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Book Review: Ecofeminism and Rhetoric: Critical Perspectives on Sex, Technology, and Discourse

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Ecofeminism and Rhetoric: Critical Perspectives on Sex, Technology, and Discourse.
(2011). Douglas, A. Vakoch. New York: Berghahn Books; 177 pages (Hardcopy) (\$42.75).
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Reviewed by Dr. R.K. Shalyefu¹

Douglas A. Vakoch's purpose for writing this book is to thoroughly describe exactly what ecofeminism is and on how to apply it rhetorically. It is also intended for ecofeminist worldwide to be able to relate to and improve ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is the combination of ecology and feminism which links the domination of nature and the oppression of women, according to Vakoch (xxviii, 2011). Eco feminists in the text are considered to be people who do anything in their power to resist sexist oppression for a more peaceful world. While Rhetoric is the art of persuasion, this book aims at contributing to the understanding of Ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism is not static as it is always mutating and dynamic. The transformation of ecofeminism is influenced by factors such as political differences, isolated actions by individuals and complaints from the masses. The different paradigms set the levels of arising whole systems. This was further affirmed by the following quotation: "While ecofeminism continues to undergo internal evolution it can also be expected to keep yielding new socially significant – and culturally disruptive- insights...We affect the world around us, not always positively...to take responsibility for the effects we have on other beings, is our challenge..." (Vakoch, xx, 2011). A rhetorical outlook proves that people do in fact care about doing things ethically. There are two types of rhetoric, traditional (rhetor-privileged advocacy with a controlled agenda and hierarchical structure) and invitational (as an alternative rhetorical option for enhancing rhetorical practice, emphasizing creating space for personal and social transformation through voluntary, co-constructed change). There is a deviation between wanting change and wanting to make a change. Technology plays a role too in ecofeminism in the sense of composition.

The introduction is insightful as it sheds adequate light on why the concept of ecofeminism exists at its core. With an understanding that women are closest to nature than men, by virtue of their reproductive role, their mothering nature and their uncanny ability to sacrificial love, ecofeminism is considered to be fact. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which the myth of Apollo and Daphne is used as a representational piece in the concept of ecofeminism which is why a visual part of the myth is used as the front cover of the book.

With only five chapters, the book seeks to "provide in-depth explorations of the connections between ecology and feminism, in the process yielding new insights into sex and technology through such varied topics as canine reproduction, orangutan motherhood, energy conservation and Microsoft Word. Consistent with the participatory emphasis of ecofeminism, we invite you to consider ways that you too may use ecofeminism approaches to deepen your understanding of persuasion and discourses, as you grapple with subjects as complex and important as sex and technology" (Vakoch, xxi, 2011) Chapter 1 starts with an advocacy that a necessary and critical establishment is that of removing the need to link up ecological theories with feminist theories. This red flag mentioned at the very beginning of this chapter acts as a

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necessary and worthwhile point. This allows the room for many to associate the two separate theories in the understanding of ecofeminism.

Terms that closely embrace the concept of the book include *feminist ecology* and *ecological feminism* and though ecofeminists may not have a unified theory, their roots stem from the two aforementioned theories: ecology and feminism. Within that acknowledgement, a further appreciation of the many shades that exist within the two theories: ecology (biological, spiritual, social, etc) and feminism (liberal, socialist, radical) allows for a reader to truly acknowledge the many angles of rhetoric found within the topic of ecofeminism.

Chapter one also delves into the several factors found within the rhetoric of ecofeminism, with the many dimensions it holds, a scholarly reader of this topic at large will find the dualisms very interesting and noteworthy considering their in-depth capacity as well as the degree of rhetoric.

An interesting comparison is brought in within chapter two, in which a look at dogs and their reproductive capacity. Human control over the reproductive capacity of dogs is laid out and compared to the oppression of women. This comes from the need to give a worthy perspective on how women are viewed lower than men, as dogs are considered lower than humans.

The elaboration between humans and their dogs are rather long considering the sentiment that it deviates too far from the topic at hand. The writers' point and entire bone of contention is given in her conclusion where she states that just as humans treat dogs, "we live, inevitably, at the cost of the lives of other. How to live with this knowledge and to take responsibility for the effects we have on other beings is our challenge - the challenge of being human, of consciously and conscientiously existing in relationship with other beings, which is, of course, the only way we exist at all" (page 59).

Chapter three deals with the argument of "orangutan copulation, orangutan motherhood and women as primatologists impose(ing) primatological narratives and interpretations in ways that engender and perpetuate dualisms related to nature/culture, masculinity/femininity, and heterosexuality/homosexuality" (pg. 66). Chapter three is easier to digest and put into perspective considering the truth that the average human being can, many a time, acknowledge the many similarities between an orangutan and a human being. The discussion on orangutans and how they link with women within the context of primatology is well argued and elaborated on.

The most delightful chapter to read is chapter four, as the concept of invitation rhetoric, new to many, is well-advocated for, in substitute of traditional rhetoric. The chapter tackles the five core assumptions of invitational rhetoric which presuppose that: the purpose of communication is gaining understanding; the rhetorical process empowers both speaker and audience; diverse perspectives are viewed as resources; transformation is a self-chosen act; and all participants exercise a willingness to yield. This chapter is well constructed, laid out and argued. The chapter truly deals with heart of rhetoric, when the term "rhetoric" is taken by its very definitive elements.

The last chapter is one of the most complex and hence it is fair to assume that many may find the core concept and propositions stipulated in this essay difficult to comprehend, if not disagreeable. With a decision to observe ecofeminism under the technological lense using the UI (User Interface) platform to be Microsoft Word and hence the digital rhetoric alongside the entire concept of ecofeminism is at the centre-stage of this theory. The author concurs with scholars who disagree with the entire make up of her proposition yet draws on several other scholars whose definitions and theories she utilises to state her purpose: "Ecofeminism is interested in the ecological manner in which subjectivity is defined in relationship to environment via language.

Additionally, it is concerned with notions of appropriate technologies embedded within the material realities and the linguistic determinations that the subject operates in. Because of this, ecofeminism can provide a framework for rhetorical investigation of the technological environment within which a linguistically determined Western subject operates” (pg 119). Romberger (2011), develops her ideas with interesting assertions yet, her fundamental argument remains one of the more complex ones to fully agreeably comprehend.

This book is chronologically written with some repetitions but quite comprehensible. Vakoch clearly informs readers on his topic and explains it well. He emphasizes the value that empowered ecofeminism could bring. The book is not an easy read for beginners due to the complex language used, but it is otherwise well-written. It is backed up with credible sources and valid references. Eco feminists and people that seek understanding on this topic could put this book to great use.

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