

Ecofeminism: Essentialism, Shared Experience or Quintessential Environmentalism?¹

Carmen Flys Junquera¹, Margarita Carretero González², Diana Villanueva Romero³, Imelda Martín Junquera⁴, and Irene Sanz Alonso¹

Universidad de Alcalá¹, Universidad de Granada², Universidad de Extremadura³, Universidad de León⁴

Abstract

Ecofeminism originated in political activism in the late 70s and 80s and only found its way into literary criticism in the 90s. Throughout human history, nature has constantly been feminized and women naturalized, particularly due to aspects of fertility and natural cycles. While some feminists reject this association of women and nature, others embraced the relationship between women and nature, based on the shared experience of oppression and domination. Ecofeminists highlight the conceptual connection between the domination of women and the domination of nature as being located in an oppressive and patriarchal conceptual framework characterized by a logic of domination. This round table pretends to analyze both ecofeminist literary theory and representative literary works. The panelists will discuss writers such as Ana Castillo, Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Octavia Butler. We will also show several photographs from the campaigns of the PETA organization and analyze them from an ecofeminist approach.

Throughout human history, nature has constantly been feminized and women naturalized, particularly due to aspects of fertility and natural cycles. While some feminists reject this association of women and nature, others have embraced the relationship between

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women and nature, based on the shared experience of oppression and domination. Like feminism, ecofeminism did not originate within the field of literary studies, but within the ground of political activism. The interpenetration that ecofeminist activists had been observing between ecology and feminism through the 70s and 80s only rarely found an echo among feminist literary scholars. From the 90s on, however, ecofeminism has definitely found its place within literary criticism. As indicated by its name, ecofeminism is a branch of both ecocriticism and feminist studies, devoted originally to analyse how the oppression women are subjected to in patriarchal societies mirrors that exerted on the natural world by human beings. As Ynestra King notes: “The hatred of women and the hatred of nature are intimately connected and mutually reinforcing” (1983: 118). Ecofeminists highlight the conceptual connection between the domination of women and the domination of nature as being located in an oppressive and patriarchal conceptual framework characterized by a logic of domination. Lately, however, building on both ecocritic and feminist challenging of the dichotomy of absolute difference, ecofeminism has evolved into a wider critical movement that extends the interconnections between the domination of nature and the oppression of women, to include the subjugation of any representative of the “Other”.

“Ecological feminism” is an umbrella term which captures a variety of multicultural perspectives on the nature of the connections *within* social systems of domination between those humans in subdominant or subordinate positions, particularly women, and the domination of nonhuman nature. ... Ecofeminist analyses of the twin domination of women and nature include considerations of the domination of people of color, children, and the underclass. (Warren, 1994: 1)

In order to illustrate some of these concepts and how they can be used in textual analysis, we will briefly present three specific examples of ecofeminist readings of three novels and the photographs of an environmentalist campaign.

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1. An ecofeminist approach to the situation of Ciudad Juárez through literary texts

Ecofeminists have brought to attention the increasing problem of abuses towards women of color and why women are preferred as workers to men in maquiladora plants in Ciudad Juárez; their oppression gets “justified by natural fact”, as Legler (1997: 231) argues. Thus, more women are employed at the maquiladora industry because their hands are smaller and more skilled for working with precision at assembly lines; therefore, the industry increases productivity at the same time that saves money by paying them lower wages. They are still second class citizens suffering the arm of patriarchy which confers more dignity to men’s jobs. *Desert Blood: The Juarez Murders* by Alicia Gaspar de Alba pays a tribute to all those anonymous “muchachas del sur” abused and murdered while searching to fulfil their dreams.

