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Ecofeminist Thought

Credit for coining the word '*écoféminisme*' in 1974 is generally given to the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne, although Janet Biehl makes a claim on behalf of the United States social ecofeminist Chiah Heller (1988). In '*Le Féminisme ou la mort*', first published in 1974, d'Eaubonne argued that male control of production and of women's sexuality brings the twin crises of environmental destruction through surplus production, and overpopulation through surplus births (her particular target here was Catholicism). D'Eaubonne called upon women to wrest power from 'patriarchal man', not to replace it with 'power-to-the-women' but 'egalitarian management of a world to be reborn'. Against the 'timid ecologists' who only looked for environmental protection, she argued that what was needed was a 'planet in the female gender' (1980: 64-7).

D'Eaubonne here touches upon a number of issues that would become central to the ecofeminist movement: the crisis of modernity, as the ecological cost of 'progress' became apparent; a critique of (western) 'patriarchal man' as the cause of that crisis; a call to women/female/the feminine/feminism to be the agent(s) of change; a seeming prioritization of the 'female gender', but a commitment to a non-gendered egalitarianism rather than 'power-to-women'. It is *patriarchy* rather than men *per se* that is seen to be the problem. Women are to be the bridge to a reformed and reformulated social order. D'Eaubonne asserted an affinity between woman/femaleness and a benign attitude to the natural world that patriarchal man appeared to lack, while looking to social changes to resolve the problem. This mixture of a near-essentialist conception of a woman-nature affinity

and a non-gendered outcome is one of the most complex 'weavings' of the ecofeminist web.

Although ecofeminism emerged in several countries at around the same time, the United States dominated the early development of ecofeminist thinking. The ex-Catholic theologian Mary Daly introduced Boston students to d'Eaubonne's text in 1974. In the same year a conference on 'Women and Environment' was called at the University of California, Berkeley, the theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether was presenting lectures on Women and Ecology at Kalamazoo College, while the poet Susan Griffin was addressing the Department of Agriculture at the University of California, Berkeley on similar issues. Ecofeminism in the United States drew on two main streams. One was radical/cultural/spiritual feminism, which tended to stress the 'natural' affinity of women to the natural world. The second drew on more social constructionist and radical political perspectives, mainly eco-anarchism, but also socialism/Marxism. Socialism/Marxism is, however, much more strongly represented in ecofeminist thought in Europe and Australia and cultural/spiritual feminism less so. Once again, however, categories cannot be watertight. The German Green, Petra Kelly, expressed cultural and spiritual ecofeminist sentiments (1984), while, as we shall see below, United States ecofeminists, even from a theological background, have adopted a socialist politics.

Regardless of their theoretical and political backgrounds, ecofeminists see women as playing a key role in the transition from an unsustainable to a sustainable world, although their perceptions of the mechanisms of change may differ. While spiritual ecofeminists may urge women to call upon the power of the Goddess, social (that is, anarchist) and socialist ecofeminists will be encouraging women to challenge the gender-blindness of male-dominated political organizations. For both groups, however, the ending of women's subordination is a prerequisite of a sustainable society – it cannot be the byproduct of some other struggle. Ecofeminism will not, and cannot, wait until 'after the revolution'.

As I have pointed out, the political impact of ecofeminism has been somewhat hindered by the fact that it has tended to be identified solely with its cultural/spiritual feminist roots and hence subject to critiques of essentialism, romanticism and political naivety (Biehl 1991; Faber and O'Connor 1989). This is largely due to the domination of ecofeminist debate by literature emanating from North America. In particular, two anthologies – *Healing the Wounds* (Plant 1989) and *Reweaving the World* (Diamond and Orenstein 1990) – concentrated heavily on cultural and spiritual ecofeminism. This was in contrast to an earlier anthology,

Reclaim the Earth (Caldecott and Leland 1983), which concentrated much more on grassroots movements and political struggles.

Some aspects of ecofeminism can certainly be criticized for over-romanticizing women and women's history, for asserting a 'totalizing' image of a universalized 'woman' and ignoring women's differences. Affinity ecofeminists can come very close to biological determinism (although rarely embrace it completely), while being unable to explain why many women are attracted to the western 'patriarchal male' lifestyle. However, it is important not to let these very real criticisms obscure the complexity of the arguments that ecofeminists are making and deflect from the radical perspective that ecofeminism can offer. Although I have made a distinction between affinity ecofeminism based on radical/cultural/spiritual feminism and a social constructionist approach based broadly on socialist/materialist ecofeminism both here and elsewhere (Mellor 1992a: 50 f.), I do not think it is helpful to try to pigeon-hole ecofeminists or ecofeminism. For example, Hilary Rose, a British socialist feminist, and Ariel Salleh, an Australian socialist ecofeminist, have recently been accused of sailing very close to the wind of essentialism (Jackson 1995: 125-6; Davion 1994: 18-20). Maria Mies's and Vandana Shiva's recent ideas are an interesting combination of materialist and affinity ecofeminism (1993), while Rosemary Radford Ruether, one of the earliest ecofeminists, combined feminist theology with a commitment to 'communitarian socialism' (1975). For this reason, in setting out the theoretical debates in this chapter I will treat contributions to the development of ecofeminism broadly chronologically rather than thematically.

Origins and beginnings: connecting women and nature

The emergence of ecofeminism in the early 1970s brought together two crises of modernity. One was the loss of faith in science, technology and development, as reflected in the green critique of western industrialism, the South's critique of economic imperialism and the growing anti-nuclear campaigns. The second was the realization that liberal feminist optimism about women's political and social progress had been misplaced. Education and economic progress had not enabled women to escape from 'femininity', the family or the suburbs (Friedan 1963). For women on the left, 'first wave' feminism was finally defeated by the sexism of the 'new left' of the 1960s, when 'men led the marches and made the speeches and expected their female

comrades to lick envelopes and listen' (Coote and Campbell 1982: 13). Equally, the socialist states of Eastern Europe had only produced token representation for women. Facing the powerlessness even of educated and radical women, feminists began to look for a new basis for their struggle. Did there need to be a class struggle between men and women of the same order as that between capital and labour (Firestone 1970)? The problem for the idea of class struggle was that women did not seem to have the same political leverage as the working class. Where, for instance, was the political equivalent of the General Strike or mass class action? De Beauvoir had already pointed out that women had no basis for collective action, scattered as they were among the men (1968). It was not unexpected, therefore, that women turned to reproduction, mothering and nurturing as a basis for their power. Production, apart from being male-dominated, was associated with destructive technologies and lifestyles. Women also began to look for the source and/or origins of male power after it had been named as 'patriarchy' (Millet 1970). Alongside this came a search for female power. If men had patriarchy - the primacy of the father - did women have matriarchy - the primacy of the mother?

One of the earliest celebrations of male/female differences that brought together a critique of male power and a dualist view of men and women in relation to nature was Elizabeth Gould Davis's book *The First Sex*:

Man is the enemy of nature: to kill, to root up, to level off, to pollute, to destroy are his instinctive reactions.

