

# The Essentialism–Constructionism Divide in Ecofeminism: Bina Agarwal's Critique and Its Contradictions

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## Abstract

The theoretical divide between essentialism and constructionism parallels the disagreement within ecofeminist strands regarding the implications of women's association with nature; it reflects the divide between cultural/radical ecofeminists and social/socialist ecofeminists, which further determines the implications for ecofeminist theory and activism. The former often supports or relies on the essentialist perspective to emphasise the intrinsic and symbolic connection between women and nature based on biology or spiritual disposition. Whereas constructionists often critique essentialist understanding, asserting that this connection is socially, culturally or historically constructed. Applying textual and conceptual analysis, this paper explores the essentialist and constructionist divide through the lens of Bina Agarwal's feminist environmentalism, which aligns with the social/socialist constructionist position, specifically in her critique of essentialism. A closer examination of her position reveals that she too inadvertently falls back on essentialist assumptions. This tension highlights the complexities of rejecting essentialism in theory while unintentionally relying on it.

**Keywords:** ecofeminism, essentialism, constructionism, feminist environmentalism, Bina Agarwal

In *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*, Françoise d'Eaubonne coined the term 'ecofeminism', asserting that the subjugation of both women and the environment are deeply linked and should be tackled simultaneously to achieve liberation (Tong, 2014). Ecofeminism is both a theoretical framework and an activist movement that explores the links between environmental destruction and gender-based oppression (Tong, 2014). It emphasises that both women and nature were oppressed and exploited in patriarchal and hierarchical structures (Tong, 2014). In pre-patriarchal Mediterranean and European cultures, fertility goddesses and the symbolic representation of nature as feminine highlighted the woman-nature relationship; however, with the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution, mechanistic rationality replaced organic human-nature relations (Joseph, 2019). This shift reinforced male dominance over women and nature, with the Earth Goddess replaced by the patriarchal Sky God during the Middle Ages (Joseph, 2019).

Ecofeminists like Karen Warren have highlighted this association, emphasizing the conceptual, symbolic, and linguistic connections between feminist and environmental issues by showcasing that patriarchy's thinking, with its hierarchical and dualistic nature, has negatively impacted both women and the environment for instance, 'women are naturalized' through animalistic labels, such as bitches, bird-brains or serpents etc. while 'nature is feminized' when 'she' is being controlled, conquered, raped or revered as

a mother (Tong, 2014). This highlights the intertwined nature of oppression of both women and nature, with both being dominated by men.

Sherry Ortner was the first to introduce the idea into contemporary feminist discourse that women have a stronger affinity to nature compared to men (Agarwal, 1992). Patriarchal thinking, with its hierarchical and dualistic structure, positions men and culture in opposition to women and nature (Tong, 2014). Ortner highlights this dynamic, arguing that women are symbolically linked to nature, serving as intermediaries between the two realms because women's biological and social roles, such as their reproductive functions and domestic responsibilities, place them closer to nature, while their nurturing roles in socializing children further mediate between nature and culture (Tong, 2014). However, this connection also places women in a 'middle status', subordinated to men but above nature, reinforcing an unequal and hierarchical relationship, which most ecofeminists critique.

While Ortner's foundational work has highlighted the connection between women and nature in patriarchal societies, ecofeminists continue to debate its origins and implications. They agree that the woman-nature association/connection is central and widely acknowledged, but they diverge on whether this connection is primarily biological, psychological, or social and cultural (Tong, 2014). Furthermore, ecofeminists debate whether women should reaffirm, sever, or transform their connection to nature (Tong, 2014).

This disagreement about women's association with nature or women-nature connection is highlighted in the debate between Essentialism and Constructionism broadly and within different strands of ecofeminism that support these perspectives, namely nature or cultural/radical ecofeminists and social/socialist or transformative ecofeminists. This debate revolves around women's identity and their relationship with the environment, leading to differing perspectives on how these connections should be understood and addressed.

Essentialist perspectives emphasise an inherent biological or spiritual connection between women and nature, whereas constructionist approaches understand this relationship as socially, culturally or materially constructed (Carlassare, 1994). Aligning with the constructionist view, Bina Agarwal (2014) argues that women's roles in environmental protection vary significantly based on their social positioning and that simplistic representations of women as inherently connected to nature can obscure the complexities of their lived experiences.

