

# Environmental Degradation in the Nepalese Society: An Eco-Critical Approach

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## ABSTRACT

The paper aims to explore the direct or indirect link between the patriarchal Nepalese society and the degradation of Nepal's forestry and environment. The males of Nepal have been dominating and disrespecting women as the inferior sex for centuries, and thereby treating natural resources as feminine, weak to be manipulated and consumed objectively for their benefits. The research tool taken to carry out the research is eco-feminism. To notice the relationship between gender and natural resources of Nepal, the theoretical concerns of such eco-feminist critics as Greta Gaard and Vandana Shiva are chiefly focused on. The Nepalese society, like most of the South-Asian societies, is a male-dominated society. It exploits both women and nature regarding them to be inferior. The chief finding is that the natural resources of Nepal such as air, water, green fields, climate, land, forestry, minerals, environment, and the species of Nepal have been getting threatened because of the Nepalese patriarchal society. The Nepali people exploit nature as carelessly as they have been exploiting women. It is assumed that the research scholars interested in exploring Nepalese society from the perspective of eco-feminism can take the article as a reference.

**Keywords:** Eco-Feminism, Environment, Exploitation, Patriarchy, Society.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Nepal was rich in agro-biodiversity a few decades ago. The Nepalese people predominantly followed the Hindu religion that respected both male and female in the society. The people of Nepal used to state the slogan, *Hario ban Nepal ko dhan* [Green forestry; Nepal's property] proudly until 1990s. But agro-biodiversity has gone under the threat now due to the rapid destruction of natural habits, land plotting and fragmentation of the soil for construction of buildings, overgrazing, commercialization of agriculture, insensible use of the pesticides, and insecticide, rapid urbanization and population growth ("Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation", 2000). Along with this deteriorated conditions of the environment, the condition of women in Nepal has been getting deteriorated for years. From the approach of environmental sociology and eco-feminism, the research intends to display how there is a close connection between the women and nature, and between the patriarchal norms of exploiting women and the degradation of agro-biodiversity. The global problems on climate control, vanishing wildlife, loss of the habitats, food security, require both the feminist and ecological analysis. Therefore, this paper seeks to address this issue as well.

The sociology of the environment is a new wing of sociology that concerns with the environment and the social context of actions about the environment (Milstein & Castro-Sotomayor, 2020). Environmental sociologists analyse the social factors that generate environmental problems and the impacts of these problems in the society. From the perspectives of environmental sociology, the researcher seeks to analyze how the patriarchal-based demographic status, organizations, and institutions that use technology in forestry have threatened environmental cleanliness in Nepal. Ecofeminists find an obvious link between the oppression of the feminine gender and the exploitation of ecological resources (Gaard, 2011). In the patriarchal Nepalese society of Nepal, women are taken as the commodity to be consumed by the males for their benefits. Women are not allowed to make decisions on childbearing matters, land plotting, and sale, use of technology in agriculture. As a result, population growth is taking place; and it has direct connections with deforestation. Therefore, eco-feminists call for an egalitarian society to conserve natural resources (Gaard, 2011). This society would rethink about the role of women. If women are respected as men and as powerful as men, then the population growth rate will be controlled. This solves maximum problem of the environmental sociology.

### A. Statement of Problem

Nepal's environmental condition is getting deteriorating day by day because of the social and organizational systems of the country. Our society has been subjugating women for a long time. Women are expected to hold their tongues in the matters of reproduction. This causes population growth. When population of a country increases, its people destroy forests for shelter, firewood, cultivation. Industrialization, urbanization, and use refrigerators and Air Conditions that use chemicals like chlorofluorocarbons also cause environmental pollution. It further causes the global warming and ozone layer depletion. The men of the society are being capitalistic and materialistic. The Nepali people are suffering from poor health, respiratory problems, eye-cataracts skin cancer because of the global warming. Health issues of Nepali people are linked with social issues.

The paper attempts to address these questions:

- How women and environment are exploited in Nepalese patriarchal society?
- Does reproduction of children beyond women's control have direct connection with the environmental degradation in Nepal?
- Is the Nepalese society being unhealthy because of the unhealthy Nepalese environment?
- What can be done to preserve the health of Nepalese society and environment?

