

Ecofeminism, Decolonial Thought and the Environment. The Role of Pedagogy

Ecofemminismo, pensiero decoloniale e ambiente. Il ruolo della pedagogia

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DOUBLE BLIND PEER REVIEW

ABSTRACT

Ecofeminist currents, formed throughout the 20th century through the integration of feminist and ecological movements, intertwine green policies with a decolonial worldview. In a society marked by gender, environmental, and social emergencies, this connection translates into the desire to denounce and deconstruct patriarchal power in the domination of nature. This *modus operandi*, in turn, promotes an ecological ethic based on cooperation. This article analyzes the interconnection between ecofeminism and decolonial thought. It aims to do so by exploring pedagogy as a fundamental tool for fostering critical thinking in present and future generations, and for redefining relationships between people and the environment. At the same time, it emphasizes the sociocultural benefits of adopting an inclusive educational model, based on the integration of both female and male perspectives, in addressing contemporary green issues.

KEYWORDS

**Decolonial pedagogy, ecofeminism, inclusivity, environmental education.
Pedagogia decoloniale, ecofemminismo, inclusività, educazione ambientale.**

Le correnti ecofemministe, formatesi nel corso del Novecento dall'integrazione tra i movimenti femministi con quelli ecologici, intrecciano le politiche verdi con una visione decoloniale del mondo. In una società segnata da emergenze di genere, ambientali e sociali, tale legame si traduce nella volontà di denunciare e decostruire il potere patriarcale nella dominazione della natura. Un *modus operandi* che valorizza, a sua volta, un'etica ecologica basata sulla cooperazione. Il presente articolo analizza l'interconnessione tra ecofemminismo e pensiero decoloniale. Intende farlo esplorando la pedagogia quale strumento fondamentale per promuovere, nelle presenti e future generazioni, un pensiero critico e di ridefinizione delle relazioni tra persone e ambiente. Sottolineando, al contempo, i vantaggi socioculturali che avrebbe l'adozione di un modello educativo inclusivo, cioè fondato sull'integrazione tra visione femminile e maschile, nell'affrontare le tematiche *green* contemporanee.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, attention to environmental issues and gender equality has been increasing, both politically and scientifically. Yet, despite the progress made in both fields, much remains to be done. These two issues are, in fact, interconnected, as the patriarchal logics that have historically subordinated women to male power are the same ones that, as we shall see, justify the climate crisis we are currently experiencing (Mies, Shiva, 1993). Within this socio-cultural framework, ecofeminism offers a theoretical and practical perspective capable of promoting a new pedagogical paradigm of reference, both in terms of environmental issues and gender equality.

2. Ecofeminism and Patriarchal Domination

The term *ecofeminism* first appeared in 1974 in the book *Le Féminisme ou la mort* by Françoise d'Eaubonne. The author describes it as a new humanism capable of overcoming the patriarchal logics of domination over nature and society (which had, until then, uncontestedly dominated the world) in favor of a more feminist vision (d'Eaubonne, 1974).

On this matter, Ulivieri recalls:

The knowledge-power expression of patriarchy has long dominated unchallenged, also because it has progressively become more complex and branched out, adapting to the uses made of it, differentiating itself according to the contexts in which it was expressed and the various educational agencies to which it was directed. Education, particularly at higher levels, was the monopoly of small groups of teachers and students, ensuring that the transmission of knowledge remained confined within the same class and gender circularity; the knowledge passed down from generation to generation underwent slight adjustments, influenced by specific political and economic changes (Ulivieri, 2016, p. 25).

If we are to provide a terminological definition of ecofeminism, the *Enciclopedia Treccani* describes it as a “branch of feminism that aims to combine the defense of women’s values and rights with the protection of territories, communities, the biosphere, and health” ([https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/ecofemminismo_\(Neologismi\)/](https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/ecofemminismo_(Neologismi)/)). Similarly, others define ecofeminism as a “movement that identifies a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women” (Mellor, 1997, p. 1).

The term ecofeminism thus emerges from the fusion of the words “ecology” and “feminism”, signifying the intersection of green movement politics with feminist movement politics, expressing concerns both for the oppression of women and gender equality and for the environmental exploitation of the Earth (Warren, 1994, pp. 1-2).

From an ecological perspective, the discussion centers on advocating for a leading role for women in addressing the contemporary environmental crisis, as they are the “primary victims of an exploitative economy that erodes its own subsistence foundations” (Deriu, 2019, p. 92). Supporting this claim is the awareness that an ecofeminist perspective generates new educational logics in the relationship between humans and the environment (Deriu, 2019).

From a feminist perspective, the discussion focuses on women’s rights, respect for diversity of thought and minorities, and opposition to masculinist policies and pedagogies based on inter-gender competition (Burgio, 2020, pp. 27-42). Even the so-called “green revolution” and the *green economy*, widely discussed in today’s world, are interpreted by some authors (Shiva, 1989; Mies & Shiva, 1993) as “ecological passports that serve to perpetuate the patriarchal model of planetary resource exploitation” (Strongoli, 2023, p. 247). This is a perspective that ecofeminism opposes, aiming instead to create “new theoretical, cultural, and political paradigms” (Deriu, 2019, p. 92).