Ana Castillo and Alicia Gaspar de Alba coincide in deliberately introducing the characters of *So Far from God* and *Desert Blood* as gendered bodies. Sofia and Ivon, correspondingly, represent the strong characters, empowered women, the non abused bodies called to restore order and avoid the supremacy of patriarchy which oppresses the protagonists of both novels. It is not unintentional that these novels show lesbian characters as well as sexually abused ones. In fact, Castillo and Gaspar de Alba’s women of colour face environmental racism in several forms because of the intersection of variables such as sex, gender, class and ethnicity. Both Chicana writers denounce the abuse and exploitation to which women from minorities are subjected.

In *So Far From God*, Fe, the most conservative of the sisters, suffers a miscarriage. Certainly, Fe had grown up dreaming to become a wife and a mother: she marries her cousin and finds a job in a factory where she works isolated, wearing gloves and manipulating chemical products.

Being so good at utilization and efficiency, the queen of it, you could say that, at ACME International, she was on to bigger jobs and better pay in no time. She worked hard no matter what,

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even though, for instance, she did not like the last cleaning job she was given. It's not like she had complained about it or nothing, but three months of working with a chemical that actually glowed in the dark and therefore you could work with it in the dark, with special gloves and cap (and why you did, as a supervisor explained was to be able to detect if any fingerprints or hair got on the parts) was this red ring around her nose and breath that smelled suspiciously as glue. (Castillo, 1998: 181)

Unaware of the fact that she is making chemical weapons for mass destruction at ACME, Fe dismisses the signs of intoxication her body sends to her; one of the symptoms is her miscarriage, something which had become common for many of the women working at ACME. Left barren first, she later develops cancer and dies of toxic exposure. Fe's death shows the reader the ulterior purpose of the factory: the chemicals are designed to kill individuals. From an ecofeminist perspective, these factories consciously use women, closer to animals, thus inferior human beings, as Castillo illustrates with the image of the red ring on Fe's nose. The ring somehow evokes cattle being marked and transported from place to place.

A similar situation is found in *Desert Blood: The Juarez Murders* where young women working in assembly lines in maquiladora plants keep disappearing and turn up dead in the middle of the desert after they have been brutally raped and butchered as animals for the sole purpose of producing pleasure:

'Where is the bitch? I want to see the bitch now! She's terrified that they're coming for her and feels her bowels contract. 'Here comes the lucky penny' [...] 'Fuck the shit out of her, man. Camera Two, keep tight on that prick. Camera One, body shot from behind. That's it. Hump the little bitch. I want to see some spunk in one minute.' 'Okay, Dracula, do your thing, man. Let's spend the lucky penny.' (Gaspar de Alba, 2005: 267–268)

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These women are expendable bodies, as well as the rest of the women working at ACME. They can easily be replaced for others eager to prosper since young women arrive every day in Juárez aiming to improve their living conditions. The claim to save the earth should definitely include a cry to protect women and especially women of color whose lives experience constant threats from the First World: "Saving people should be as important as saving trees. In addition, it is noteworthy that the people that are targeted as expendable are people of color or Third World people who have the least institutional power or access to resources in society" (Smith, 1997: 25–26).

Gaspar de Alba chooses Cecilia, a pregnant woman from a maquiladora plant, to show the abuse and exploitation female workers are subject to in Ciudad Juárez. She is found dead and the autopsy reveals that she was impregnated at work, as part of an experiment, by the so called Egyptian chemist:

Well, yeah, all of them had to take a pregnancy test, but apparently, there were some he chose to test for something else. He made her take saliva samples, not just urine samples, and he gave them pap smears himself. She had to keep meticulous charts about their periods and ovulation cycles. I guess he thought she was stupid and didn't know that he was doing sexual things to these girls during their physicals." (Gaspar de Alba, 2005: 96)

Within the same sphere of abuse inflicted on female bodies, of using women as test objects, another concern of ecofeminist criticism, clearly illustrated in these two novels is the fight for reproductive rights: "Women of color, in fact, do not get choices regarding our reproductive health. In the efforts to stabilize our population, we are constantly subjected to unsafe drug testing or forced sterilization" (Smith, 1997: 28).

