

## FEMINIST GEOGRAPHY

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### Component-I (B) - Description of Module

Items	Description of Module
Subject Name	Geography
Paper Name	Geographical Thought
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Pre-requisites	Feminism, Feminist Geography, Ecofeminism
Objectives	To study about the concept of feminism, how it influenced geographical thought and its manifestation in the discipline.
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## Component II - e-Text

### Feminist Geography

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#### INTRODUCTION

It is very important to find answers to certain queries before going into a detailed discussion about feminist geography as, the key concept of the discipline may be rooted in it. Several statistics across the globe pose certain questions before us as to why there are lesser number of females in certain parts of the globe as compared to males; why the prevalence of illiteracy is more among females than males; why females in younger age groups tend to be more unemployed than their male counterparts; or why females are most often under-represented in governments and politics. In short, whether in terms of birth, education, economy or politics, opportunities and power are unequal between the sexes. It is this '*inequality*' that forms the subject matter of what is known as '*feminism*.' The most important feature of feminism is that it challenges the traditional thinking by connecting issues of production with the issues of reproduction; and the personal with the political.

The feminist theory is essentially based on *three* assumptions:

- ✓ Gender is a social construct that oppresses women more than men.
- ✓ These constructs are shaped by patriarchy.
- ✓ Women's knowledge about these constructs helps in envisioning a future non-sexist egalitarian society.

Thus, two relevant concepts that need to be understood here are that of '*gender*' and, '*patriarchy*.'

The word gender is often used interchangeably with sex, though the two have different connotations altogether. While sex is biological, natural and remains constant over space and time; gender is a social construct that may vary with time, space and culture. Gender is a social classification of the sexes into masculine and feminine. Different masculine and feminine qualities may have their impact on the social and spatial relations between and among the sexes. When such relations are approached by geographers from within the realm of the principles and

concepts of feminism, what arises may be termed as *feminist geography*. Since feminism always deals with women's position vis-à-vis men; there may be another simultaneous field of study within geography, that is, the *geography of masculinities*. Together they constitute what can be precisely called '**gender geography**.'

The term *patriarch* originally derived from the Old Testament means the rule of the father (*pater* in Latin meaning father). However, the feminist use of the term was introduced by **Kate Miller** in her groundbreaking book, '**Sexual Politics**' in **1970**. The term may be well understood in the words of **Marilyn French** as the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of this dominance in the society as a whole. The following aspects of women's lives may be under patriarchal subjugation:

- ✓ Women's productivity and labour power.
- ✓ Women's reproductive capacity and sexuality.
- ✓ Women's mobility.
- ✓ Women's access to economic resources.
- ✓ The social, cultural and political institutions.

To develop a proper understanding of the subject matter of feminist geography, it is necessary first to understand the true meaning of the feminist theory, its development through time, the different schools of thought that emanated within it and how its methods can be used in geography.

## **THE CONCEPT OF FEMINISM**

Feminism as a concept is often misunderstood as an approach with extreme hatred for men and that a feminist is essentially a female. But in reality, there is no biological pre-requisite to be a feminist---males can also be feminists and in fact some are, just the way some women are not. The feminist theory upholds that inequality exists between the sexes. It has *four* notable features:

- ✓ It is intensely interdisciplinary in nature ranging across various disciplines.
- ✓ Certain themes are recurrent in it---reproduction, representation, sexual division of labour.
- ✓ It imbibes in it new concepts like sexism which are not only created to address the gaps in existing knowledge but also to describe forms of social discrimination.
- ✓ It draws upon women's subjective experience to enrich knowledge.

The idea of 'women' as a distinct social group dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The first full political argument for women's rights and individual development was inspired by the French Revolution. At that time, **Mary Wollstonecraft** described in her '*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*' (1792), the psychological and economic damage experienced by women owing to their forced dependence on men and exclusion from the public sphere. Over time, the ideology of feminism has passed through several *waves or phases* that resulted in the development of its different variants.

The *first wave* of feminism started with the liberal principles of individual rights and freedom for women. The *liberal feminists* contrasted the concept of servitude of women that was considered as 'natural' and protested against all forms of subordination that reduced women to adjuncts of their husbands or fathers. The roots of this stream of feminism can be traced in 17<sup>th</sup> century British liberalism and the French Revolution. **Wollstonecraft**, a liberal feminist advocated for the protection of women under civil laws, their right to be politically represented and to be engaged in well-paid work and respected professions so as to reduce their dependence on the institution of marriage. **Harriet Taylor** argued that women should be allowed to work even after their marriage because, not only will her economic contribution to the family promote her status within it, but it would also enhance her freedom of choice. Domestic violence and the tyrannical behaviour by the husbands was a central theme of focus for **John Stuart Mill**.

