THE ADVENT OF ANTHROPOCENE: When man–woman and culture–nature divides are bridged

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Abstract

Ecofeminist literature worldwide has canonized the fault lines of post-modern civilization which are the man – woman and culture – nature divides. Ecologists and Economists have confirmed in various ways that to mitigate and reverse the negative effects of Climate Change, the agency of women is essential. The feminist organizations of earlier times have fought hard over three waves of feminism on innumerable issues of discrimination, suppression and oppression and also written extensively in many genres to unite women and win on many social and political fronts. But how are the present generation of women in this age of digital culture, taking forward the gains reaped by the earlier generation of feminists and fighting for the ones not gained yet? Is digital communication leading to unification of feministic thought and action or dissipating it in the global social media chatter? How have the patriarchal constructs in man – woman relationships, led to the hegemony of culture over nature? How can the agency of women help in mitigating climate change? Can digital media be used to foster the unification of feministic thought and action to create an environment to bridge the man – woman divide further and lead from the front to take control of nature? This paper tries to answer these questions through a review of literature on the diverse issues across disciplines, especially actionable research on ecofeminism and concludes that the advent of Anthropocene of 'post-human' kind; is possible only through the agency of women and digital media can surely help.

Key words Feminism, ecofeminism climate change, digital media, man-woman, culture-nature

Introduction

"You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women"
Jawaharlal Nehru

Cultural studies reveal the history of various women's movements of the earlier centuries started with abolition of slavery, independence from colonialists and women's suffrage movements. As women felt that their experiences and history are distorted and their contributions unrecognized, they took to writing it themselves in a big way in the 19th century; starting the first wave of feminism and has continued ever since. This helped not only in bringing to fore women's issues, but also in discovering more about themselves. Buried history was exhumed and rewritten by historians and anthropologists; sociologists and psychologists researched on the female lifecycle, violence, sexuality and maternity; and economists and analysts studied the roles of women as consumers and voters. The second wave of feminism, enabled women to realize the cultural and political inequalities they suffered – in Higher Education, reproductive rights, workplace, divorce, custody laws, child care and many other areas. In India this led to the formation of women's organizations such as the

All India Women's Conference and the National Federation of Indian Women and the critical development of the role of women and their rights in independent India; and ultimately the state adopted a patronizing role towards women. But women continued their struggle for the un-won issues and that formed the basis for the third wave of feminist consciousness starting from the 1990s along with the birth of the internet. The third wave began as a reaction to the failures of the second wave and some of the prime issues involved were – gender, sexuality, empowerment and self determination.

The ultimate aim of feminist consciousness is to make the experiences and insights of women available to the entire world and not simply to know more about women in and of themselves. The rise in women's consciousness led to an extensive and intensive writing by women of all dispositions, leading to a plethora of genres viz. – post-colonial, gender and culture, gay and lesbian, black and aboriginal, work and home, travel and leisure, and women's science fiction. The frenzy of feministic literature production and its worldwide dissemination has done its bit by uniting women against the ill-effects of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism; and winning on many social and political fronts. The research on deconstruction of feminist writing, the search for a gender neutral language and the reconstruction of the cultural ethic, challenged the notions of universal womanhood and confronted the complex intersection of gender, sexuality, race and class; as well as globalization and ecological concerns – literarily represented through works such as *'In search of my Mother's Gardens'* by Alice Walker (1983) and *'Staying Alive'* by Vandana Shiva (1988) and numerous such works worldwide.

Climate change and impact on women
Climate change is for real and that is what research worldwide has proved, in spite of the nay sayers. The short term effects of climate change are already upon us, in the form of extreme landslides, floods and hurricanes and the long term effects too in the form of gradual degradation of the environment, can be noticed in good measure. Climate change will have direct or indirect impacts on everybody's life. It is unfair that it will affect most the lives of the poorest people, in the poorest regions, who have contributed least to the causes. The majority of those deeply affected are women. To change this injustice it is essential to ensure that those perspectives and experiences shape and drive our action on climate change.

