

## Article

# On Greta Gaard's critical ecofeminist animal research

Yaxue Wang<sup>1</sup>, Qian Zhao<sup>1,2,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Anhui Business College, Wuhu 241002, China

<sup>2</sup> University of Technology MARA, Shah Alam 40170, Malaysia

\* Corresponding author: Qian Zhao, zhaoqiannnu@163.com

**Abstract:** The term “women” in ecofeminism goes far beyond its own scope and has a wide range of references: women, animals, plants, nature, people of color, grassroots people at the bottom of the ladder, and so on. As a famous contemporary ecofeminist scholar in the United States, Greta Gaard focuses her critical ecofeminism more on the criticism of sexism and speciesism, and she has been committed to animal research in ecofeminism. In her critical animal research, Gaard inherited the animal research of ecofeminists and advanced the research of critical ecofeminist animal study. She is not only highly concerned with the issue of animal oppression, but also proposes the theory of vegan ecofeminism and animal liberation, which are extensions and essence of Gaard's critical animal research.

**Keywords:** critical ecofeminism; animal liberation; vegan ecofeminism

## 1. Introduction

As a famous contemporary American ecofeminist, Greta Gaard developed critical ecofeminism based on Richard Watts' three-stage development model of the evolution of ecofeminist academic discourse and Plumwood's ecofeminist theory. Gaard's book “Critical ecofeminism”, which seeks to explore the feasibility of a continuous dialogue between scholars and environmental activists and mutual dialogues among species, can be regarded as one of the representative works of the fourth phase of critical ecofeminism. Combining with queer theory, animal ethics, climate justice and other discourses, Gaard's critical ecofeminism is extremely critical and groundbreaking. Back in 1966, feminist critics already used animal ecofeminism to challenge anthropocentrism. All types of oppression (especially oppression on non-human animals) are interrelated and need to be eradicated, the survival of animals depends heavily on the environment, so the goal of animal liberation is not only the overthrow of environmental domination, but also the abolition of human domination of non-human animals. Gaard also points it out that vegan ecofeminism goes beyond ecofeminism because it highlights the ways in which humans exploit and kill animals. Linking the oppression on women with the oppression on non-human animals, vegan ecofeminism is inclusive and combines animal liberation with ecofeminism.

## 2. Speciesism: Oppression on animals

Gaard has always devoted herself to the study of the relationships among women, nature and animals. She makes an important argument in critical ecofeminism, “speciesism”, which is “defined as an arbitrary form of discrimination that gives preference to one's own species over all other species”<sup>[1]</sup>. Based on this concept, the exploitation and slaughter of non-human animals can be carried out, just like any other forms of oppression. Gaard once pointed out, “we can't talk about water without talking about land, we can't talk about mountains without talking about trees, and we can't talk about salmon without talking about eagles, consequently, how can we talk about human beings without nature? Because of pollution, natural resources such as water, forests and animals are affected, and different races suffer from environmental injustice, and all these are attributed to the ideology of anthropocentrism.” In Gaard's book “The nature of home: Taking root in a place”, there is a

lot of descriptions of oppression on animals. In the chapter, “Looking for home”, Gaard describes how the Austin River, the main natural tributary into Whatcom Creek, was once a prime spawning area for cutthroat trouts and red salmons, “but recent logging had added so much silt to the stream that the kokanees were gone, and the cutthroat severely reduced.”<sup>[2]</sup> If the logging industry continues, many animals will disappear from the earth. Interestingly, Gaard also describes a story about the “salmon goddess” in the book. This story is like many legends in which God sacrifices his children for the sake of mankind, although humans may be forgiven, they do not properly obey God’s teachings or keep each other’s promises, and they always abuse God’s gifts, becoming greedy, and ignore the contract with God, and thus become the victims of one’s own evil deeds, and eventually they would not be able to live happily.