The struggle for reproductive rights is incomplete without an antiracist, anticolonialist analysis. Imperialist, colonialist attitudes oppress even more women of colour. Heads of these colonialist forces, representatives of the church appear in both novels with Francisco el

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Penitente or Fr. Francis as censorship, as the oppressive force against queer and sexualized bodies. Christianity has been used as both an authorization and a mandate for the subordination of women, nature, animals, people of colour, and queer people. “From a queer ecofeminist perspective, we can examine the ways queers are feminized, animalized, eroticized, and naturalized in a culture that devalues women, animals, nature and sexuality. We can also examine how persons of colour are feminized, animalized, eroticized and naturalized. Finally, we can explore how nature is feminized, eroticized even queered” (Gaard, 1997: 119). Sexual harassment is also an ecofeminist concern, since the woman becomes dehumanized and objectified. The branding that takes place in both novels suggests the attackers are absolutely convinced of their superiority over their victims. All these women are targeted because of their status of second class citizens: being closer to nature, women can be dominated, tamed and used by the king of creation at his will.

The situation of environmental racism against women workers that Ana Castillo denounced in 1998 has worsened as Gaspar de Alba illustrates in 2005, especially on both sides of the Mexican-American border where female labour becomes expendable. At this point, the border is more than ever Anzaldúa’s open wound, still bleeding in the flesh of the oppressed.

2. When humans become lab rats

Octavia Butler uses a popular genre as science fiction to deal with relevant issues such as race, gender, hierarchy and ethics. In her Xenogenesis trilogy or *Lilith’s Brood* she analyzes how human beings who have survived a nuclear war are treated by a group of aliens called the Oankali. In the first novel, *Dawn*, Butler shows the kind of manipulation humans are subjected to. By using the domination of the Oankali over humans, Butler mirrors the way humans treat the “other”: subjugation of women and racial minorities and animals. This way Butler invites the reader to reflect on what hierarchical behavior implies and to realize what it feels to be a lab rat or a colonized individual.

Lilith’s comments on the experiments carried out by the Oankali, directly relates these to habitual human practices. She clearly

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establishes the connection between humans and animals: “This was one more thing they had done to her body without her consent and supposedly for her own good. ‘We used to treat animals that way’, she muttered bitterly” (Butler, 2000: 33). Our anthropocentrism drags us to the assumption that animals and human beings are completely different when it comes to basic principles such as free will and the capacity to suffer. Free will is often evoked as something pertaining to humans as rational animals and used to justify our superiority. By establishing this comparison, Butler seems to be questioning this position. Similarly, our knowledge of the way animals perceive things and how they experience suffering and pain is limited. The Oankali similarly experiment with humans to understand their reactions and perceptions. Lilith’s empathy with the animals, illustrates this ethical debate.

Later on in the novel Lilith makes a different division concerning living creatures when she says: “It’s one thing to do that to a plant. It’s another to do it to intelligent, self-aware beings” (Butler, 2000: 54) In this example we can perceive a change in her attitude as she places herself along with animals after having been treated like one. Regarding her experience and how she compares it with things that had already happened in the past, she adds: “Implantation of unrelated fertilized eggs. Removal of children from mothers at birth...Humans had done these things to captive breeders —all for a higher good, of course” (Butler, 2000: 60). In this last quote we can appreciate her ironic tone while commenting on issues that most human beings consider unethical if done to other human beings, but normal to some extent when we talk about animals. At this point we see that she reacts against what humans had done to animals because she has suffered that situation herself. This comparison becomes even more poignant when we realize that throughout our recent history, these practices, such as birth control without consent, have been practiced on disabled people or certain racial minorities.

These attitudes are related to an important concept in ecofeminism: synergism. Peter Wenz analyses this idea in the following words: “Ecofeminists say that respect for nature generally promotes human welfare, and genuine respect for all human beings tends to protect nature. This is synergism” (2001: 190). Our society has lost

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respect for nature: from an ecofeminist point of view, this is a manifestation of a deeper problem, the loss of respect for any “other”.