... Woman... is the ally of nature, and her instinct is to tend, to nurture, to encourage healthy growth, and to preserve ecological balance. She is the natural leader of society and of civilization, and the usurpation of her primeval authority by man has resulted in uncoordinated chaos. (1971: 335, 336)

While Mary Daly recalls the 'incredible impact' that Davis's book had on US feminism in the early 1970s (Collard 1988: xi), Davis's work was subject to heavy criticism, particularly from Black feminists for ignoring Black women's history (Rich 1976/1991: 91). Rich describes Davis as 'the first contemporary feminist myth-maker' whose work is in a direct line from the nineteenth-century German 'patriarchal mythographer' J. J. Bachofen. Rich accepts that Davis's book has 'undoubtedly been an embarrassment to academic feminists intent on working within strictly traditional and orthodox definitions of what constitutes serious knowledge. Yet its impact has been great, beginning with the arresting implications of its title' (ibid.: 91).

Davis's historical claims have been described as 'flights of fancy' (Eisler 1987: 149) but the book did represent a cultural celebration of women which opened up a debate about the relationship between women and nature that has profound implications for feminist theory and practice.

The criticism of modernity implicit in both deep green and radical feminist writing has led to a search for a period in history that was more benign, both socially and ecologically. Sometimes this has been identified with particular historical periods, such as Minoan Crete, sometimes with particular types of human society that may still exist, such as tribal communities. The culture and beliefs of Native American peoples have been particularly influential for spiritual ecofeminism in North America.

Some feminists have claimed evidence of women's power in ancient times (Stone 1976; Daly 1978; Gimbutas 1982). This evidence is drawn from old myths and legends and in archaeological discoveries of a period in early human history when female images abounded (Daly 1973; Reed 1975; Stone 1976). They see women's power as represented in the symbols of women's fertility and sexuality, such as the so-called Venus figurines of 25,000–15,000 BCE, the shrines of the Mother Goddess in Jericho in 7,000 BCE and in evidence from the ceremonial burials of women from 12,000–9,000 BCE (Miles 1988: 19–20). Other feminists have been highly suspicious of this exercise and have seen in the 'myth of matriarchy' a justification for male power (Bamberger 1974). I do not intend to investigate the arguments for and against these claims here, as I have done so elsewhere (Mellor 1992a: 117 f.).

The importance of Davis's ideas and those of other matriarchal theorists to theologians like Mary Daly was that she, like spiritual feminists of the same period, was seeking to reclaim women's spiritual history from patriarchal theology. In Daly's case her aim was to 'spin' an alternative feminist mythology and theology (1973, 1978). Although the woman–nature connection was implicit in Daly's work, it was taken up more fully by other early ecofeminists such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Susan Griffin.

It is perhaps Griffin's *Woman and Nature* (1978), a poetic exploration of the relationship between scientific/technological man and nature/woman speaking alternately in the male and female voice, that has given ecofeminism its 'essentialist' tag. In her preface Griffin claims that 'this book could not exist had I not read Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father*, which opened ways of thinking for me' (1978: xii). However, Griffin also cites the socialist ecofeminist Carolyn Iltis

(Merchant) as another influence and her later work makes it clear that she adopts a social constructionist position: 'what I mean . . . is not the biological male and female, but the socially created categories, masculine and feminine, (1990: 87). *Woman and Nature* explores many of the later concerns of ecofeminists such as the relationship between humans and animals, wilderness and wild-ness, sexism and science, the technological destruction of the natural world and woman, bodies, sexuality and knowing. Griffin's work is also a celebration of her own close identification with nature. A prose poem towards the end of the book, entitled 'This Earth What She is to Me' ends with the following:

This earth is my sister: I love her daily grace, her silent daring, and how loved I am *how we admire this strength in each other, all that we have lost, all that we have suffered, all that we know: we are stunned by this beauty,* and I do not forget: what she is to me, what I am to her. (1978: 219; italics in the original)

Another work which echoes many of Griffin's concerns is Andrée Collard's *Rape of the Wild*. This, too, has often been cited as evidence of the essentialist nature of ecofeminism. Collard, a professor of romance languages, farmer, beekeeper and close friend of Mary Daly, linked the oppression of women with nature in general and animals in particular. The origins of her book lay in a lecture on 'Nature, Animals and Women' given in 1979 in support of Mary Daly, whose employers were causing difficulties following the publication of *Gyn/Ecology* (Collard 1988: xv). *Rape of the Wild* was finally published in 1988, two years after Collard's death. In her view, the domination of woman and nature are directly connected:

In patriarchy, nature, animals and women are objectified, hunted, invaded, colonised, owned, consumed and forced to yield and produce (or not). This violation of the integrity of wild, spontaneous Being is rape. It is motivated by a fear and rejection of Life and it allows the oppressor the illusion of control, of power, of being alive. As with women as a class, nature and animals have been kept in a state of inferiority and powerlessness in order to enable men as a class to believe and act upon their 'natural' superiority/dominance. (1988: 1)

For this reason 'no woman will be free until all animals are free and nature is released from man's ruthless exploitation' (ibid.: 1). Collard calls on women in the same terms as Mary Daly to re-member and reclaim their biophilic (life-loving) power as 'our destiny as women and the destiny of nature are inseparable' (ibid.: 168). Women's identity with nature is through their bodies as mothers and nurturers. As

Collard's is one of the most explicit statements of affinity ecofeminism, I will discuss her ideas more fully in Chapter 4.

The criticism of both essentialism and mysticism that has been levelled at ecofeminism reflects the fact that several of the early writers were either poets like Susan Griffin, or theologians like Mary Daly. However, one of the earliest attempts to set out a coherent ecofeminist analysis – Rosemary Radford Ruether's *New Woman, New Earth* – shows the importance of not categorizing ecofeminism too readily, even in its earliest days. At the time her book was written in 1974, Ruether was a theology professor and activist in various feminist, peace and global justice organizations. Like Mary Daly, Ruether's starting point was not ecology as such, but sexism, particularly in relation to theology.

For Ruether the subjugation of women is the first subjugation. 'Liberation movements begin at the point of the subjugation of their people. Black Americans begin their story with the slave ships ... Latin Americans begin their story in the same period. But the subjugation of women begins in prehistoric culture. The woman's story must encompass the entire scope of the human dilemma' (1975: xii). Unlike Simone de Beauvoir, Ruether does not see women's lack of history as a weakness, but as a strength. Arguing that 'women are the first and oldest oppressed subjugated people', she goes on to claim that 'women must be the spokesmen [*sic*] for a new humanity arising out of the reconciliation of spirit and body' (1992: 51). While laying the blame for the human condition on patriarchy, Ruether does not argue for a return to matriarchal pre-history in order to recover an alternative. In fact, she criticizes pre-historical studies for confusing the anthropological literature on matrilineal cultures (family identity and/or location with the mother's family) among tribal peoples and the goddess figurines of classical antiquity among cultures that were hierarchical and civilized (i.e. with power centres in cities). Women's history, she tells us, is broken, but we can pick up the fragments that may 'swell into a real alternative, not just for women, but for humanity and the earth' (1975: xi).