In Gaard’s another book, “Critical ecofeminism”, there are similar descriptions. In the first chapter, “Environmental justice”, she cites the example of the oil spill in Santa Barbara County in California. After the first crude oil spill in 1969, the authorities were forced to set up two bird cleaning centers to remove oil from damaged wildlife because seabirds were either suffocated by the oil, unable to fly, or removed the oil by constant preening. The scene of dead dolphins and whales being washed away on the beach was shocking. While there had been numerous bursts of environmental justice movements, nearly five decades later, on 19 May 2015, there was another oil spill in Santa Barbara County. Apparently, the impact of another oil spill on wildlife was being documented in harrowing graphic details. More than 100,000 gallons of oil along the shoreline damaged or destroyed smaller creatures, such as pelicans, sea lions, dolphins, crabs, snails and fish which were all soaked in oil, and in turn, oil spills had lasting effects on the reproductive health of these animals. Also in the book, Gaard claims, “Colonialism of earthothers continues today through tar sands operations, fracking, and industrial animal agriculture.”<sup>[3]</sup> Studies such as the report of Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations have confirmed the ways in which industrialized animal-based diets in the West can jeopardize human health and livelihoods, which also cause immense suffering to animals and accelerate climate change through methane emissions, deforestation, and waste dumping. Using vast tracts of land to feed animals for human has created real material famine for both human and wildlife, and it will bring suffering to billions of animals used in the animal food industry. In addition, in the same book, Gaard also describes the use of non-human animals in space exploration as a precedent for sending humans into space, and she feels very sad and strongly condemns these acts of mistreatment and oppression on animals.

### **3. The essence of Gaard’s critical ecofeminist animal research**

#### **3.1. Vegan ecofeminism**

Since its birth, ecofeminism has been in dispute with traditional feminism on the concept of animal liberation. While some ecofeminists have remained silent on the topic of animals, others have emphasized that the oppression on non-human animals (speciesism) is implicit in ecofeminist analysis, arguing that speciesism is intrinsically related to racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and naturalism. Outside of ecofeminism, some feminists are particularly vocal in their opposition to giving equal moral consideration to the interests or rights of non-human animals. For vegan ecofeminists, this opposition runs counter to the basic goals of feminism. Vegan ecofeminism, as the name suggests, is a combination of vegan theory and ecofeminism, vegan ecofeminism puts the feminist insights of “personal as political” into action and examines the political context of dietary choices, as well as the economics of strategic and operational choices in science.

Since now, the research and exploration of vegan ecofeminism has been clearly articulated through the massive works of scholars and activists, such as Carol Adams, Norma Benny, Linda Burke, Dean Curtin, Josephine Donovan, and so on. Vegan ecofeminism has roots that go back much further, and draws on compassion for non-human animals, contemporary animal liberation theories, the counter-culture movements

of the 1960s and 1970s, and decades of feminist activism and thought. In 1993, Gaard edited a collection of essays, "Ecofeminism: Women, animals and nature", which discussed the relationship among human beings and the natural environment and non-human animals, and it opposed the nature/culture and animal/human dualism in patriarchal thought, and studied the conflicts between green politics and ecofeminism as well as the application of ecofeminist theory. Then she published a review essay titled "Vegetarian ecofeminism", in which she pointed out, "For if ecofeminism can be seen as the offspring of feminism, then vegetarian ecofeminism is surely feminism's third generation."<sup>[1]</sup> In this essay, Gaard explores vegan ecofeminism and other issues through the analysis and practical application of vegan ecofeminists. First, the essay investigates the different origins and motivations of vegan ecofeminism. It then traces the path followed by many vegan ecofeminists, starting with establishing connections among specific objects of oppression (animals and people of color, women and animals, or animals and the environment), then it gradually progresses to include connections among several objects of oppression (animals, people of color, women, gays and lesbians, nature), and finally concludes an analysis of the structure of oppression itself. Besides, the essay examines various conceptual developments in vegan ecofeminism and their overall contributions to ecofeminist theory. Finally, the essay provides directions for its future development and action. Tracing the roots of vegan ecofeminism carefully, Gaard comprehensively investigates the research methods of many vegan ecofeminists, and addresses ethical issues related to dietary choice, animal liberation, and female oppression. With an expanding range of caring theory and cross-cultural perspective, vegan ecofeminism has become a liberating theory, which provides humane care to non-human animals on the basis of humanism. Its ideas, derived from the connections among sexism, racism, and speciesism, and the consciousness of meat-eating patriarchy, and from the study of the culturally essential connections among women, animals, people of color, and nature, which are subordinate in Western patriarchal thought, are the result of the broader development of the feminist academic field. The emergence of vegan ecofeminism is an important supplement to the development of ecofeminism. Vegetarians and ecofeminists break through the constraints of social construction on interspecies sympathy and establish a sympathetic relationship between human experience and other animal experience. This has made an important contribution to the theory of attaching importance to wildlife protection and exploring the internal relationship between natural ecology and women.