The rationale of the research lies in the attempt of the researcher to analyze what patriarchal norms of Nepal are harmful to the feminine gender and how these oppressive gender norms are causing environmental damages. The environmental sociology studies the energy issues, green movement, making good environmental policies, the catastrophes brought in the environment, views of the people towards the environmental issues as a social problem.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The researcher has used both the primary and secondary data for the preparation of this research paper. The paper is primarily grounded on the descriptive research design. The universe of the research is the environment and society of the Eastern region of Nepal in particular, and the environment and society of Nepal in general. The universe is examined from the perspectives of eco-criticism, especially from the theories of the eco-feminists, Greta Gaard and Vandana Shiva. The demographic changes in Nepal over a few decades and the environmental changes in Nepal over a few years are taken as sample. The articles on the Nepalese society, and environment from the websites, reports of NGOS and INGOS were taken as the secondary data for the analysis.

The research paper is qualitative and quantitative in nature. The qualitative approach relies on text and image for the data analysis and draws on diverse designs (Creswell, 2014). The data available on the population changes and environmental issues in Nepal from the secondary resources were analyzed from the perspective of eco-feminism. The result is presented in the interpretive form to show how patriarchy has affected environmental society of Nepal.

In making the ethical consideration the researcher is confident that the collected data are reliable. However, due to the pandemic situation of COVID-19, the researcher confesses that the concrete pictures to show the impact of environmental damage on Nepalese society, or the primary data could not be collected.

### A. Conceptual Framework

The research is centered on several issues of gender roles and eco-criticism. There are some critics who have noticed the issue of the environmental degradation in the Nepalese society. The socio-economic status of women in Nepal is low because of gender inequality (Acharya & Ghimire, 2005). Gender inequality is determined by "material assistance, gender ideology, and socio-economic structures" (Acharya & Ghimire, 2005, p. 4726). The patriarchal values of Nepal are influenced by traditional gender roles and this hampers in establishing a gender-egalitarian society (Adhikary, 2016). Patriarchy is probably the oldest form of exploitation of one part of the population by another (Ruth, 1990).

Eco-feminism is an academic movement for social justice and environmental health (Gaard, 2011). Eco-feminism is also referred to as "ecological feminism" (Warren, 1994), "feminist environmentalism" (Agrawal, 1992), or 'Social eco-feminism' (Heller, 1989). Eco-feminists believe that both the physical health of women and the environment are endangered by the male-dominated social norms. The male of the patriarchal society treat women, animals, nature as inferior and exploit all of them (Gaard, 2011). The Domination of women and nature has given rise to capitalism (Merchant, 1980). Militarism, corporatism is supposed to be masculine acts. Rich and powerful countries like the United States use nuclear weapons and bombs to display their power and to promote their goods. The capitalists and military power do not bother what impacts mother earth would have by their nuclear weapons. This is the exploitation of nature by the patriarchal cult. According to Gaard (2011), "Feminist activism in the 1980s offered an ecological and

feminist perspective that linked militarism, corporatism, and unsustainable energy production by joining together the anti-nuclear protests and the peace movement” (p. 28). Shiva (1988) regards that “passivity, as an assumed category of the ‘nature’ of nature and of women, denies the activity of nature and life” (p. 3). The “feminist movement for human and environmental health took action and created theory that later influenced ecofeminist thought” (Gaard, 2011, p.30). But the possessive drive of nature has risked the health of women and nature. Gaard (2011) also makes a discourse on “environmental classism” (p. 31), a counterpart to the “environmental racism” (p. 31). Environment classicism is an ideology that believes that the environment policy made by the authorities and its implementation created disproportionate impacts upon the people with lower income or marginal communities. Environmental racism obviously speaks against any kind of maltreatment upon natural resources and women by masculine race. The environmental feminists like Gaard and Shiva argue that it is insensible to degrade environment and natural resources by the few males. They propose to respect women and natural resources as the integral parts of nature.

Thus, the ideas of the eco-feminist theorists justify that nature is connected to society. Although some critics have expressed their growing concern on the environmental degradation in the Nepalese society, they have failed to explore the real cause of the behind the climate issues in Nepal. There lies the research gap. Therefore, the paper aims at addressing the research gap. It seeks to expose how the patriarchal society of Nepal colonizes environment thinking that they are inferior as female. These eco-feminists and the feminists’ approaches are the theoretical tools used for the analysis of data of the research.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The environmental issues of Nepal are the outcomes of the social issues of the country. Directly or indirectly, the social structure and existing phenomena of the country, chiefly regulated by men, have been responsible for the deteriorating condition of the environment and the condition of the Nepalese women. The environmental crisis is brought by the patriarchal social norms (Gaard, 2011; Shiva, 1988). Deforestation, air pollution, water pollution, industrialization, urbanization, and unplanned dumping of rubbish have generated critical problems in the environment of Nepal.