Like Marx, Ruether argues that the task is not to change consciousness (rewrite theologies, reclaim history), as: 'culture and consciousness themselves are merely the ratifiers of a social system ... the transformation of consciousness is the servant of a struggle to transform this entire social system in its human and ecological relationships' (ibid.: xiv). Ruether calls for the 'fundamental reconstruction of the way resources are allocated within the world community' (ibid.: 31). Women's liberation and the problems of ecological destruction

would only be realized in a social revolution. What is needed is a communitarian socialism (by which Ruether means a community-based socialism) that harnesses rather than rejects technology (ibid.: 204–11). She sees the male ideology of western patriarchy as rooted in a 'self-alienated experience of the body and the world' (ibid.: 4). In this, she is setting out a basic tenet of ecofeminist thought, that women have been subordinated with the body and nature as 'man' reaches out for culture and autonomy. Ruether sees the subordination of women as involving three stages: the conquest of the mother, which involved taking away from women over history their economic independence; the negation of the mother through the development of patriarchal religions and philosophies that associated women with carnality and flesh (as in the fall of Eve); and, finally, sublimation of the mother into an idealized image of 'pure womanhood' – the Virgin Mary (ibid.: 6–23).

In describing this 'descent of woman' Ruether argues against seeing women as a class in the Marxist sense. Instead she claims that women are a 'caste within every class and race' (ibid.: 30). Although they have common oppressions such as 'dependency, secondary existence, domestic labour, sexual exploitation', they are also 'divided against each other by their integration into oppressor and oppressed classes and races' (ibid.: 30). Ruether's ecofeminism is therefore a delicate balance, advocating the centrality of women's experience, while taking account of inequalities and differences between women. Nor does Ruether celebrate women, as women. While she sees embodiment and its lack of recognition as crucial, this is not represented as a transhistorical gendered essence, but contextualized within western cultures. And she does not see 'nature' as elemental or essential. In a later work she argues that 'Nature is a product not only of natural evolution, but of human historical development' (1989: 149). She advocates a change in *human* consciousness, 'a historical project and struggle of re-creation' that will remake humanity's relation with nature. Again, Ruether emphasizes the importance of taking account of 'the structures of social domination and exploitation that mediate domination of nature' (ibid.: 149).

Ruether's political solution is a 'communitarian socialism' loosely modelled on the Israeli kibbutz. Women's dependency is to be overcome by 'transforming the relationship among power, work and home' (1975: 207). Women's work would be communalized and collectivized but always under local communal control, as state socialism, like all state power, was potentially fascist. Children would thereby gain 'a tribe while remaining rooted in the family' (ibid.: 207).

All forms of production would return to the local level. Work would be craft-based and non-alienating, organic and non-waste-generating. 'Human society, patterned for a balance through diversity, would be consciously integrated into its environment' (ibid.: 209).

While Ruether has set out a basically socialist and social perspective, other feminists were concerned, like Mary Daly, with the creation of a new spirituality from the perspective of women. Radical political change must first be preceded by profound spiritual change. In 1975, the same year that Ruether's book was published, a women's spirituality conference was held in Boston, which attracted 1,800 women (Christ 1992a: 277).

Feminist spirituality

Feel your natural tendencies toward multi-layered perceptions, empathy, compassion, unity and harmony. Feel your wholeness. Feel our oneness. Feel the elemental source of our power. Discard the patriarchal patterns of alienation, fear, enmity, aggression, and destruction. It is not necessary to force them away; by merely focusing awareness on the negative, masculinist thoughts as they begin to arise and then opting not to feed them any more psychic energy, their power becomes diminished and they fade . . . The authentic female mind is our salvation. (Spretnak 1982: 573)

It is the strength of the feminine which can guide us towards a consciousness which, though aware of polarities, is concerned with their interplay and connectedness rather than their conflict and separation. (Leland 1983: 71)

Feminists arguing for a distinctive women's spirituality claim that it will provide a basis for women's empowerment outside patriarchal control. Spiritual ecofeminists maintain we can find this by reclaiming older forms of wisdom that patriarchy has sought to obliterate.

As with ecofeminism generally, the main focus for the critique is Judaeo-Christianity – that is, western religion as symbolic of western patriarchal culture. In the introduction to their anthology *Womanspirit Rising*, which was first published in 1979, Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow see feminist spirituality as addressing four main issues. The first is the problem of an image and language of God that is exclusively male. The second is the division between body and soul (representing also mind and intellect). This is central to Christianity, where the flesh is sin and dwelling upon the Earth is merely a 'travail' in preparation for the Kingdom of Heaven. The third aim is to reclaim women's spiritual experience and history, and the fourth is to create

new theology and rituals (1979: vii). Feminist spirituality is earth-based not heaven-directed. It provides a female image of spirituality, often in the form of a goddess, and celebrates the spiritual nature of the physical world and women's bodies.

What was cosmologically wholesome and healing was the discovery of the Divine as immanent and around us. What was intriguing was the sacred link between the Goddess in her many guises and totemic animals and plants, sacred groves, and womblike caves, in the moon-rhythm blood of the menses, the ecstatic dance – the experience of knowing Gaia, her voluptuous contours and fertile plains, her flowing waters that give life, her animal teachers. (Spretnak 1990: 5)

Many ecofeminists seek to recover the lost mystical world of older earth-based religions of paganism, witchcraft and goddess-worship:

In ancient times the world itself was one. The beating of the drums was the heartbeat of the Earth – in all its mystery, enchantment, wonder, and terror. Our feet danced in sacred groves, honoring the spirits of nature. What was later broken asunder into prayer and music, ritual and dance, play and work, was originally one. (Eisler 1990: 33)

Spiritual feminists vary as to whether they advocate that there is/was a goddess, or stress the importance of the goddess as a symbol. Carol Christ claims that religion feeds a deep human need which provides 'symbols and rituals that enable people to cope with limit situations in human life (death, evil, suffering) and to pass through life's important transitions (birth, sexuality, death)' (1992b: 274). She sees spirituality as a very important source of empowerment for women, as they realize the 'fierce new love of the divine in themselves' (ibid.: 274).

Christ's case, like many other advocates of feminist spirituality, is that men have their sky/sun gods, therefore why should women not have their moon/earth goddess? She argues that religious symbols have psychological and political effects even for people who don't believe them. Humanity seeks belief systems that make them feel comfortable with current social and political arrangements. If these do not exist as 'the mind abhors a vacuum', other beliefs will take their place. If we are to have symbols, then the goddess, it is argued, is the best one to have. What the goddess represents is the 'acknowledgement of the legitimacy of female power as a beneficent and independent power' (ibid.: 277). She represents 'the affirmation of the female body and the life cycle expressed in it' (ibid.: 279). Male-centred religions are 'anti-body' in that they reject the flesh, particularly as

represented by women. Like many feminist theologians Christ points to the attack on women launched by the publication in 1486 of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Hammer of the Witches), prepared by two Dominican monks (Merchant 1983: 134). This tract argued that all witchcraft stemmed from women's 'carnal lust'.