This paper will adopt a theoretical and conceptual approach to explore the essentialism and constructionism debate, focusing on their broader implications and their reflection in different strands of ecofeminism, including cultural/radical and social/socialist or transformative ecofeminists. Focusing on Bina Agarwal's feminist environmentalism as a case study, this paper examines her social/socialist constructionist critique of essentialism and analyses how her arguments inadvertently reflect essentialist tendencies. By examining this tension, this paper aims to offer a deeper understanding of the complexities in her perspective and its relevance to the essentialism versus constructionism debate.

### **The divergence between Essentialism and Constructionism**

Essentialism is the view that certain characteristics, such as those associated with being a 'woman', are inherent, unchanging, and exist independently of social influences (Carlassare, 1994, p. 52). Essentialists argue that men and women have inherent essences or qualities that are not influenced by contingent historical and cultural factors but remain constant and unalterable, often rooted in biology, which is seen as unchangeable (Carlassare, 1994). In other words, 'essence' refers to qualities or traits that remain fixed,

unchanging and universally applicable. Essentialists assert that women have an ‘essential natural biological or spiritual’ connection to nature that differs from men (Birkeland, 1993) and hence, qualities like cooperation, ecological sensitivity and peace-loving nature are usually attributed to women as innate and seen as inherent principles of female nature which become the defining feature of their unique relationship with the environment (Carlassare, 1994). Essentialist ecofeminists reject patriarchal essentialism, which claims that masculine traits such as ‘dominance, aggression, and rationality’ are the essence of human nature, arguing that these are culturally and historically constructed, not inherent (Birkeland, 1993).

Supporting the aforementioned viewpoint, certain strands of ecofeminism, such as nature or cultural/radical ecofeminists, often celebrate feminine traits as superior for nurturing relationships and ecological stewardship, thereby emphasizing the unique relationship of women with nature, which is seen as a source of strength since it encourages women to reclaim their identities by challenging patriarchal norms (Tong, 2014).

For instance, in Gyn/Ecology, Mary Daly celebrates women’s life-giving and nurturing qualities as the foundation of their unique and empowering bond with nature, positioning them as natural stewards of ecological harmony (Tong, 2014). She argues that these traits, traditionally linked with women, result from their biological and psychological experiences, not social construction, highlighting her essentialist stance (Tong, 2014). Moreover, Daly highlighted men’s destructive tendencies as ‘death-giving’, contrasting them with women’s nurturing, ‘life-giving qualities’, further emphasizing women’s need to reconnect with their inherent relationship to the earth to ‘reclaim’ their identities and challenge patriarchal domination (Tong, 2014).

Spiritual ecofeminists, aligned with radical/cultural ecofeminism, advocate for embodied spiritual practices in harmony with nature. They critique patriarchal religions for their focus on a disembodied, omnipotent male deity; instead, they adopt goddess worship and earth-based rituals often highlighting the role of ‘Gaia’ (earth mother or birth-mother), symbolising her as an archetype representing nature’s creative and nurturing forces, paralleling women’s biological roles in giving and sustaining life (Tong, 2014). For instance, Starhawk argues for dissolving the nature-culture dichotomy, viewing women’s embodied experiences like childbirth, breastfeeding and menstruation as a deep connection to Gaia, privileging women’s connection to nature over men’s (Tong, 2014).

This perspective, rooted in essentialism, contrasts with constructionism, which argues that concepts like nature, culture, and gender are shaped by history and society and vary across times and cultures (Agarwal, 1992). According to Carlassare (1994), “Constructionism refers to the belief that a subject is constituted by social, historical, and cultural contexts that are complex and variable” (p. 52). In other words, these concepts, being socially and historically contingent, are subject to change over time and arise from cultural norms, economic systems and power dynamics that validate women’s subordination and nature’s exploitation.