Women bear the brunt of the effects of climate change, as they are more dependent on natural resources for livelihood. The UN Women Watch, in their fact sheet *Women Gender Equality and Climate Change*, state – "In many of these contexts, women are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change than men – primarily as they constitute the majority of the world's poor and are more dependent for their livelihood on natural resources that are threatened by climate change. Furthermore, they face social, economic and political barriers that limit their coping capacity." Access to resources, participation in decision making and limited mobility are the three main reasons that make women vulnerable, more so rural women. "Poor women and those in countries of higher gender inequality appear to be at the highest risk: a direct correlation has been observed between women's status in society and their likelihood of receiving adequate health care in times of disaster and environmental stress." (WHO, 2008. Pg.9). While delivering the opening address at the UN Climate Summit on 23, September, 2014, the then UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon said - "Climate change is the defining issue of our age. It is defining our present. Our response will define our future. To ride this storm we need all hands on deck."

Women are not only vulnerable to climate change but they are also effective actors or agents of change in relation to both mitigation and adaptation. Women often have a strong body of knowledge and expertise that can be used in climate change mitigation, disaster reduction and adaptation

strategies. Furthermore, women's responsibilities in households and communities, as stewards of natural and household resources, positions them well to contribute to livelihood strategies adapted to changing environmental realities. They are the ones adapting to droughts, floods and other extreme weather events right now, they are at the front lines in the battle against climate change. This puts them in a better position to recognise some of the opportunities that climate change presents. But if women are to be true agents of change, real and measurable action at all levels must be ramped up. Christina Figueres, the Executive Secretary, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCC) said - "Women are disproportionately affected by climate change impacts such as droughts, floods and other extreme weather events. They also have a critical role in combating Climate change, but need to be better represented at all levels in the decision-making. Empowering women will be a significant factor in meeting the climate challenge."

The UN has identified environmental degradation as a key threat to human security. All post-conflict countries face serious environmental issues that could undermine the peace building processes, if left unaddressed, and specifically affect women who are faced by a combination of hardships. "It is thus important to identify gender-sensitive strategies for responding to human security needs and environmental and humanitarian crises caused by climate change. These efforts should focus on: reducing women's vulnerability, in tandem with men's susceptibilities; promoting gender sensitive emergency responses; and enlisting women as key environmental actors in natural disaster management decision-making processes, alongside men, tapping on women's skills, resourcefulness and leadership in mitigation and adaptation efforts." (Aguilar, L., Granat, M., & Owren, C. ,2015).

Lifting millions out of poverty is still the overall target of the Sustainable Development Goals. They build on the best achievements of the Millennium Development Goals. Combating climate change and promoting gender equality are both explicitly among the new goals. Gender equality is also integrated in a horizontal way in many activities under the other UN goals and is a standalone priority in spotlight. "Gender and Climate" is a permanent agenda now and the UNFCCC Secretariat now has a Gender Focal Point.

Gender Equality and Global Action
Realising gender equality means women and men are equally able to access and employ the full spectrum of their human rights— which is imperative for justice, in and of itself, everywhere around the world and a prerequisite for an equitable and sustainable world. But driving economic, social, political and environmental transformation is another key opportunity and outcome of advancing gender equality: from household to corporate levels, women's full and equal participation and empowerment, and their access to and control of spaces and resources, allows for multi-fold benefits to the global community, including:
- Raising healthier, more educated families
- Translating equitable land tenure into wellbeing
- Guaranteeing inclusive decision-making benefits the community as a whole
- Dramatically reducing food insecurity
- Growing the global economy and national economies, too

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was developed to specifically address the urgent issue of climate change, with the ultimate objective to stabilise Green House Gases (GHG) concentrations "at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system." While Parties ratify it, thereby entering it into force or validating it, the treaty provides only a legal framework for further action; thus, given the nature of the climate change challenge and need for decisive action, the international community established

the complementary Kyoto Protocol (KP) that legally binds signatory developed countries, who are primarily responsible for GHG emissions, to reduce those emissions.

The Millennium Declaration and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) resulted from the 2000 Millennium Summit. Member nations outlined a global partnership to address the world's most pressing development needs through specific targets and timelines (2000–2015) of the eight MDGs. Of particular significance, the Declaration aims "to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable."