Reclaiming women's bodies and sexuality is very important to spirituality feminists. Rituals involving menstrual blood and other aspects of women's bodies that are declared taboo or unclean in male religions are celebrated. Starhawk, a.k.a. Miriam Somos, is a follower of the pagan religion of Wicca (1982, 1987). She sees rituals as a way of generating the energy for political action and the image of the goddess as a way of understanding the immanence – that is, the 'aliveness' that permeates the natural world:

[S]pirit, sacred, Goddess, God – whatever you want to call it – is not found outside the world somewhere – it's in the world: it is the world, and it is us. Our goal is not to get off the wheel of birth nor to be saved from something. Our deepest experiences are experiences of connection with the Earth and with the world. (1990: 73)

The phases of women's lives are held sacred: menses, birth and menopause, as represented by the maiden (youth), mother (creativity) and crone (wisdom). It is through the reclaiming of embodiment that women can make the connection between body and nature and realize their own hitherto denied human potential: 'The Goddess as symbol of the revaluation of the body and nature thus also undergirds the human potential and ecology movements' (Christ 1992b: 282).

Does the goddess then exist, or is she a figment of feminist imaginings? Starhawk, first national president of the church of the 'Covenant of the Goddess', responded to this question as follows: 'It depends on how I feel. When I feel weak, she is someone who can help and protect me. When I feel strong, she is the symbol of my power. At other times I feel her as the natural energy in my body and the world' (quoted in *ibid.*: 278–9). Christ comments that these words may represent 'sloppy thinking' to a traditional theologian, but that they correspond to 'my deepest intuition that tells me they contain a wisdom that Western theological thought has lost' (*ibid.*: 279). Can a feminist spirituality be consciously created? Doesn't religion have to be something that is handed down as 'god-given'? Should women not seek a rationalist basis for political action rather than a mystical one? While feminist theologians like Mary Daly have argued that women need to create a female mystic power equivalent to the sky-gods

(1973), this search has been condemned as diversionary by social/ist ecofeminists. As Janet Biehl has argued, merely changing our myths from 'bad' ones to 'good' ones will not change our social realities (Biehl 1991: 18). Charlene Spretnak and Starhawk, on the other hand, see spirituality as a source of inspiration for women in their struggle to change social realities. Spiritual energy empowers women. Such energy can, and should, be channelled into political struggle (Spretnak 1990; Starhawk 1990).

Spiritual ecofeminists draw their inspiration from pre-history and from surviving tribal religions, particularly those of Native Americans and original peoples of Australia and New Zealand. This is often expressed as returning to a nature-based spirituality that the modern world has destroyed. Spretnak sees Native American peoples as having 'maintained unbroken practices of earth-based spirituality for more than twenty thousand years' (1991: 89). Unbroken practices perhaps, but they are not unbroken societies, with the beneficiaries being European colonizers. As a European, I feel uncomfortable about drawing spiritual strength from the rituals and beliefs of people whose lives have been so cruelly destroyed. Taking beliefs out of context is also problematic if they are associated with hierarchical or patriarchal views. Vandana Shiva has been criticized for finding inspiration in some aspects of the Hindu religion, such as the ideas of Prakriti (activity and diversity in nature) and Shakti (the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos), while other aspects of the religion support women's subordination and the caste system (Agarwal 1992; Jackson 1995). Green thought has also drawn heavily on Buddhism (Schumacher 1973) and Taoism (Capra 1976), which are also male-dominated.

New Ageism, and the crass commercialism that has accompanied it also poses a problem for spiritual ecofeminism (Seager 1993; Mellor 1992a). And nor is the attack on Christianity unproblematic. White middle-class feminists may find the Christian faith wanting, but other less privileged groups are continuing to find strength and support in Christianity – for instance those in Eastern Europe or the Black churches. Christ and Plaskow, reflecting in 1992 on their *Womanspirit* anthology of 1979, note the absence of the voice of women of colour in their critique of male-dominated Judaeo-Christianity. Barbara Epstein, on the other hand, argues that the development of spirituality within ecofeminism is positive: 'the orientation towards spirituality gives ecofeminism much of its vitality – and also has been the basis for creating bonds between white women and women of colour' (1993: 148). She cites a conference at the

US Woman Earth Institute in 1988 which brought together equal numbers of white women and women of colour.

Affinity and difference

Spiritual ecofeminism is the exemplar of affinity ecofeminism, which tends to combine a celebration of women-centred values (mothering, nurturing, caring) with a celebration of women's bodies. Women's embodiment is then caught up in a cosmology that tends to identify male and female forces (transcendent god versus immanent goddess). Whether these sex/gender differences are insurmountable is more problematic and depends on the perceived origin of patriarchy.

Hazel Henderson, who developed one of the earliest criticisms of western socio-economic systems from a radical 'futurist' perspective (1978, 1980), sees a constant interrelation between human biology and social relations. 'Since, biologically, humans do come in two asymmetrical forms, it is obviously different to experience life in a male and female body.' Women's biology means that they 'vividly experience their embeddedness in Nature, and can harbour few illusions concerning their freedom and separatedness from the cycles of birth and death' (1983: 207). Men, on the other hand, 'for the past 6000 years' have had a sense of freedom and relative disembeddedness. Human civilizations in this time have been vastly creative. However, this diversity and creativity has now become destructive and the human species will need to become more androgynous: 'Today we see these alternatives emerging from the world's ethnic and indigenous peoples, from subsistence cultures and traditional wisdom; from the world's women and from the rising female principle, whose nurturant energies can be seen in the new breed of gentle-men' (ibid.: 206). The feminine spirit for Henderson is not only available to women, but to men too if they choose to embrace it. Women have a biological affinity with nature, but the differences between men and women are not ultimately fundamental. Their different historical experiences mean that women have retained a distinctive form of reasoning that is holistic and intuitive, while men have developed a logical, linear and cerebral mode of thought. Sometimes this is expressed as a division of function in the brain itself (Capra 1983).

Henderson's version of affinity ecofeminism sees biological and social differences between men and women, but no ultimate conflict of interests. Women are closer to nature because they never left it. (Western) men have wandered away for a few millennia, but are now

returning. For many radical and social/ist ecofeminists, such a view is deeply problematic. Divisions between men and women are not seen either as biologically based or accidents of historical development, but as representing distinct material interests. Social change will not come from a spiritual rebirth, the weaving of dreams or spells or the re-emergence of the 'female' as body or spirit, but from active political struggle against the structures and institutions of current society.

While affinity ecofeminists start from the association between women and nature, social/ist ecofeminists begin from inequalities and dominations within human society. However, once again these categories are not entirely distinct. While social/ist ecofeminists may start their analysis with social forces, their view of the relationship between men and women may lie close to the views of radical difference feminists. For example, while Rosemary Radford Ruether advocates a political solution to gender inequalities and ecological degradation based on a community-based socialism, she does not see the subjugation of women as dependent on any other social forces. It is not a by-product of capitalism, or even western culture, although it has been enhanced by the separation of mind and body in Greek culture. While Ruether sees the origins of women's subordination as lost in pre-history, she does not claim that there is a biologically based division between men and women. Like many ecofeminists, she sees the origins of sex/gender divisions as being historically remote, but socially pervasive.