By the 1960s, though the first wave of liberal feminism had achieved its basic goals in Europe, women still suffered from various forms of legal discrimination and were grossly unequal in both economic and political terms. The *second wave* of feminism thus, that started in Europe towards the end of the 1960s, sought to adopt a socialist and radical standpoint. Since

1970s, many feminists had started questioning the relevance of liberalism as a possible remedy to women's subjugation. Hence, *Marxist feminism* emerged as a dominant strand of feminist ideology in the 1970s and 1980s. This variant of feminism, as the name suggests, drew its ideas from the theories of **Karl Marx**. It attempted to link the situation of women's oppression to class struggle and economic development. Though Marx himself did not have much to say regarding the situation of women, his methods and concepts were universally accepted and applied. This method argued that the key to comprehend the women's question is laid in the development of production, that is, economy and technology. Therefore, like any other social organization, the relationship between the sexes is a function of a particular stage of economic development and cannot be altered on its own but only through socio-economic changes resulting from class conflict and revolution. **Engels** believed that women's oppression did not exist through time but only started with the creation of private property and a class-based society. Hence, only with the overthrow of capitalism, such oppression would disappear as, women would be no longer economically dependent on men and socialization of housework and childcare would free them from domestic chores. Therefore, women instead of fighting for their own causes should stand by working men for a revolutionary transformation of the society. This strand of feminism ruled out the idea that the interests of working men and women might conflict and that, women can have group interests beyond class lines or gender relations.

By this time, another group of feminists were developing their theories asserting that patriarchy, and not class was the oldest form of oppression. They constituted the *radical feminists* who originally worked within the Marxist set up in which they found that women's issues were treated as trivial. They were of the view that Marxism and feminism were not compatible with each other. However, in response to this there were some Marxist feminists who rejected the concept of patriarchy as historical and opined that women's issues could not be isolated from a wider socialist movement. They tried to analyse women's work both in home and in paid employment which eventually gave rise to the domestic labour debate and there was a demand of '*wages for housework.*' Some of the key ideas associated with radical feminism may be listed as---- (i) unity of theory and practice; (ii) linking the personal with the political; and (iii) the fundamental nature of women's oppression and subordination.

By the 1990s, there was a deep distrust for any metanarratives or any universal philosophy as Marx's. This was the beginning of the post-modern era. **Jean Francois Lyotard's *The Post Modern Condition* (1984)**, laid the foundation for post-modern feminism which believed that, women like race, class or ethnicity could not be used cross-culturally to describe the practices of human societies and that it was not a universal category. Lyotard criticized the Marxist philosophy for propounding a homogenous society which was believed to be created only through coercion. Post-modern feminism upheld that social identities were heterogeneous and complex, and it was thus impossible to create a totalizing social theory.

## **EVOLUTION OF FEMINIST GEOGRAPHY**

By the 1970s it was increasingly felt that very little attention was being paid to the matter that whether the methods of mainstream research and theoretical approaches could be applied in feminist studies. Prior to this, it was a widely held notion that women were not capable of political thinking or economic decision-making and, even in academia the discipline of geography was no exception to this. It was realized that since there were very less women academicians in geography, women's issues were not sufficiently studied in it. The preliminary objective was therefore, to make women visible in the field of geographical studies. What followed was a series of articles that attempted to probe the position of and acknowledge the presence of women within geography. One of the pioneering works was '*The Strange Case of the Missing Female Geographer*' (1973) by **Wilbur Zelinsky**.

Drawing inspiration from the development of feminist theory in the social sciences and the welfare, radical and Marxist streams of geography, soon there were works produced by members of several women study groups and professional geographical associations in United States, Canada and Britain. Mention in this regard, may be made of *The Women and the Geography Study Group* of the **Institute of British Geographers (IBG)** who presented a series of researches on feminism and geography at the annual meeting of the IBG in 1981. In 1983, they also organized a series of sessions on feminism as a mode of geographical thought and thereafter in 1984, published their landmark work, '*Geography and Gender: An Introduction to Feminist Geography*.' In 1982, **Janice Monk** and **Susan Hanson** collaborated to produce an

outstanding article '*On Not Excluding Half of the Human in Human Geography.*' **Mazey and Lee's** '*Her Space, Her Place* (1983) provided one of the best introduction to this emerging branch of geography. Taking recourse to conventional geographical methods, they tried to map the geography of women's rights; status of abortion laws; economic and political participation of women; their differential access to education, income and health services; their daily travel patters as well as long-term migration patterns. In 1984, two important works of feminist geography came forth in United States---a Ph.D. thesis was written in the department of geography at the University of California in Berkeley that was devoted entirely on feminist geography; and, a special edition of the geography journal *Antipode* (mouthpiece of the radical geographers) was published dealing exclusively with feminist geography. Following their British and American counterparts, a new specialized study group named the *Canadian Women and Geography (CWAG)* was created within the **Canadian Association of Geographers** in 1985. All these, greatly inspired the initiation of a multitude of research on women's topics by feminist academics in geography like—urban environment, housing, transportation, women in labour force, access to social services, violence, family structure etc.