Feminist history, in the broadest sense, requires us to look at the historical process through egalitarian eyes, viewing it anew not only from the perspective of women but also from that of social and racial groups, as well as the natural environment—the previously unrecognized resources upon which Western culture and its progress have been built. Writing history from a feminist perspective means overturning it: that is, seeing the social structure from below and proposing alternatives to prevailing values (Merchant, 1980, pp. 31-32).

Although encompassed within these general definitions, it is important to acknowledge that multiple strands of ecofeminism exist, depending on the pedagogical, socialist, animalist, or environmental characteristics attributed to each movement (Deriu, 2019, p. 92).

In general terms, however, the main objectives remain consistent and interconnected: the defense of ecological justice; the overcoming of patriarchy; the elimination of gender inequalities; the promotion of an ecological and feminist education; openness to alternative and sustainable economies, such as circular economies; and the recognition of women’s roles within communities and in environmental protection (Mies, Shiva, 1993).

3. Interconnection with Decolonial and Deconstructionist Thought

The ecofeminist stance and its opposition to patriarchal logics in the human-nature relationship mirror the contrast between colonial and decolonial thought. Indeed, according to some scholars (Salleh, 2017; Warren, 1994, *passim*), the ecofeminist movement strengthens the connection between various ecological, social, and educational themes characteristic of decolonial pedagogy. From the latter, we will draw inspiration to explore the topic from a pedagogical perspective.

In education, decolonial thought refers to a pedagogical approach aimed at ensuring a certain universality of knowledge and learning. While the colonial approach leads to the subjugation of minorities to enforce cultural homogenization, at the core of decolonial thought lies the exact opposite: the overcoming of such logics in all systems of knowledge, education, and society (Farahi, 2024, pp. 51-53). This means dismantling patriarchal power hierarchies and oppressor-oppressed relationships to promote gender and cultural equality, the appreciation of differences, and participatory and critical educational methods (Hall, 2006).

Coloniality, therefore, permeates all spheres of existence, although its impact can be understood by examining several key areas. *The coloniality of being* operates through the processes of inferiorization and subalternization, casting doubt on the human value and cognitive faculties of colonized subjects. *The coloniality of the cosmos* is based on the binary division between nature and society, leading to the elimination of magical-spiritual components from the social sphere. *The coloniality of knowledge* centers on the imposition of Eurocentrism as the sole legitimate order of thought, excluding other epistemic rationalities and ways of knowing.

[...] Decolonial pedagogical practices unfold in two phases: a deconstructive phase, aimed at dismantling dominant pedagogies that rely on epistemic silencing and the ontological negation of everything that does not fit within the capitalist-colonial geopolitics of knowledge; and a constructive phase, which develops alternatives *from and with* radically different genealogies, rationalities, knowledges, and ways of life.

Notably, social movements and practices of struggle and resistance are, par excellence, the contexts in which decolonial pedagogical proposals emerge (Muraca, 2017, pp. 202-203).

Since, as previously mentioned, social movements have decolonial origins (Muraca, 2017, p. 203), ecofeminist thought can also be associated with this orientation.

It asserts the role of women in the green policies and initiatives adopted by patriarchal power structures, where they have historically been considered a minority. Ecofeminism, in its political intentions, goes beyond the complex human-environment relationship, reshaping an idea of ecology that not only connects human beings with nature but, above all, redefines gender relations within cultures and societies (Mies, 1988, p. 222).

According to this perspective, the current ecological crisis and environmental issues are the result of a patriarchal capitalist culture that has taken root over centuries—one that is characterized, on the one hand, by the domination of nature and, on the other, by the subjugation of women, perceived “as nature” (Salleh, 2017, p. 35). This implies that, much like the environment, women have been (and in some ways still are) treated as “colonies”—passivized within a social, educational, and cultural framework that does not belong to them, yet whose values society (and the environment) have long been deprived of (Mies, 1988, p. x).

In other words, as in pure colonialism, the patriarchal system has enacted a form of colonization of bodies and environments (Giardini et al., 2020; Burgio, 2020, pp. 27-32), as well as of all elements that, by themselves, do not generate an accumulation of capitalist value for patriarchy (women, nature, developing countries). It is only through their exploitation that they feed the very capitalism upon which patriarchy thrives (Mies, 1988).

Decolonial and ecofeminist pedagogies aim to overturn this state of affairs—that is, to deconstruct “the naturalized truths imposed by the colonial order, through processes of conscientization that generate hope and responsibility toward the world” (Muraca, 2017, p. 204). By *deconstruction*, we mean:

To transcend the “logocentrism” of Western tradition (which not only grants *logos* primacy but also imposes it as a constraint) in order to access a *thought of radical difference*—conceived as alterity, dissemination, and decentralization—that can be elaborated across various domains through repeated processes of critique, interpretative engagement, and strategic dislocation. This involves both formal aspects (such as “margins,” “traces,” “spurs,” etc.) and thematic aspects (such as memory, friendship, difference, etc.), which animate a form of thought that is always an environmental-ethical-social-historical effect and a meta-personal process. Deconstructionism seeks to move beyond Tradition (the West, Metaphysics, Philosophy, Science, etc.) toward a form of thought that, by anchoring itself in interpretation, expands both its critical values and its innovative procedures (Mariani, 2008, p. 19).