Affinity ecofeminism offers a strong and a weak version of the relationship between women and nature, affinity and difference. The first is to assert a strong version of both affinity and difference. This would claim a fundamental difference between men and women based on biology and/or cosmological forces that are irreconcilable (immanent goddess versus patriarchal god) and a direct biological or cosmological link between women and nature. A weaker emphasis on both affinity and difference would see differences between men and women as based on biological and/or cosmological differences that are complementary, and therefore reconcilable, as in the Taoist concept of yin and yang. Even where ecofeminists rhetorically claim a strong affinity between women and nature, and deep divisions between men and women often the actual analysis leans towards social constructionism, as differences and divisions in human history are given causal significance such as the patriarchal invasions of ancient matriarchal societies. The clash in this case becomes one of culture and values rather than one of biology or cosmic division. For

those ecofeminists who take a social (i.e. anarchist)/socialist/materialist approach, the emphasis is much more on contemporary social inequalities, and the relationship between women and nature is seen as a purely historical phenomenon. It is as if, as Plumwood argues, 'women and nature have been thrown into an alliance' (1993: 21). However, the degree to which that alliance is socially contingent or materially structured becomes crucial. For most ecofeminists, whether they take a strong or weak affinity or social constructionist approach, the relationship between women and the natural world is seen as a material one. For affinity ecofeminists it is a materiality of female embodiment, of blood, birth and sexuality. For those ecofeminists who take a more socially constructed (but not radically constructivist) view of sex/gender, the material relations represent power relations around human embodiment and the allocation of the burdens and responsibilities it represents.

Social/ist ecofeminism

Women have been culture's sacrifice to nature. (King 1990: 115)

Ynestra King represents the link between the ecofeminist movement and radical political activism. She has 'prominently figured in the promulgation of ecofeminism as a position on the American left which is deeply rooted in the politics and practice of the direct action movement' (Noël Sturgeon, quoted in Lahar 1991: 32). King was a founder and organizer of both the Women and Life on Earth Conference in 1980 and the Women's Pentagon Action in 1980-1, which launched ecofeminism as a movement. Before this she had a long history of activism in the feminist and peace movements, and she had worked as a professional community organizer and an academic. Like Griffin, Daly and Ruether, King gave lectures on ecofeminism in the mid-1970s, in King's case at the Institute of Social Ecology in Vermont founded by Murray Bookchin (Merchant 1992: 184). Bookchin has been a formative figure on the green left in the United States, and has theorized a broadly anarchist perspective, although his own background was originally Marxist.

King's ideas were set out in a number of articles (1981, 1983a, 1983b) and have been reproduced or developed in later anthologies (Plant 1989; Jaggar and Bordo 1989; Diamond and Orenstein 1990). Although she takes a broadly social constructionist position on gender relations (that I have described as social/ist), in many of her state-

ments King expresses ideas that are close to affinity ecofeminism. In her earliest writings she records her debt to the writings of Mary Daly and Susan Griffin, praising the former as an inspirational thinker, but dissociating herself from what she sees as Daly's dualistic thinking. She sees Daly as wanting to reverse the truths of patriarchal theology by asserting the truths of feminist theology. King herself holds that 'any truly ecological politics including ecological feminism must be ultimately anti-dualistic' (1983b: 128).

Susan Griffin, on the other hand, King argues, is not a dualistic thinker and has been misrepresented through her poetical expression of the relationship between men/science and woman/nature in *Women and Nature*, into which an unnecessarily essentialist politics has been read. I would agree with King on this matter. In her introduction to the anthology *Reclaim the Earth*, Susan Griffin makes the assertion that human beings (not solely women) are 'flesh and blood of this earth' and goes on to argue the social constructionist case that:

[W]omen have long been associated with nature. And if this association has been the rationalisation of our oppression by a society which fears both women and nature, it has also meant that those of us born female are often less severely alienated from nature than are most men. (Caldecott and Leland 1983: 1)

This is echoed by King, who sees the building of 'western industrial civilization in opposition to nature' as interacting dialectically with, and reinforcing, the subjugation of women 'because women are believed to be closer to nature in this culture against nature'. (1983b: 119). This, King argues, gives women a 'particular stake in ending the domination of nature' (ibid.: 118). She sees the domination of men over women as the 'prototype' of all other forms of domination, so that potentially feminism creates a concrete global community of interests through interconnection with other dominations, 'its challenge... extends beyond sex to social domination of all kinds because the domination of sex, race and class, and nature are mutually reinforcing' (ibid.: 120). Ecofeminism can form the basis of 'a decentralized global movement founded on common interests but celebrating diversity and opposing all forms of domination and violence' (ibid.: 119/20).

King's work presents the main elements of ecofeminism: a critique of the dualism of (western) patriarchal society that makes a distinction between humanity (man) and the natural world; the subordinate position of women in that dualism, so that women are associated

with, and materially experience, a relationship with the natural world; the necessity of creating a non-destructive connectedness between humanity (man) and the natural world; the centrality of women to creating that connectedness. King rejects the idea of women abandoning their association with nature and joining men on an equal basis in the 'public world', as that would mean embracing women-hating and nature-hating cultural forms. Also, given that women's 'ecological sensitivity and life orientation' is socially constructed, it 'could be socialized right out of us depending on our daily lives. There is no reason to believe that women placed in positions of patriarchal power will act any differently from men' (1983b: 122-3).

The core of social/ist ecofeminism that brings it close to affinity ecofeminism is that all human beings are rooted in nature, they are embodied beings. However, for social/ist ecofeminists women are not more rooted *essentially* than men, it is just that men are less rooted in practice. To put it another way, (some) men have used their power to escape the consequences of their rootedness or embodiment. Like Ruether, King argues that women are particularly connected to nature through the process of the patriarchal rejection of embodiment: 'it is as if women were entrusted with and have kept the dirty little secret that humanity emerges from nonhuman nature' (1990: 116).

Patriarchal society's rejection and objectification of women and the natural world means that women have a 'deep and particular understanding' of nature-hating patriarchy, 'through our natures and through our life experience as women' (1983a: 11). It is clear from such a statement that King is bringing together elements of affinity (our natures) and social construction (our experience). Women as 'keepers of the home, the children and the community' develop 'nurturant powers', which they use daily whether or not they are biological mothers – a similar point is made by the affinity ecofeminist Andrée Collard. Through their particular experience and understanding, King argues, women can develop an attitude to the natural world that is 'about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice. It asserts the special strength and integrity of every living thing' (ibid.: 10). In the process of nurturing the 'socialisation of the organic' women form the 'bridge between nature and culture' (1990: 116).