Rejecting essentialism, constructionists maintain that the perceived connection between gender and nature is also socially and historically constructed, and hence, women or men do not possess any inherent, unchanging essential traits or an intrinsic connection with nature; for instance, traits like aggression or nurturing are socially constructed, not innate. Carolyn Merchant, a socialist ecofeminist, states, “There are no unchanging ‘essential’ characteristics of sex, gender, or nature” (Carlassare, 1994, p. 56). This enables constructionists to emphasize that essential traits are not pre-social, universal, fixed or determinant of social structures, as they are influenced by various social, political, economic and cultural factors, not just

by unchanging qualities (Carlassare, 1994). In this sense, they argue that essence has been socially attributed to women to justify their subordination and dominance by men and the continuation of hierarchical power structures.

Constructivism includes the idea of intersectionality, which means that our identities (not just gender, but race, class and caste) are shaped by society and culture rather than being fixed (Carlassare, 1994). Intersectionality examines how various identities overlap and affect people's experiences, showing that individuals can face multiple forms of oppression or privilege simultaneously. The debate between essentialism and constructionism also highlights the importance of intersectionality, which the essentialist perspective ignores.

Further, this helps them highlight the complexity and variability of social relationships and power dynamics and dismantle the rigid binaries (dualistic categories) like man/women, and nature/culture upheld by systems of domination like patriarchy that marginalise certain sections of society, relying on these binaries which the essentialists fail to take down (Tong, 2014). Hence, social/socialist or transformative ecofeminists adopting a constructivist perspective criticize the framework of cultural/radical ecofeminists who rely on essentialism, especially biological essentialism, as it leads to biological determinism and instead focus on how systems of domination contribute to the creation and continuation of oppression of both women and nature (Carlassare, 1994). In simpler terms, they reject the essentialist belief that women have an inherent, unchanging connection to nature rooted in biology or spirituality, which universalizes women's experiences.

By incorporating intersectionality, they emphasize the diversity of women's experiences and their varied interactions with the environment. This framework highlights how social and ecological injustices are interconnected and must be understood within the broader context of identity and power; for example, environmental degradation disproportionately affects marginalized groups, such as women in low-income or indigenous communities, due to systemic inequalities (Agarwal, 1992).

They critique systems like patriarchy and capitalism, which create hierarchies that commodify women's labour and natural resources for profit, reinforcing oppression and exploitation. These ecofeminists stress the interdependence of social justice and environmental sustainability, arguing that addressing one requires simultaneously addressing the other (Tong, 2014). They call for 'transformative' change that dismantles these oppressive systems and promotes inclusive strategies to address the complexity of both social and ecological crises (Agarwal, 1992).

The constructivist approach of socialist, social, or transformative ecofeminists challenges the fixed and universal essentialist view of gender and nature. Instead, it focuses on the changing relationships between identity, social systems, and environmental degradation, emphasizing the importance of understanding how different forms of oppression are connected to the dynamic and varied nature of women's experiences. This perspective advocates for comprehensive and holistic solutions that promote equality, sustainability, and justice.

### **Bina Agarwal's critique of essentialism**

Many ecofeminist critics align with the constructionist view of social or socialist ecofeminism, criticizing cultural or radical ecofeminism for its essentialist tendencies (Carlassare, 1994). Associating with the aforementioned view, Bina Agarwal (1992) has argued that ecofeminism is problematic on various accounts, one of them being the reliance on various forms of essentialism (mainly biological) by certain

branches of ecofeminism that highlight the link between women and nature, suggesting that both are similarly oppressed and must be liberated together.

I'll be focusing on her critique of essentialism in general and her alternative approach, feminist environmentalism, arguing that her perspective may rely on essentialist elements that she critiques.

Bina Agarwal (1992) critiques essentialism primarily for the following reasons:

**Oversimplification of Women's Roles:** Essentialism often reduces women's identities to fixed, biologically or culturally assigned roles that portray women as closer to nature. For instance, representing women as 'Mother Earth' assumes that women, due to their inherent natural conditioning, are nurturers or life-givers. This perspective overlooks the diverse and complex realities of women's lives, motivations, and agency in engaging with environmental and social issues.

**Reinforcement of Stereotypes:** Emphasis on traditional roles can unintentionally reinforce these stereotypes, limiting a nuanced understanding of women's agency.