By the 1980s, more advanced and theoretically sophisticated works began to be produced in this field. The celebrated article---'*A Woman's Place?*'—by **Doreen Massey** and **Linda McDowell** may be cited as an example. **McDowell** also published another work titled '*Coming in From the Dark: Feminist Research in Geography*' which itself is explanatory about the position of feminist studies in the recent past. Gradually geographical studies were being discussed more and more in feminist contexts. By this time, feminist geography was quite well-established and some feminist geographers wanted to extend the arena of this discipline beyond the Anglo-American circuit to the developing world as, in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

As the 1990s approached, feminism in geography was strongly grounded. This fact can be substantiated by the launching of a new and exclusive journal on feminism----'*Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*'---in 1994. This journal was totally devoted to issues of feminism, gender, sexuality and so on within geography.

Three interrelated observations stimulated the growth of feminist geography. Firstly was the presumption that the spatial layout is essentially gendered. To elaborate, '*private*', '*home*', '*suburbs*' are always associated with women in the public-private, work-home or city-suburbs

relations. Secondly, it was observed that culturally specific notions about gender behaviour are greatly shaped by spatial relations. Women's access to social services is largely determined by her location and associated gender roles. Thirdly, it was found that a person's relationship to the environment is largely a function of gender. For example, the idea of safe and unsafe environment may be different for women and men.

## **ECOFEMINISM—A MANIFESTATION OF FEMINIST THEORY IN GEOGRAPHY**

Man-environment relationship has always been one of the prime themes of geography. Ecofeminism may be viewed as a feminist perspective to the relationship between nature and humans or in short, environmentalism. During the time when feminist issues began to appear in the discipline of geography, '*green politics*' in the West also assumed the character of mainstream politics with heightened concern for an ecologically balanced earth. Both the movements---environmentalism and feminism found a common ground of subordination by '*man*' (humans in case of environmentalism and man in case of feminism)---and joined hands to give birth to a new socio-political philosophy called '*ecofeminism*.' The original expression of the term was '*ecological feminiane*.' It was coined by the French feminist **Francois d' Eaubonne** to express a strong parallel between the subjugation of women in family and the society as a whole and, the degradation of nature. The term ecofeminism appeared for the first time in her book titled '*Feminism or Death*' in 1974. However, the term was popularized following the first ecofeminist conference that was held at Amherst in 1980 when large number of women across USA came together to launch their protests against environmental destruction. The basic essence of this concept is that, the devalued status of women in society and the degradation of nature are the two sides of the same coin. The nature was epitomized as feminine and male ownership of land and other natural resources were considered to give rise to a dominator culture. Hence, they used such terms as '*rape the land*', '*tame nature*' and like. As described by **Warren (1987)**, the *basic tenets* of ecofeminism may be elucidated as:

- ✓ Women are akin to nature whereas men are closer to culture.
- ✓ Both women and nature are conceived as '*producers of life*' that is ideologically rooted in their reproductive powers.



- ✓ A strong parallel exists between the oppression and domination of women and the degradation and exploitation of nature.
- ✓ Understanding this connection between women and nature is the basic requirement to understand the oppression of women and exploitation of nature.
- ✓ Hence, feminist theory and practice should have an ecological association.
- ✓ Likewise, environmental issues in turn, should be approached with a feminist perspective.
- ✓ Because, of the close link between women and nature, women can be perceived as important stakeholders in environmental protection and conservation.
- ✓ Finally, there should be the establishment of an egalitarian society in which there is no dominance on women or nature by 'man.'

In the 1990s, by the time feminist geography was well-established, two prominent works on ecofeminism was produced. The one by **Irene Diamond** and **Gloria Orenstein** in 1990 named '**Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism**' laid out *three* strands of this concept:

- ✓ Social justice has to be achieved in collaboration with the well-being of the Earth as human life is dependent on the planet.
- ✓ The spiritual aspect emphasized on the sacrosanct earth.
- ✓ The third strand highlighted on the necessity of sustainability.

In the co-authored book '**Ecofeminism**' by **Vandana Shiva** and **Maria Mies** in 1993, they spoke of *three* kinds of domination prevalent in the world:

- ✓ Nature by humans.
- ✓ Women by men.
- ✓ Global South (the developing nations) by the Global North (the developed block) especially in terms of access to natural resources and controlling the world economy.