King praises the contribution to ecofeminism from radical cultural feminism. She sees it as a 'deeply woman-identified movement' which, by celebrating what is different about women, has challenged male culture rather than, as liberal feminism, 'strategising to become part of it' (ibid.: 111). Acknowledging that radical cultural feminism

tended to overlook the differences between women, King argues that the feminist spirituality movement that grew out of radical cultural feminism has been better able to bridge the gap between western and non-western women. However, feminist spirituality is weakened by its emphasis on personal transformation as a route to emancipation. This cannot provide a solution to current forms of domination without a confrontation with political realities, as 'human beings can't simply jump off, or out of history': 'These indigenous, embodied, Earth-centred spiritual traditions can plant seeds in the imaginations of people who are the products of dualistic cultures, but White Westerners cannot use them to avoid the responsibility of their own history' (ibid.: 113). To confront history King turns to a socialist analysis: 'Ecofeminism takes from socialist feminism the idea that women have been *historically* positioned at the biological dividing line where the organic emerges into the social. The domination of nature originates in society and therefore must be resolved in society' (ibid.: 116-17; italics in the original). However, King feels that the analysis of women's domination has been better expressed in Murray Bookchin's anarchist analysis of the origins of hierarchy in society than in traditional socialist analysis. Bookchin sees the origins of hierarchy in the subordination of women by men and the young by the old (1982, 1989). The socialist emphasis on class domination, on the other hand, has focused on the sphere of production, with women's role in the sphere of reproduction seen as secondary if not diversionary.

Despite the long history of women's subordination, like Hazel Henderson, King does not in the end see any fundamental conflict between men and women. A cultural form has emerged which is ecologically destructive and socially unjust. In response, 'thoughtful human beings must use the fullness of our sensibility and intelligence to push ourselves intentionally to another stage of evolution' (1990: 121). In this process women are to play a special role:

It is the moment where women recognise ourselves as agents of history – yes even unique agents – and knowingly bridge the classic dualism between spirit and matter, art and politics, reason and intuition. This is the potentiality of a *rational re-enchantment*. This is the project of ecofeminism. (1990: 120-1 italics in the original)

From her earliest writings King rejects the assertion that women 'naturally' align themselves with nature, but argues that they can make the conscious political choice not to reject that alignment. Women can:

recognize that although the nature/culture opposition is a product of culture we can, nonetheless *consciously choose* not to sever the woman nature connections by joining male culture. Rather we can use it as a vantage point for creating a different kind of culture and politics that would integrate intuitive/spiritual and rational forms of knowledge, embracing both science and magic insofar as they enable us to transform the nature/culture distinction itself and to envision and create a free, ecological society. (1983b: 123; italics in the original)

From a socialist feminist perspective Carolyn Merchant agrees with Ynestra King that: 'Although cultural feminism has delved more deeply into the woman-nature connection, social and socialist ecofeminism have the potential for a more thorough critique of domination and for a liberating social justice' (1992: 184). Carolyn Merchant was an early advocate of the compatibility of socialism and ecofeminism. However, her best-known work was a feminist critique of the idea of nature in the scientific revolution, in which she only discussed socialism briefly in reference to the socialist-feminist aim of 'revolutionizing economic structures in a direction that would equalize female and male work options and reform a capitalist system that creates profits at the expense of nature and working people' (1983: 294). In a later essay Merchant expands on the relationship between ecofeminism and other feminist perspectives (1990), and in her book *Radical Ecology* argues for socialist ecofeminism as part of a radical ecology movement (1992).

For Merchant, socialist ecofeminism sees environmental problems as 'rooted in the rise of capitalist patriarchy and the ideology that the Earth and nature can be exploited for human progress through technology' (1990: 103). The basic source of the problem is the sexual division of labour, as humanity tries to divorce itself from nature through the productive system. Men predominate in the sphere of commodified production, while the domestic sphere is serviced by women's unpaid labour. As a result, women and men become alienated from each other and from their labour. The productive process itself is alienated from the natural world. The natural world is, in turn, transformed, eroded and polluted in the course of production for profit. Even so, although nature remains the basis of human life, it is at the same time the result of historical and social forces. It is both a 'natural' and a social construct. The same is true for gender. It is created by biology *and* social practices. As a result, socialist ecofeminism sees the natural world and the human world as active agents, as material forces. Ecological and biological conditions, social production and reproduction are all forces creating and shaping

human society. What is required, therefore, is a multilevelled structural analysis that sees a dialectical relationship between production and reproduction as well as between society and nature.

Socialist ecofeminism, Merchant argues, steers a course between a natural conception of 'nature' and the idea of social construction as well as between patriarchy and capitalism as systems of exploitation. While claiming that a materialist analysis of women's social position provides the best basis for an ecofeminist politics, and that a spiritual assertion of women's difference as 'a politics grounded in women's culture, experience and values could be seen as reactionary' (1990: 102), Merchant, like King, does not seek to divide the ecofeminist movement: 'Weaving together the many strands of the ecofeminist movement is the concept of reproduction construed in its broadest sense to include the continued biological and social reproduction of human life and the continuance of life on earth' (1992: 209). Merchant sees ecofeminism as part of a broader movement of 'radical ecology' that embraces theoretical and practical struggles across the globe. This movement has not yet produced 'a worldwide socialist order', but it does offer 'an alternative vision of the world in which race, class, sex and age barriers have been eliminated and basic human needs have been fulfilled' (ibid.: 235-6). The task of the movement is to raise public consciousness of the dangers to human health and non-human nature of maintaining the status quo and to 'push mainstream society toward greater equality and social justice' (ibid.: 235).

Social/ist ecofeminism has developed in a number of directions. Much of its work has taken the form of a critique of Marxism and/or male-oriented versions of ecoMarxism and ecosocialism (Merchant 1992; Thrupp 1989; Mellor 1992b) or of deep ecology (Salleh 1984). More recently, socialist ecofeminist analysis has been developed using a neo-Marxian framework (Salleh 1994; Mellor 1992a/b), or drawing on critical theory (Plumwood 1986, 1993). These ideas will be discussed more fully in later chapters.

Although affinity and social/ist ecofeminists have differed in their emphasis, they have mainly addressed the position of women in western societies. As Seager has argued, ecofeminism is in danger of being a 'particular first world philosophy' (1993: 316). However, it is perhaps right that (mainly) white middle-class feminists should challenge patriarchy and privilege (including their own) in their own societies. In 1975 Ruether called upon feminists in the United States to challenge patriarchal power within their own society. Maria Mies, a German with a long history of involvement with, and support for, women in India asks that western women challenge power 'in the

heart of the beast' (Mies and Shiva 1993: 1). However, given the importance of women from the South in grassroots struggles over the environment and the global nature of patterns of socio-economic exploitation, racist oppression and ecological degradation, an ecofeminist analysis from a South perspective is vitally necessary.