Many global organizations are working to bridge the gender-gap and the culture-nature divides and the prominent ones are –
- UNEP: Gender and the Environment www.unep.org/gender.env
- UNWOMEN: www.unwomen.org
- UNDP-UNEP Poverty-Environment Initiative: Main-streaming Climate Change Adaptation into Development Planning: A Guide for Practitioners
- Global Gender Climate Action Alliance (GGCA): www.gender-climate.org
- International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) - UNDP: www.genderandenvironment.org
- Women's Environment and Development Organization: www.wedo.org Energia http://energia.org/
- Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development: Resources on Climate Justice www.apwld.org

However, counting the gender references is not enough; understanding and propelling progress requires capacity building for gender-responsive implementation at all levels and accountability for the operationalization of mandates.

The points of inter-section
The points of inter-section of man-woman and culture-nature divides, for appropriate intervention; as identified by UN Women Watch are -
- Women, agriculture and food security
- Women, gender equality and biodiversity
- Biodiversity and Indigenous Women
- Women, gender equality and water resources
- Women, gender equality and energy
- Women, gender equality and health
- Women, gender equality and changes in human settlements and migration patterns due to environmental degradation
- Implications of climate change for women's human rights
- Women, gender equality and technology in adaptation responses
- Women, gender equality and financing of mitigation, adaptation and technology
- Women, gender equality and emergency measures during natural disasters

The means, tools and guidelines advocated by actionable research
Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) a part of the CGIAR Research Program on Forests, Trees and Agro-forestry (CRP-FTA in partnership with Bioversity International, CATIE, CIRAD, the International Centre for Tropical Agriculture and the World Agro-forestry Centre. It advances human well-being, environmental conservation and equity by conducting research to help

shape policies and practices that affect forests in developing countries. Out of their many successful projects worldwide, the one done is India is given below as an example.

Promoting women's participation in forest tenure reform processes in Odisha, India, by Priyanka Bhalla,2014 -
The context of this study is the Forest Rights Act (FRA), passed in 2006 in India (that came into force in 2008), which legitimizes marginalized groups' access to ancestral forested lands, promotes collective management of forests and provides tribal and other groups with the option of pursuing individual and community-owned land titles through the establishment of claims committees. Complementing existing research on the *critical mass* of women in decision-making, this qualitative case study, conducted in four districts of the south-eastern state of Odisha, examines:
The study thus makes the following policy recommendations:
• At the national level, there is a need for another round of amendment rules to be issued, providing specific guidelines for the formation of claims committees. Specific recommendations include increasing women's quotas within each committee, and rotating leadership of committees between men and women.
• At the State and district level, more lessons learned and best practices exchanges on the integration of women and other marginalized groups are needed.
• Increased consultations are needed within the nongovernmental sector on women's role as critical actors and actors in the FRA process.
• NGOs should consult women in the community to understand what the customary land boundaries are, whether there are any female claimants that have been left out, and what type of future strategies they have for forest management, protection, biodiversity and dealing with negative interference from external actors. It is also important to involve them in project work as much as possible.
• Finally, we must place more emphasis on process versus outcome developments in future research, which addresses women's meaningful participation and their role in forest tenure reform processes. Further research on key critical actors and critical junctures is needed in order to understand when and how enabling factors are created.

Case studies of success stories that can be replicated locally and globally
Out of the many case studies reviewed for the purpose of this article, only one is being quoted, due to paucity of space –

Bhungroo water management in Gujarat, India: Empowering women to build farming resilience through improved irrigation technology – Project by *Naireeta Services Pvt. Ltd. with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation* (Roots for the Future, GGCA, p 426)

Drought and flash floods pose significant threats to farmers in the western Indian state of Gujarat. Water logging during peak cropping season and water scarcity in the rest of the year severely impact crop yields, especially those of vulnerable female farmers whose livelihood depends on the monsoon. However, these same women are taking this crisis and converting it into opportunity through improved irrigation management. Bhungroo is a water management system that stores water underground during excess rainfall, then lifts it out for irrigation during dry spells. This technology has not only increased fresh water supply and decreased salt deposits on fields, but it has also helped women gain land ownership, participate in local government, improve food security, and increase income. From selecting farmers, erecting technology, and maintaining the Bhungroo system, this is a fully women-driven process empowering them to become leaders in their communities. Because it is open source and scalable (although it must be used to benefit poor people only), this project has far-reaching benefits in drought stricken areas. Project overview - Seasonal floods and droughts in Gujarat, India, make it extremely difficult for poor farmers to have productive crop yields. With

Bhungroo technology, farmers—especially women—are benefitting from increased fresh water access and more consistent crop yields.