**Shiva** asserted that one of main motto of ecofeminism was to modify the outlook of the society regarding the activities and productivities of women and nature, both of whom are misconceived as '*passive*' resulting in their exploitation. **Mies** described women's work as producing sustenance and advocated that women and nature worked as partners to give rise to a new kind of relationship in which there is an essence of reciprocity. Although women usurp nature, but there is no sense of domination. Rather, there is a sense of '*to let grow and to make grow.*'

Sometimes ecofeminism is also linked with *deep ecology* in their contrast to male chauvinism and both being forms of radical environmentalism. The term '*deep ecology*' was introduced around the same time as ecofeminism by the Norwegian philosopher **Arne Naess** in an article titled '*The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement.*' What was common between the two were---both were critical of any kind of hierarchy, be it nature-humans, man-women, nature-culture and so forth; and, both sought to establish an egalitarian system free from any form of domination with equal right to live and flourish. But there was a basic difference between the two. While deep ecology was against *anthropocentrism*, ecofeminism was against *androcentrism*. Deep ecologists considered human population as the root cause of biospherical destruction with humans selfishly multiplying at the cost of other forms of life causing their numbers to cross the carrying capacity of the Earth. However, they failed to provide an answer to the question as to why humans reproduce even in areas with huge population size that may often lead to food shortages, overcrowding, poor health and hygiene, degradation of land, destruction of species etc. For this, the ecofeminists found their answers in a multitude of human social factors many of which were akin to issues of gender and oppression. They may be highlighted as:

- **Sexism:** This means the *sexual disempowerment* of women. Glorification of male virility which is an expression of sexism associates reproductive capacities and abundance of offsprings with male prestige.
- **Motherhood:** Social stigma is attached to women not bearing children. Motherhood is an integral part of female identity which is often considered as the most meaningful purpose of their lives.

- **Cultural Factors:** Certain forms of birth control may be forbidden and may be treated as signs of collusion by some culture. Human reproductive capacities and having children are highly valued as per some cultural norms and beliefs which again are, formulated by men.
- **Racism and Class Oppression:** The reproductive issues become even more complex for women of colour, poor women or those from the developing block. Imperialism has left behind a disastrous level of poverty in which the need for children is intensified by economic stress and more children are regarded as constituting a large familial workforce.

Like feminism in which lies its root, ecofeminism too is not a single line of thought. **Carolyn Merchant** described about the variants of this ecosophy (ecological philosophy) in her book, **'Radical Ecology: The Search for a Liveable World' (2005)**.

- **Liberal Ecofeminism:** This school of thought was in belief that if women were given equal educational opportunities as men, they could prove themselves as important stakeholders in natural conservation and improvement of the environment to ensure a higher quality of human life. They have to transcend the social stigma and biological constraints to join hands of men as scientists, lawyers, regulators and legislators for environmental conservation. This school of thought was thus in tune with reform environmentalism that sought to alter human-nature relationship within the existing framework of governance through the passage of new laws and regulations.
- **Cultural Ecofeminism:** Cultural ecofeminism spoke of an era prior to the emergence of the patriarchal system when femininity was held in high esteem and nature was portrayed through female deities. But, with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, the concept of the nurturing Earth was replaced with the metaphor of a machine to be controlled from outside by humans.
- **Social Ecofeminism:** This strand of ecofeminism advocated women's liberation through the overturning of the existing socio-economic hierarchies that translates all aspects of life to a market system. This ideology is based on the concept of '*social ecology*' that views the domination of nature by humans as an outcome of the domination of humans

by humans. It envisioned of a society constituted of decentralized units that would transcend the public-private dichotomy characteristic of the capitalist system.

- ***Socialist Ecofeminism:*** This variant of ecofeminism blurs into the previous strand and, provides a critique of the dialectical relations between production and reproduction, and between production and ecology that is typical of capitalist patriarchy.

Ecofeminism has been criticized for being too idealistic in its standpoint. It overemphasized on the mystical connection between nature and women rather than highlighting the actual conditions of women. The entire onus of environmental conservation rested with women and completely undermined the role of men in maintaining environmental sustainability. Moreover, it also failed to differentiate women across space with different social background. Nevertheless, it provided a sort of platform for the achievement of *sustainable development*.

Feminist geography essentially employs the feminist philosophy in addressing several issues of social and spatial relations and the role of men and women in such social and spatial frameworks. There is a political element inherent in it that adds some sort of '*radicalism*' to this field of geography. The basic premise of '*feminist geography*' is that advocates that inequality exists between the sexes over space which should be done away with to establish an egalitarian society.