Throughout the trilogy Lilith evolves and becomes aware of other species and their suffering. In her behavior we see how she leaves behind her hierarchical position of “human far from / above others” and becomes “part of a wider group”. This is synergism and in her experience she learns to respect other creatures after she puts herself in their place. Her evolution is towards an ecofeminist stance.

3. What happens when top models become ecofeminists?

Another example of ecofeminist approach is the analysis of images used by the American nonprofit organization PETA, *People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals*, in their fur campaign since 1988. PETA is “an international nonprofit charitable organization”² based in the States. It was founded in 1980 with the aim of defending the rights of all animals. Its guiding principle is that animals are not ours to eat, wear, experiment on, or use for entertainment, hence its main lines of action are on factory farms, in laboratories, in the clothing trade, and in the entertainment industry. Regarding the clothing trade, PETA has made the fur industry one of its main targets. After reviewing the ads used in its fur campaigns since the 80s, we have chosen images classified in two groups: 1) images of female nudity with animals; and 2) images of women as animal carers and denouncers of injustice.

Women and animals are the protagonists of the first category. In the photo of pop singer Jamelia, a chinchilla has been comfortably placed on her lower back with a beautiful disposition of the colors black, white and pink that draws attention towards the beauty of the scene. A very different case is that of Cindy Crawford’s ad. The model holds a cat in her arms while, in a cat-like way, she seems to roar threateningly to anyone wanting to take her “fur”. This is perhaps the most obvious identification of women with animals we have found so far in PETA’s ads. Another example appears in an ad from the PETA’s “Go Vegetarian” campaign. A woman is animalized by showing her naked body tattooed in the same manner a beef ready for being sold at

² <<http://www.peta.org>>

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the butcher's would be. This ad seems to be saying "women as well as meat can be consumed" or else "women are something to be consumed". It looks as if PETA's decision to use images of women to draw attention to the ill treatment of animals has led it to neglect the ethical treatment of women since by turning a woman into a piece of meat, it ends up reinforcing the objectification of women.

A different strategy was implemented in the second category. On the one hand in some photographs, women are shown as animal protectors, on the other, they are portrayed as denouncers of the abuse inflicted on them by the fur industry and those who buy fur. The last group has photos of women holding the defurred bodies of two animals as if offering proof against those who base their business on the unjustified killing of innocent animals. A dialogue is established then between the protagonists of both ads and a segment of their possible audience. The way they are dressed suggests their possible inclusion within the group of those who can afford to buy a fur coat; however they are somehow prompting a change by not wearing it and by displaying the byproduct of the fur industry. What is more provoking in these two pictures is the fact that the accusers also represent the offenders group. Fur is synonym of the highest level in the scale of consumerism and women are generally the biggest consumers of fur. However these women seem to be rejecting this luxurious status symbol although they can afford it. For many people with either feminists or ecofeminist sympathies this is perhaps a better alternative than the one of the naked woman. Moreover, it connects with one of the landmarks of both environmental and ecofeminist activism: Audobon Society's nineteenth-century campaign against the use of exotic birds and their feathers in the making of female hats.

As the examples illustrate, ecofeminism provides interesting possibilities of reading very different texts. However, the common denominator is the denunciation of injustice, particularly that of a dominant hierarchical master mentality,³ which views some living beings as expendable for the good or pleasure of those higher up on the scale. Ecofeminism rejects the limited and essentialist association of women and nature. Although it draws on the shared experience of

³ The "master mentality" is amply discussed by V. Plumwood.

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domination, where ecofeminism seems to be headed is to an environmental synergy where respect for the “other”, regardless of whether the other is human or non human, is essential and that respect of the other promotes the well being of all. Thus, as K. Warren affirms, one cannot be an environmentalist and not be a feminist (1996: 19).

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