Conclusion

The new media technologies of the post-modern digitalized world have fragmented the discourses of not just feminist organizations and feminists, but of all women in general. As Donna Haraway states 'There is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women' (p295). Being 'female' is a social construct and in the post-modern world, gender, race and class are not the basis anymore for creating or forming identity and unity amongst women. She suggests that the way forward has to be through affinity and not identity. But to conserve and build on the gains of the earlier struggles, it is important for feminism to make real connections among women, even if they are only partial. New categories and types of exclusion are created by digital networks, hindering the participation of minority groups. A kind of 'communicative capitalism' is coming into play and along with 'neoliberalism' is disabling the goal of achieving equal rights to all women. Reviewing the book *Cyberfeminism 2.0,* by Radhika Gajjala and Yeon Ju Oh; Elizabeth Mazur (2015) observes that 'there is not as much evidence of feminism in the cyber world as the editors and authors had hoped, though certainly the potential remains for there to be.'

To realize this potential, the issues effecting feminism in the digital era viz. – female digital literacy and skills, identity creation and management, funding for digital feministic networks, low trust in networks, cybercrimes including trolling, insufficient research on patriarchal ingraination in digital media technologies and feminist models of technological education, dissemination of knowledge of feminism in history, help in identifying and subverting content which demeans and commodifies women and many such others need to be addressed by networked feminism itself. In this scenario, it is imperative to identify commonalities among feminists of various hues, their motivations and communicative practices; to understand the relationship between digital media networks and activism for social change. As new media needs everyone to be a creator, collaborator and publisher of content; the modes and methods of distribution altered the type of content and thus the medium became the message. But it is essential for women's organizations and movements to maintain cohesion, as this is crucial for achieving any collective objective, political or social.

Feminist of earlier generations have fought and won many an issue on the legal and political fronts bringing much needed relief for women, but the gendered concepts of patriarchy are much difficult to uproot in the social and cultural spheres; and it is here that the Y-gen of girls and young women need guidance and support from networked feminism. The social, cultural and political work for building a movement among the populace is an expertise that has to be relearned by every generation and the help of experienced practitioners, the elders from the earlier generation is required. The lessons learnt from the history of feminist movements should be incorporated into the digital networks of present day feminists and women's organizations. Many girls and young women do not seem to be interested in engaging in feministic movements and are adopting an anti-theory and cavalier attitude; which accentuates the divisiveness in feministic thought and action. However it appears they are expressing their feminism directly in social media through their interactive practices, visual art and subverting online social mores. But the dangers lurking in such approaches are that, they unthinkingly appropriate and recirculate sexist, misogynist and stereotyped images of women from popular media; without any critical analysis of their actions and this does not bode well for feminism.

Feminity and ecology are natural allies, mutually synergizing and almost synonymous, as in the depiction of 'Mother Earth' or 'Prakriti' (which means 'Nature') and even in exploitative language such as 'virgin forest'. The concept of 'Prakriti' can be explained as the primal motive force (Adi-

Shakti) of the universe, the basis of creation, the nature of intelligence by which the universe exists and functions and which is essentially feminine as against 'Purush' which is the masculine other. It also means Earth, Nature and Environment which has three modes of operation – creation, preservation and destruction. The holism implied in the feminine respects and nurtures diversity, whereas the concepts of globalization imply homogenization which destroys diversity. The development models of the modern industrial age and the growth oriented models of present economic development are all rooted in the patriarchal assumptions of homogeneity, domination and centralization. There is violence inherent in these developments and growth models, and are absolutely unsustainable. Hence more focus is required on understanding how constructs of patriarchal oppression and power are inbuilt into digital media technologies and spreading awareness on the same amongst girls and young women, so as to enable them subvert and eliminate these in the future. The gender gap has to be narrowed, before the hegemony of culture over nature can be over-turned. Only then the advent of the Anthropocene or the time of the new human will happen.

'We are either going to have a future where women lead the way to make peace with the Earth or we are not going to have a human future at all'.
Vandana Shiva

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