**Neglect of Socio-Political Contexts:** By emphasising traditional roles, essentialist narratives fail to consider the broader socio-political contexts that not only shape women's identities but also their relationships with the environment.

**Homogenization of Experiences:** Essentialism often homogenizes the experiences of women across different classes, castes, and ecological zones, ignoring the unique challenges and perspectives of various groups.

In her critique of essentialism, Bina Agarwal's Feminist Environmentalism aligns with the social/socialist constructionist view; women's identities and relationships with nature are socially (or culturally) constructed rather than biologically determined (Carlassare, 1994). In this sense, her perspective advocates for a more inclusive approach that focuses on (socio-economic and cultural) contextual variability and intersectionality, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how different factors influence women's environmental roles. Agarwal (1992) emphasises the importance of recognizing the diversity within women's relationships with nature, which can lead to better representation of women's voices in activism, rather than confining them to predefined roles based on gender.

### **Bina Agarwal's Feminist Environmentalism**

Feminist environmentalism, as articulated by Bina Agarwal (1992), emphasises the material basis of the relationship between gender and the environment, contrasting it with the ideological focus of Western ecofeminism. Agarwal (1992) states that "an intensifying struggle for survival in the developing world... highlights the material basis for this link" (p. 119). This sets the stage for new ways of thinking about ecofeminism and acting on it, which she calls 'feminist environmentalism'.

Situating her theory in the context of developing countries like India, she shows how material realities and socio-economic structures affect people's lives. Further, the impact of state control, privatization and environmental degradation threatens the survival of marginalised, poor, rural and tribal communities, especially women of these communities who rely on subsistence resources, leading to a loss of traditional knowledge systems (Agarwal, 1992).

This perspective highlights that they are disproportionately affected by the class-gender effects of the gender-based division of labour, property ownership, and resource access that shape women's lived experiences with the environment; for instance, women in rural and tribal communities often bear the primary responsibilities for collecting water, fuel and fodder or cultivating land, making them 'victims' of nature's destruction (Agarwal, 1992). However, Agarwal (1992) emphasises that this close reliance on



connection to nature also provides them with valuable knowledge of natural processes, making them 'critical agents of change' and their perspectives critical for environmental regeneration as they emerge as key participants in ecological movements like the Chipko movement (1972-73), which demonstrates the importance of (gender and class conscious) activism. Additionally, this implies that women should not be viewed as mere victims or passive sufferers of environmental degradation but as actively engaged in 'stewardship' and advocacy for the environment (Agarwal, 1992, p. 147).

Agarwal (1992) advocates for structural changes, such as redistributing resources, reforming labour systems, and addressing class, caste, and gender inequalities, making it a transformative and intersectional approach, thereby addressing environmental and social/gender injustices together by emphasizing the importance of inclusivity in decision-making processes that elevate women's voices in environmental governance, ensuring their insights contribute to sustainable practices and policies.

### **The Unintentional Fallback on Essentialism in Bina Agarwal's Constructionist Framework**

The tendency to universalize women's roles often leads to framing women's connection with nature as inherent due to the perceived commonality of this connection, primarily due to traditional roles (gathering food/firewood or being caring or nurturing). However, this perspective reinforces stereotypes that overlook the complexities of women's experiences (Carlassare, 1994).

Bina Agarwal (1992) highlights that while tribal or landless rural women possess unique gender-specific knowledge derived from their dependence on natural resources (or subsistence activities), framing them primarily as 'protectors' of forests can unintentionally perpetuate essentialist stereotypes that women are inherently nurturing and closely connected to nature. This perception may overshadow the actual reasons for their involvement in environmental movements; women join these movements not just out of a love for nature, but also in response to social injustices and the threats posed by deforestation to their livelihoods. An instance of this is the Chipko movement or the Appiko movement in Karnataka (Agarwal, 1992).

Moreover, by positioning rural women primarily as defenders of the environment, Agarwal's (1992) perspective may neglect the diverse motivations of urban women by oversimplifying the complexities of their engagement with environmental issues. Urban women who do not fit this traditional model due to their limited interaction with the environment may engage with the environment differently (advocacy or policy changes), for instance, while rural women recognize that forests encompass more than just trees for commercial use, urban women may still be influenced by reductionist perspectives, similar to men, limiting their understanding of the environment (Agarwal, 1992).

