects of study, like I mentioned above instances such as Chipko Movement emphasises the importance of the insight that women hold about nature and the active role that they play in its preservation. Any objectivity reached by staying outside the realm of what is being studied is not valid knowledge.

Therefore, there is need of an Eco-feminist epistemology that will challenge the notion that knowledge should be objective, and the knower should be a detached, rational and independent observer.

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