Destruction of forests has been one of the major problems of the country. It was mainly caused by over population. The male of the patriarchal society always treated women and nature as commodities to be exploited (Gaard, 2011). The population growth rate of Nepal was 5.1 per woman for the past fifty years. Though the problem of population growth has been resolved now as it is reduced to 1.1 per woman by 2022, the issue of the deforestation has not been solved. The urban population of Nepal covered 16.8% of the total population of the country in 2010, but it increased up to 21.4 % in 2020 (“Population, total-Nepal”, n. d.). The exploitative nature of male in the matters of childbearing and reproduction is the root cause of population growth (Shiva, 1988). Women in Nepal can’t make decisions on how many children and when they have to reproduce. This causes population explosion which in turn causes deforestation. The population of Nepal in 1960 was 10,105,050. It rose up to 23,941,110 in 2000 and 29,136,808 in 2020 (“Population total, Nepal”, n. d.).

Another factor of the deforestation of environment and feminine gender in Nepal is the maltreatment of both by the male chauvinists. Eco-feminists opine that the exploitative nature of men has been exploiting the environment (Gaard, 2011). Because of the massive growth of population in the country, people have been demolishing forests for firewood, cultivation, and for the settlement in the forests. The Nepali people use insecticides, pesticides, because they treat nature as feminine like women. All these environmental problems have affected the social life of the country. The Nepali people suffer from expensive prices, unemployment and poor health conditions. Eco feminism regards the significance of the interdependent of human and non-human life (Gaard, 2011). If maltreating women causes problems in their health, maltreating nature by throwing insecticides, pesticides causes problem in the health of environment of women. Regarding the discrimination of women and nature, Shiva (1988) states, “The displacement of women from productive activity by the expansion of development was rooted largely in the manner in which development projects appropriated or destroyed the natural resource base for the production of sustenance and survival” (p. 5). The Nepali people would no longer suffer from the expensive life price, and unemployment problems if women are given equal status.

Climate change implies the long-term impact in weather and temperatures situations. The impact may be caused by the natural events. For example the solar cycle variations may cause the climate change. But careless human acts such as firing fossil fuels like oil, coal, and gas since 1800 AD have been the principal reason of climate change (Shiva, 1988). When fossil fuels are burnt, the emission of the gas, like carbon dioxide and methane, causes the greenhouse effect. This further increases heat in the sun and raises the temperatures. Carbon dioxide is also released by clearing land and forests. Methane gas is emitted by filling the land with garbage. The principle emitters are industries, means of transportations, buildings, and the unscientific use of the agriculture and land.

The Nepalese society is badly affected by the air pollution and water pollution. Kathmandu has repeatedly been declared as the most polluted city of Nepal. The Air Quality Index (AQI) of Nepal crossed

500 in January 5, 2021 (“Kathmandu air pollution hits records high”, 2021) and the schools were closed for five days then seasonal variants. The cross border industrial pollution, vehicular emission, forest fires are the causes of air pollution (“Nepal general health risks: Air pollution”, 2020). Climate change is another environmental issue which is badly affected by the patriarchal society. Climate change is directly linked to the greenhouse effect, global warming, and the loss of glaciers.

Environmental sociology is a sociological study of the interaction of humans with many aspects of nature (Gaard, 2011; Milstein & Castro-Sotomayor, 2020). The problem behind such climate change lies in the masculine culture. The male members of Nepal possess natural resources and fuel resources carelessly without considering the future impacts of their actions. Here lies their masculine mentality. The materialist instinct of the male members of the country exploits land and forest thinking that they are inferior as females. The eco-feminists believe that the issue of the climate change can be solved only when there is unfair interaction between the biophysical environment and human society.

Eco-feminists regard that men manipulate the environment as if she is a feminine (Gaard, 2011). It is the male who do not treat nature as god. The women of Nepal can never make wildfires because she respects forestry as goddess and wild lives as her own children. If wild lives are threatened by patriarchal actions, the lives of people in the periphery of wild lives are also threatened. The harmful chemicals used in the industries flow through their drainages. This hampers the sustenance of agrarian life. The people of Nepal have been suffering from respiratory problems due to air pollution. It is the possessive drive of men that has risked the health of women and nature (Shiva, 1988). Thus, the Nepalese society is affected by air pollution or environmental issues.