Ecofeminism: a South perspective

Third World women are bringing the concern with living and survival back to centre-stage in human history. In recovering the chances for the survival of all life, they are laying the foundations for the recovery of the feminine principle in nature and society, and through it the recovery of the earth as sustainer and provider. (Shiva 1989: 224)

While ecofeminism has largely been identified with white women in the North, the Indian ecofeminist Vandana Shiva has been one of its most influential voices worldwide. She is, perhaps, best known for her book *Staying Alive* (1989). Inspired by 'the many women, peasants and tribals of India who have been my teachers in thinking ecologically', Shiva abandoned her career as a nuclear physicist and devoted herself to campaigning against ecologically destructive 'maldevelopment'. Examples of maldevelopment are agricultural technologies that are unsustainable and reproductive technologies that interfere with the integrity of women's bodies.

Maldevelopment, for Shiva, has been created by the North's imperialist imposition of its model of modernity on the whole globe. The 'twin pillars' of this model are economic development and modern scientific knowledge. As a result, the world is becoming effectively a 'monoculture' with a consequent loss of diversity of plant and animal life and of peoples and cultures (1993). At the heart of this development is violence, a violation of nature and women: 'this violence against nature and women is built into the very mode of perceiving both, and forms the basis of the current development paradigm' (1989: xvi). The diversity of the natural world is sacrificed for industrialized agriculture and genetically engineered crops. The subsistence, use-value-based way of life of women and peasant peoples is sacrificed for profit-driven commercial production and trade. The West, she argues, has justified its intervention by the assumption that traditional economies are poor economies: 'The paradox and crisis of development arises from the mistaken identification of culturally perceived poverty with real material poverty, and the mistaken identification of the growth of commodity production as better

'satisfaction of needs' (ibid.: 13). Western 'developers' have also made like assumptions about the economic position of women in the South. Drawing on Ester Boserup's analysis of women's role in subsistence production (1970), Shiva shows how western patriarchal assumptions about male domination of production processes destroyed the resource base for women's subsistence. This denial of the 'feminine principle' in development leads to a one-sided view of resources and resource use. Maldevelopment only sees a river as a resource to be dammed and put to technological use, and not as a 'commons' – that is, a communal resource that meets the water needs of local communities. As women are the main users and carriers of water, they suffer most if supplies are interrupted. Maldevelopment, is a development bereft of the feminine, the conservation, the ecological principle' (ibid.: 4). The aim of the development process is to pull all resources and labour into the commodity form, to be circulated via the market. This leaves no resources for women's subsistence or for 'nature to maintain her production of renewable resources' (ibid.: 9). While economic development undermines the subsistence base through pulling all resources into the capitalist market, scientific development applies technologies conceived in laboratories without any real understanding of the 'web of life' on the ground.

Shiva particularly criticizes the green revolution for developing species of crops that demanded high chemical inputs of fertilizers and pesticides, and huge amounts of water. The hybrid seeds that had been developed were also sterile so that farmers had to buy new seeds each year rather than retain seeds from their crops. The loss of diversity and species and the commercial control of seeds has been a particular concern of Shiva's (1994). The commercial production of seeds affects both diversity and the autonomy of farmers, particularly women, who do not have the resources to buy seed. Worse, Shiva argues, vital knowledge is also being lost as the livelihood of subsistence farmers is destroyed. The domination of the North then becomes not just commercial domination, but a domination of knowledge itself. The monocultures of the green revolution and commercialized agriculture are being joined by a 'monoculture of the mind' (1993).

For Shiva, the whole process of maldevelopment rests on the patriarchal assumptions of western culture. This is in contrast to the world-view of women and non-westernized peoples, as represented by the Chipko movement:

In the world-view personified by the Chipko women, nature is Prakriti, the creator and source of wealth, and rural women, peasants, tribals who live

in, and derive sustenance from nature, have a systematic and deep knowledge of nature's processes of reproducing wealth. (1989: 219)

There is a confusion in Shiva's ideas between the relationship between women *per se* and nature, and between women as representative of non-westernized peoples (peasants, tribals) and nature. Women are, of course, part of the North as well as the South. Following Mies (1986), Shiva argues that western patriarchy has effectively conquered women, through the dualistic nature of its philosophy and science, and the sexual/gender division of labour under industrialism. Western patriarchal culture broke the connection between society and nature and between women and nature. Again following Mies, Shiva argues that women have a particular connection to nature through their experience of the 'production of life' because:

(a) Their interaction with nature, with their own nature as well as the external environment, was a reciprocal process. They conceived of their own bodies as being productive in the same way as they conceived of external nature being so.

(b) Although they appropriate nature, their appropriation does not constitute a relationship of dominance or a property relation. Women are not owners of their own bodies or of the earth, but they co-operate with their bodies and with the earth in order to 'let grow and to make grow'.

(c) As producers of new life they also became the first subsistence producers and the inventors of the first productive economy, implying from the beginning social production and the creation of social relations, i.e. of society and history. (Mies 1986: 56; quoted in Shiva 1989: 43)

Shiva's ideas are therefore a mixture of affinity ecofeminism and an assertion of the social construction of inequality through western models of science and economic imperialism.

Mies and Shiva have elaborated their ideas in a book of essays on ecofeminism (1993). For them 'an ecofeminist perspective propounds the need for a new cosmology and a new anthropology which recognizes that life in nature (which includes human beings) is maintained by means of co-operative, mutual love and care' (1993: 6). They reject any division within the ecofeminist movement based on 'spiritual' versus 'political' ecofeminism. While criticizing the commercial appropriation of 'oriental spiritualism', they claim that an assertion that the earth should be treated as sacred is not in conflict with a materialist and active politics. Against feminists such as Seager, who have argued that spiritual ecofeminists are in danger of stressing the importance of personal transformation to the exclusion of collective political action (1993: 249), Mies and Shiva claim that:

'The ecological relevance of this emphasis on "spirituality" lies in the rediscovery of the sacredness of life, according to which life on earth can be preserved only if people again begin to perceive all life forms as sacred and respect them as such' (1993: 17/18). Political change will come from a spiritual approach combined with political struggles over the fight for immediate survival. In the end everyone can unite on the 'material base' that 'all women and all men have a body which is directly affected by the destructions of the industrial system' (ibid.: 20).

Mies and Shiva also combine an affinity perspective on women's relationship with nature, with an emphasis on women's social experience. Both are triggered in political action:

Wherever women acted against ecological destruction or / and the threat of atomic annihilation, they *immediately* became aware of the connection between patriarchal violence against women, other people and nature . . . We have a deep and particular understanding of this both through our *natures* and our *experience* as women. (ibid.: 14 italics added)

The enemy of nature and women is the 'white man' of patriarchal capitalism. The main focus of Mies and Shiva's political strategy is to oppose the hegemony of capitalist patriarchy through the defence of women-based subsistence communities in the South and the development of economic alternatives to the capitalist system in the North. The new politics would unite around fundamental needs such as food, shelter, clothing, affection, care, love, dignity, identity, knowledge, freedom, leisure and joy, which are common to 'all people, irrespective of culture, ideology, race, political and economic system and class' (ibid.: 13).