Based on the critical and positive strategies that previous vegan ecofeminists had developed to deal with various situations, including the related oppression on women, Gaard believes it is important to limit vegan ecofeminists' arguments to specific examples of animal hunting, racism, sexism, and speciesism in science and technology. Vegan ecofeminism continues to evolve and contribute to the broader development of a more inclusive ecofeminism. Based on its analysis and the criticism of its analysis, Gaard pointed out several directions for its future development. Firstly, to what extent is the speciesism's analysis relevant to non-Western cultures? Are there potential links between cultural vegetarianism and vegan eco-feminism that has not yet been theorized? Both feminists and eco-feminists are exploring the strategies and boundaries of cross-cultural feminist ethics. Non-western feminists are evaluating their own cultural traditions in terms of gender justice and developing their own feminist ethics. Will these feminists find a connection among the oppression on women, slaves, and non-human animals in their cultural traditions? Of course, cultures that have a tradition of hunting, killing, consuming, or sacrificing other human and non-human animals cannot be said to be the culture of specialists. The cross-cultural relevance of vegan ecofeminism remains to be explored. Secondly, ecofeminists must address issues of heterosexuality, racism, and class discrimination within our movement and the larger culture. This discussion has already been started within ecofeminism, but it needs to develop further. Some vegan ecofeminists, inspired by their own oppression as lesbian and bisexual women, began to address the issue of speciesism and began to link the animalization of gays and people of color to the oppressive structures of speciesism and heterosexism. We need to do more to make race, class and species the focus of

ecofeminist discourse, and make them equal to gender and nature. Finally, as vegan ecofeminists explore the relevance of cross-cultural speciesism, some will want to build or strengthen alliances with female activists in the environmental justice movement. These alliances may raise questions about contextual ethical vegetarianism, as these activists share work and diet. While the power of resolving these issues seems to fall to vegetarian women of color who are willing to speak out, omnivorous environmental justice activists and vegan ecofeminists also need to engage each other in critical conversations. It is only through such a democratic dialogue that a more inclusive, emancipatory movement can be achieved, a movement for justice for the half-different human beings, the animals and all life on earth.

### 3.2. Animal liberation

In ecofeminist discourse, the terms “nature” and “woman” are mostly used to encompass the object of oppression, and animal issues are rarely mentioned within this broader framework. Peter Singer’s “Animal Liberation Theory” and Tom Regan’s “Animal Rights Doctrine” have contributed greatly to the world’s attention to animal issues. In 1975, Peter Singer published the book “Animal liberation”, which explores the theory of animal liberation, with the main point being that animals are natural beings like human beings and have the ability to perceive pain, so they should be protected. Then in 1983, Tom Regan published “The case for animal rights”, a book about the study of the nature of animal rights. It is argued that the reason why we have to protect animals is that animals have inviolable rights just like human beings, and the reason why animals have inviolable rights is that they have “inherent value”, as well as the reason why animals have “inherent value” is that they are “subjects of a life”. The reason why animals have “inherent value” is that they are “subjects of a life”. Then in 1990, the feminist academic journal signs: “The journal of women in culture and society” published Josephine Donovan’s article, “Animal rights and feminist theory”, this paper described more than a century of vegan feminist activism and theory, linking feminist ethic of care with animal protection. In the same year, the relations between the oppression on women and animals were developed in Carol Adams’s book “The sexual politics of meat: A feminist-vegetarian critical theory”. In the first chapter of her edited book “Ecofeminism: Women, animals, nature”, Gaard also said, “Ecofeminism is a theory that has evolved from various fields of feminist inquiry and activism: peace movements, labor movements, women’s health care, and the anti-nuclear, environmental, and animal liberation movements.”<sup>[4]</sup> Gaard reviews some of the perspectives of animal research in vegetarianism: first, they don’t want to be eaten. Countless texts from animal studies confirm that animals don’t want to be eaten: their behavior expresses their desire as they flee from hunters, fight other predators, and struggle to escape from zoos, traps that can catch their legs, scientific experiments, and other forms of confinement. Second, they feel pain. Animals suffer and they should not suffer. Singer’s utilitarian’s views have fueled animal rights for decades. Obviously, animals are also subjects of life: animals feel pain, emotions, and have a sense of self that affirms their intrinsic worth and gives them moral rights. Third, they have consciousness. The consciousness of most animal species involves a sense of self that is simultaneously individual and familial.