Another environmental issue that has a direct link with society is water pollution. Department of water supply and Sewerage in Nepal records that through 80% of the population of Nepal has access to drinking water, it is unsafe (Suwal, n. d.). Nepal is not only a patriarchal society but also a dogmatic society. The poor and excluded groups in Nepal have no access to water. They have to rely on the water of rivers or brooks. Even water supplied by the drinking water supply organization in Nepal is not safe. And the rural people of Terai regions mostly on drinking water from their wells and tube wells. This groundwater is contaminated from arsenic (Suwal, n. d.). The Ecofeminists treat the earth as a goddess, and water resources as the manifestations of divine beings (Gaard, 2011). But the hegemonic nature of men exploits water resources. The industrialization, use of technology in water resources, drains linked to rivers are practiced by the male. Hence, the whole society safely is affected by water pollution. This is also the result of overpopulation for the dominating nature of men is responsible.

Biodiversity is another environmental issue that is attached to the issue of society. The diversity of life on Earth is responsible for maintaining the health of ecosystems. Ecofeminists claim that biodiversity is exploited by masculine culture (Shiva, 1988). The rapid population growth, overexploitation of the habitat, unsustainable consumption patterns are primary causes of biodiversity loss. If men respect women and listen to them in controlling the population, biodiversity loss can be controlled. For the eco feminists, biodiversity damage has a clear link to our patriarchal society (Gaard, 2011). The women of Nepal perceive that they have no power to control and save biodiversity in the same way as they have no power to control their bodies.

Mal-development of society is mainly responsible for ecological degradation. Reviewing on the mal-development of modern society, Shiva (1988) remarks, “Commodities have grown, but nature has shrunk. The poverty crisis of the south arises from the growing scarcity of water, food, fodder, and fuel, associated with increasing maldevelopment and ecological destruction” (p. 5). The Nepalese society is based on their environmental base. Women of Nepal worship the ‘Bar Peepal’ as their god and ‘Peepal’ tree as their goddess. They feel the divine manifestation in air, water, and habitats. But the men of Nepal have a patriarchal mentality. They manipulate both women and nature regarding them as inferior and weak. Destruction of nature, trees means destruction of our own society. Behind all these destructions, only unthinking actions of the male members of our society are responsible. The feminists working for the breast cancer research marked the connection between breast cancers and the environment (Gaard, 2011). Some chemical corporations emit toxins like endocrine disruptors. These cause both breast cancer and hazard in the environment (Clorfene-Casten, 1996). The Nepalese society, if we think from the eco-feminist perspective, can only be safe and peaceful when men start respecting women and nature. Eco feminists assume human beings as an integral part of their environment. Eco-feminism also emphasizes the value of the ecosystem and natural processes (Gaard, 2011). Eco feminists raise voices for the foundation of a clean environment and ecological balance.

Men of Nepal have long been mal-practicing and mal-treating women. The commodifying tendency of women and natural objects has been globalized. Materials made from the natural resources have been marketized, but the very identity of nature and women has never got developed. Because of the mal-practice on female by Nepali male, and ecological destruction, Nepali people have been suffering from the scarcity of clean-drinking water, food, and fuel in all the geographical regions. The situation has always been worse in the Himalayan and hilly regions.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

There is a deep relationship between ecology, environment, and human beings. The environmental issues of the country, Nepal, like deforestation, extinction or the loss of wild lives, increase in the air, water pollution, and global warming due to the use of harmful chemicals in the air conditions and refrigerator are brought about by the actions of the patriarchal society. The principal error of the patriarchy has been to manipulate the women. The male chauvinists assume themselves as superior and do not provide women the opportunity to make decisions on childbearing affairs. This results in overpopulation. Most of the environmental problems are directly caused by overpopulation which is itself a major impact of the patriarchy. Eco-feminists also have complaints with the male capitalists. In their materialist and capitalist drive, men do not care what environmental problems are generated by the smoke-throwing industries, the chemicals used in the luxury goods, spray cans, insecticides, pesticides. They rule nature as cruelly as they rule the women. Thus, the people of the country, Nepal have their own perspectives regarding the relationship between society and the environment. To maintain the ecological balance, the masculine members of the Nepalese society must respect the women. They can control the reproduction rate and this can directly help to check the deforestation issues. From the eco-feminist perspective, nature is an integral part of human beings. The key idea of eco-feminism is that we are all connected to the earth. The co-existence of humans and the environment is possible by having an egalitarian attitude towards women and there by the nature. Instead of dominating women and nature, eco-feminists demand the equal distribution of the materials, power, and work for both male and female sexes.

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#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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