In maintaining that there is the basis for a common global politics, Mies and Shiva reject the postmodern claim that such ideas are 'totalizing' and denying of difference. Drawing upon the experience of the women of the Chipko movement, they argue strongly against the postmodern turn to cultural relativism:

These women spell out clearly what unites women worldwide, and what unites men and women with the multiplicity of life forms in nature. The universalism that stems from their efforts to preserve their subsistence - their life base - is different from the eurocentric universalism developed via the Enlightenment and capitalist patriarchy. (ibid.: 13)

It is not universalism *per se* that is at fault, but the false universalism of western hegemony.

Common themes in ecofeminist thought

Women's values, centred around life-giving, must be revalued, elevated from their once-subordinate role. What women know from experience needs recognition and respect. We have generations of experience in conciliation, dealing with interpersonal conflicts daily in domestic life. We know how to feel for others because we have been socialised that way. (*Plant Green Line*, No. 48 1986-7: 15)

The everyday struggles of women for the protection of nature take place in the cognitive and ethical context of the categories of the ancient Indian world-view in which nature is Prakriti, a living and creative process, the feminine principle from which all life arises. (Shiva 1989: xviii)

Women are devalued first, because their work cooperates with nature's processes, and second because work which satisfies needs and ensures sustenance is devalued in general. (*ibid.*: 7)

The divisions within ecofeminism between a biological and a social construction of the relationship between women and nature (affinity versus social/ist ecofeminism) are not easy to separate, as the above statements show. Plant begins by asserting an affinity and woman-centred perspective, referring to women's nature and their life-giving role, but goes on to talk of women's social experience and ends up by arguing the social constructionist case that women have been socialized into their role and values. Shiva's first statement sees women as embodying an ancient cosmic expression of the feminine, but within a few pages we are presented with a socially constructed view of the devaluation of women's work, not just because it is associated with nature, but because it is concerned with basic needs and sustenance.

Whichever perspective is taken – strong or weak affinity, or purely social constructionist – ecofeminism necessarily engages with women's embodiment as sexed beings. Ecofeminists start from the importance of human embodiment (as reflecting biological existence) and embeddedness (within the surrounding ecosystem) and direct their attention to the impact of both on women. The case ecofeminism is making is that women represent the dilemma of human embodiment in a sexed and gendered society. Human embodiment, in turn, represents the fact that human beings live not only in an historical and social context, but also an ecological and biological one. The needs of human embodiment have to be met within an encompassing ecosystem. Differences in the historical and social position of human beings

mean that their relationship to their ecosystem may be very different. The rich middle-class drinker of sparkling mineral water is in a very different relationship to her/his water ecosystem from the wo/man who relies upon local intermittent rains. However, they are both embodied and need water, however it is obtained.

Where there are inequalities and/or differences based on sex/gender, the consequences of human embodiment and embeddedness mean different relationships between women and 'nature' in terms of their sex/gender-related work in different contexts. In industrial societies women's distinctive role lies mainly in the area of childbirth, childcare and unpaid domestic work generally. This work is also represented in low-paid and sexually segregated occupations in the formal economy. In the South many women combine their 'biological' roles of motherhood and nurturing with a wide range of activities that directly relate to their environment, such as water-fetching, farming, wood-gathering, rearing small animals, etc. It is important, therefore, not to let the issue of women's oppression on the basis of her reproductive role in the North obscure the wide range of ecological issues that impinge on many women in the South in addressing the 'women and nature' debate.

The common core that unites ecofeminist thought worldwide is its critique of the patriarchal nature of western society. The current threat to the natural world is seen as resulting from the existence of hierarchical dualisms in western society (man/woman, public/private, society/nature, mind/body) and western patterns of knowledge (reason/emotion, abstract/concrete, expert/vernacular). Although ecofeminists may differ in their focus, sex/gender differences are at the centre of their analysis. In confronting western dualism, affinity and social/ist ecofeminists want to revalue the experience of women in patriarchal society. For some affinity ecofeminists this becomes an end in itself, the realization of the 'feminine' in women's bodies or natures or as a spiritual force. For other affinity ecofeminists and social/ist ecofeminists the revaluing of women's experience is a political challenge to dualism.

While differing in their focus and approach to western dualism, ecofeminists are in agreement about the kind of society they want, although most ecofeminist writings are much more concerned with eliminating the negatives of present society than envisaging the specific positives of a new one. An ecofeminist society would be egalitarian and ecologically sustainable. There would be no sexual/gender division of labour, and any necessary work would be integrated with all aspects of communal life. Relationships between

humans and between humans and nature would be harmonious and co-operative. These ideals would be shared with most feminists, who 'would advocate a view of nature that emphasized harmony and cooperation with other living things' (Birke 1986: 149; Soper 1995). In ecofeminist writings there tends to be an implicit optimism that once dualist structures are removed there will be no inherent imbalance between the human and the natural worlds, an assumption that I would not make.

However, overemphasis on the particular role of women in challenging the dualist divisions in western society could marginalize the importance of other inequalities and oppressions. Most ecofeminists are at pains to point out that they see sex/gender as being part of a matrix of oppressions. While some affinity ecofeminists may seem to adopt a reductionist position, seeing sex/gender as the original or most universal oppression, I would want to argue that attention to sex/gender can reveal structural dynamics that are helpful in confronting other oppressions. This is not, however, to claim a priority for sex/gender, it is simply *one* starting point.

Addressing the relationship of woman and nature as ecofeminism has done is problematic for feminists who have sought to minimize or destroy this connection. From the perspective of feminists who deny the social relevance of sex difference and claim equality with men in the 'public' world, ecofeminism is in danger of returning to the old essentialist arguments that denied women's equality in the first place. In the next chapter I will look at the feminist debate around 'nature' and biology and its implications for ecofeminist thought. Another debate that is very important in contemporary feminism is the question of sex/gender identity as the basis of political action or as the foundation for particular kinds of knowledge. I will look at ecofeminism in the context of this debate in Chapter 5.

4

Women, Biology and Nature in Feminist Thought

I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king. (Elizabeth I, 1588. Speech to the troops at Tilbury on the approach of the Armada)

One essential feature of all ecological feminist positions is that they give positive value to a connection of women with nature which was previously, in the west, given negative cultural value and which was the main ground of women's devaluation and oppression. (Plumwood 1993: 8)

The fundamental difference between the attitude of Elizabeth I to her body, which has had many echoes through the ages, and Plumwood's summary of the ecofeminist position is their acceptance or rejection of female embodiment. While strong affinity ecofeminists would see female embodiment as positive in itself, most ecofeminists (including Plumwood) would see it as standing for the dilemmas of human embodiment generally.

The debates around the nature of sex/gender differences and the impact of women's biology on their social position has been very much a feature of western feminism. As I have pointed out, for women in other parts of the world and for poor women in western societies, embodiment is much more about obtaining basic sustenance and avoiding disease, disability through overwork and death. To discuss the woman-biology-nature debate within feminist thought is very much to embrace the concerns of relatively privileged western feminists with the danger of ignoring more fundamental problems which the majority of women face. To look at the debate between feminism and ecofeminism in this context must necessarily marginalize