Benefiting from Plumwood’s theory of contextualized ethical of mutual identification of humans and the ecological other, Gaard accepts our position in the food chain as both the eater and the eaten. Although all food production brings with some death, as Lori Gruen says, “We can’t live and avoid killing; this is something I think has been underexplored in vegan literature... We harm others (humans and nonhumans) in all aspects of food production.”<sup>[5]</sup> Whether in our lives or after our deaths, we ourselves are potential prey for other animal species. Gaard points it out that animal liberation theory, an important component of critical ecofeminists, can recognize the perceptual abilities of plants and other ecological organisms, and place humans in the food chain as both the eaters and the eaten in different contexts. She argues that context-specific ethical directions are in an effort to provide the least amount of suffering and the greatest amount of care to all participants: humans

(industrial, rural, agricultural indigenous), animals, plants and ecological entities. Moreover, she advocates that all animals are entitled to their most basic interests such as the right to live, which means certain kinds of animals have the right to be treated as individuals in accordance with their own desires and needs, rather than as a form of property.

#### **4. The enlightenment of Gaard's critical ecofeminist animal research**

Gadd deems that the elimination of the grasp and hegemony of carnal culture requires a shift from denial to listening, from detachment to empathy, and from heteronormative universalism to queer pluralism. Animal research in Gaard's critical ecofeminism identifies our place in the food chain as both the eater and the eaten, which advocates an ethical vegetarianism that values both individual lives and ecosystem relationships, and makes food choices that contribute to sustainable development and reduce suffering in carnivorous ecosystems.

Gaard has also adopted a cross-cultural practical strategy to practice her critical animal studies. While participating in a graduate seminar on ecofeminist literary criticism at Tamkang University in 2009, considering that Taiwan's cultural background is Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, rather than Christianity, the philosophical reconstruction would be more helpful in exploring the connection between gender and species in Asian cultures, for example, the concept of "no harm or no kill" and the virtue of compassion for all beings, which has been used as the basis for Buddhist vegetarianism, Gaard notes, "There is also the Buddhist belief in the six directions of reincarnation, which suggests that the beings humans eat (if we eat other animal bodies) may once have been our family and this belief resonates with the suggestion from western vegetarian ecofeminism that eating meat can be seen as a form of cannibalism, particularly for those who reject the human/non-human animal dualism."<sup>[6]</sup> A cross-cultural ethical perspective is more conducive to the practice of critical animal research and is developed throughout the whole world.

Paying great attention to the animal ecological environment, Gaard advocates the equality of the existent value of global species, the protection of wildlife and preservation of the ecological balance of the earth. All of these aspects are Gaard's expansions of the research on animal ethics in critical ecofeminism and provide ongoing relevance to the current environmental protection movement and the sustainable development of the human beings.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Greta Gaard's critical ecofeminism combines ecology with feminism, linking patriarchy with racism, capitalism with women, nature with the care of animals and plants. With far-reaching critical animal research, the ecofeminist contextual ethical vegetarianism of ecofeminists provides a useful strategy for ethical dietary decisions in humans, plants, and animals. A balanced ecological environment and harmonious coexistence of human beings and other animals and plants on earth should be our common long-term goal. Like most eco-activist scholars, Gaard dedicates the value of her work to present and future generations in the hope that it will contribute to the building of a just world: a world more closely in tune with life; a world in which we interact with non-human animals and with all the species and elements of this precious earth.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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