Overcoming colonial barriers in the human-nature relationship, as well as in the relationship between men and women, means embracing a different approach to green issues—one that fosters the creation of new connections between female and male perspectives on reality (Mies, Shiva, 1993, p. 295). This idea is echoed by Bateson,

who, while not explicitly referring to ecofeminism, asserts that “for everything concerning existence, nature, and the living, it is the relationship that comes first and precedes any attempt at change” (Bateson, 1984, p. 179).

Pedagogy is the key tool for implementing these principles: fostering critical and conscious thought, giving voice to minorities, and promoting an environmental policy free from colonial influences (Burgio, 2015, p. 124).

4. Pedagogy as a Tool for Rethinking Green Issues

As previously stated, the ecofeminist perspective, when framed within decolonial pedagogy, aims to foster a complex ecological mindset that educates toward an eco-centric ethic. This is achieved through a relational ecology that, in turn, generates a culture of educational sustainability (Malavasi, 2008; Lombardi, 2016, p. 223). Consequently, beyond appropriate political, institutional, and social choices, “the ecological shift is connected to the significance of pedagogical-educational choices and calls into question the humanization of technological progress, equity in production relations, and the dignity of labor” (Malavasi, 2008, p. 8).

Building on Bateson’s ideas, using pedagogy as a tool to rethink green policies through a decolonial—and thus inclusive, man-woman—perspective means considering three interconnected factors: technological progress, population growth, and, most importantly, “traditional (but mistaken) ideas about human nature and its relationship with the environment” (Bateson, 1976, p. 532). These mistaken ideas are well articulated in another passage by Bateson:

a) us versus the environment; b) us versus other humans; c) the individual (or the individual company or nation) is what matters; d) we can and must strive to achieve unilateral control over the environment; e) we live within a frontier that expands infinitely; f) economic determinism is obvious and sensible; g) technology will enable us to do it (Bateson, 1976, pp. 536-537).

This passage precisely reveals the ecofeminist pedagogical paradigm we have been seeking—one that, in its various forms, places the interconnection between individuals, the environment, and society at its core. The most significant aspect of ecofeminist educational action, in this sense, is not solely the individual or the environment itself but rather the system of relationships and cultures in which they are embedded (Baldacci, 2011, p. 7; Bateson, 1976, p. 532).

In this way, even from a pedagogical perspective, the patriarchal, individualistic, and colonial logic of the human-nature relationship is overcome, opening up to a shared vision that transcends colonial dichotomies between technology and nature, between rights and power, and between resource exploitation and ecological limits (Persi, 2011, p. 76; Lombardi, 2016, p. 227).

However, this pedagogical perspective can only be realized if a genuine integration occurs between female and male educational perspectives—or, more precisely, if future generations are educated in the “feminine values” that have been absent for centuries, through the construction of new identity pathways (Loiodice, Ulivieri, 2017).

5. Conclusion: The Ecological Need to Educate Through a Feminine Perspective

We have discussed how the ecofeminist approach seeks to educate future generations toward an ecological—and, indeed, feminist—perspective on the environment, with all the intercultural and social implications this entails. But what does it mean to “educate through a feminine perspective”?

Women have historically been defined by their capacity to care for others, whether people or things. This quality, while valuable, has often been confined to the private sphere and excluded from the public sphere, which for centuries has been reserved for male power. A pedagogy framed through a feminine lens, therefore, emphasizes relational care, empathy, and cooperation—standing in contrast to traditionally masculine models based on competition and rationality (Ulivieri, 2016, pp. 19-31; Dato, De Serio, 2009).

When these values and knowledges are integrated with the ecofeminist perspective discussed in this contribution, it leads to an understanding of the environment not through a masculinist, individualistic, and privatized lens (as a resource to be exploited), but rather through a lens of care for nature. A feminine education that does not limit itself to an abstract form of environmental education but aims instead at fostering a new vision of the world, of nature, and even of social justice (Nussbaum, 2002). Educating within the ecological field from a feminine perspective means generating new and diverse educational approaches. It is a pedagogical method that frames issues through an eco-social, democratic, pluralistic, and pacifist lens (De Vita, 2022; Strongoli, 2023, p. 251). A method that, on one hand, promotes the inclusive dimension of intercultural pedagogy (Farahi, 2024, pp. 52-54) and, on the other, fosters a sustainable vision of the environment (Mortari, 2020).

To conclude, drawing on Freire (1970, *passim*), educating from an ecofeminist perspective means considering

education as a tool for emancipation from dominant patriarchal logics—both for women and for the environment. It is a process of liberation that transcends the perception of the environment as a mere resource to be exploited. An ecological education that is fully aware of its role in fostering an inclusive model of ecological justice (Nussbaum, 2002), characterized by respect for differences and for all existing forms of life (Lopez, 2017).

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