While both urban and rural women interact with the environment, the nature and context of their interactions differ significantly. Presuming that all women have uniform experiences overlooks the unique issues urban women face, such as pollution and limited green space or rural women, such as balancing traditional ecological knowledge with modern scientific knowledge and technology (Agarwal, 1992).

Although Agarwal (1992) highlights the importance of intersectionality, particularly with reference to class-gender and socio-economic factors, her framework may unconsciously generalize the experiences of women and undermine the significance of context in understanding the relationship of women with the environment that Bina Agarwal originally intended to achieve.

Moreover, Agarwal's analysis is based solely on the experiences of rural, tribal, peasant or marginalised women in India. Her insights into the specific socio-economic and environmental contexts of these women, although insightful, are insufficient to adequately address the diverse experiences and differing

environmental contexts of women in other regions, such as urban areas or different (developed) countries, limiting the broader applicability of her framework of feminist environmentalism.

To sum up, Agarwal's framework strategically employs simplified identities for activism, which is why she unintentionally falls back on essentialism when her framework is interpreted or applied in a fixed or rigid manner (Carlassare, 1994). For instance, in the case of the Chipko movement, portraying women as 'protectors of the forest' helped foster solidarity and collective action among participants; however, simultaneously it risks essentializing women's roles and motivations, which were left undetected even when applied contextually (Aggarwal, 1992). There is an inevitable tension in her work as she steers the fine line between fostering solidarity and risking oversimplification.

Acknowledging this strategic use of identity or strategically applying essentialism as a method of opposition or resistance, as Carlassare (1994) puts it, can enhance the effectiveness of grassroots movements (mobilization/collective consciousness) while being mindful of the potential for oversimplification. But in Agarwal's case, although she critiques essentialism in theory, her emphasis on the traditional roles of rural and tribal women as 'stewards of the environment' in activism inadvertently reinforces the essentialist narrative she critiques, overlooking the broader socio-political contexts that shape activism.

## **Conclusion**

In ecofeminism, the perception that women and nature are interconnected resulted mainly from their shared history of oppression and subjugation in the androcentric framework whose hierarchical and dualistic mode of thinking justified the oppression of women (sexism) and the exploitation of nature (naturism) in patriarchal culture. Ecofeminists largely agree with Rosemary Radford Ruether in asserting that only a unified movement will concentrate efforts on the liberation of both nature and women due to the interconnectedness of struggles against the prevailing model of domination in society (Tong, 2014). However, ecofeminists disagree regarding the nature of the connection between women and nature, as essentialists claim that the nature of this association is rooted in biology or spirituality (in inherent nurturing traits); diverging from this perspective, constructivists critique it for perpetuating stereotypes that women are inherently nurturing or closer to nature, homogenising their varied experiences. Instead, they argue that the association is primarily socially or culturally constructed (shaped by societal norms and values) rather than biologically determined, which accounts for the varied experiences of women and, at the same time, makes room for challenging societal norms rather than accepting them as given or glorifying them. These two perspectives further shape the debate between various strands of ecofeminism, mainly between cultural/radical ecofeminists and socialist/social ecofeminists.

Bina Agarwal's feminist environmentalism is aligned with constructionist socialist/social ecofeminists, especially in her critique of essentialism. However, her emphasis on the traditional role of women in environmental protection, particularly of rural and tribal women as the protectors of the environment (as seen in the Chipko movement), oversimplifies their identities for the sake of activism, which inadvertently leads to essentialism, wherein a single fixed characteristic or role shapes their identities. This also gives the impression that the homogenised experiences of tribal and rural women reflect the experiences of all women. Further, Agarwal's framework emphasises addressing the context of rural, marginalised or tribal women in India, which limits its applicability to women in urban settings or developed countries, therefore failing to account for the diverse conditions of women. Ultimately, her approach also reflects essentialism even when applied strategically.

Bina Agarwal's case highlights the tension between rejecting essentialism in theory while unintentionally relying on it in certain aspects, such as in the portrayal of women's responsibility as environmental caretakers and in strategically deploying essentialism.

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