

A critical appraisal of the ecofeminist argument that the subjection of nature is akin to, and stems from, the subjugation of women

Introduction

The denials of dualism have defined the meaning of the human/nature relationship in the western tradition (Val Plumwood)

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “Nature” as: “The phenomena of the physical world collectively, including plants, animals, the landscape, and other features and products of the earth, as opposed to humans or human creations.”

This suggests that natural phenomena are separate from humans or creations thereof, and exemplifies the concept of dualism cited above by philosopher and ecofeminist, Val Plumwood. Just how profoundly this sense of disconnection has affected western people’s attitudes and relationships with each other and with nature is an important aspect of this appraisal.

Methodology

This essay will consider several aspects of the notion of the “subjection of nature” in terms of its control, exploitation and destruction for human purposes, and correlations with the “subjugation of women” as posited by a number of ecofeminist thinkers, writers and activists.

It is based on the hypothesis that the planet that sustains us is being taken for granted by humans as a “given” resource to be used and abused with impunity; and that western society is stuck in a dualistic worldview of “them and us” that perpetuates an attitude of “otherness”, alienation and oppression of anything, or anyone, that challenges an anthropocentric mindset. This has influenced western thinking for many ages with far-reaching consequences for our relationship with the natural world that few people are fully aware of today.

A wake-up call for Sleeping Beauty

From a personal perspective, reading for the first time Caroline Merchant’s authoritative work *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, I felt like a huge crack of thunder had awoken me from the slumbers of a somewhat stagnating consciousness.

While I had worked throughout my life to help uphold human rights and protect some of the most vulnerable human beings in the world – refugees – and knew

well of the oppression and violations that so many women suffer in situations of displacement, and also in relation to the beliefs and practices of some religious traditions, I had not understood the extent to which the notion of "man's superiority", domination and sense of "power over" has played in the western world and beyond.

Nor did I equate this worldview with the exploitation of nature and other-than-human beings on our beleaguered planet. Consequently, the perceptions of ecofeminist writers like Merchant, that "Man's dominion" - over nature, the deep feminine principle and womanhood more generally - has been established in large part by the imposition and perpetuation of anthropocentric - or more precisely androcentric - values and principles, have helped me realize that I and many others have fallen under a great psychic spell. And like Sleeping Beauty, I have had to rub my eyes and wake up to a whole new worldview...

A sobering story: from mothering to othering

Merchant draws striking parallels between nature and the feminine, through many fascinating historical, social, cultural and philosophical examples. She artfully describes the demise of a former living, breathing, life-nurturing world order of interdependence, diversity, equality, regeneration and ethical responsibility and integrity, that has left humankind separated from the natural resources it then felt justified in violating and exploiting with impunity.

It is sobering indeed to contemplate the destructive illusions under which western anthropocentric proponents of "progress" continue to labour, despite the many signals of planetary suffering. In *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment* (ed. Gottlieb), ecofeminist writer Rosemary Radford Ruether observes wryly: "We need to discover our actual reality as latecomers to the planet. The world of nature, plants and animals existed billions of years before we came on the scene."

A living planet: Up to the 16th century, human beings are described in *The Death of Nature* as co-habiting the Earth with other-than-human species (animal, vegetable and mineral) as part of an organic, living system, likened to a nurturing mother and a healing nurse; and living by beliefs, values and ethical standards/norms that provided a sense of natural law and order.

A spanner in the works: The undermining (figuratively and literally) of this worldview, as thinking human minds (almost exclusively male) sought new scientific and philosophical answers to questions about life, led to a brutal suppression of respect for the feminine qualities of nature. The new mindset favoured rational, mechanistic arguments designed increasingly to gain power, control and exploit whatever became considered either inferior and lifeless or, alternatively, wild and dangerous to Man - most notably anything female.

The taming of female energy: As a Scot, brought up in the Calvinist Church of Scotland tradition, it was horrifying for me to read of John Knox's misogynist rant in *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558) and the efforts of King James I, notably in *Daemonologie* (1597), supported by Francis Bacon and others, to introduce anti-feminist legislation and intensify witch-hunts. Other illustrations offered by Merchant include fascinating and touching examples observed in art and literature, e.g. Lucas Cranach's painting *Nymph of the Spring* (1518, Germany) foretelling of evolving cultural beliefs that nature – and by association female energy in all forms - could be “tamed” and exploited as an expendable resource to the point of justifiable violation and rape. Also interesting to note are the author's references to the influence of Aristotle, whose theory of generation posited that woman was simply a passive, incomplete form of being, who required the active male spark of life through the “power which resides in the semen” to generate life in the mere matter she supplied.

Ethics undermined: Any ethical arguments against the violation of nature put forward by philosophers and other thinkers, such as the Gnostics, were also gradually extinguished. Human greed and possessiveness then opened the gates to widespread plundering of the planet's resources and the propelling of human destiny towards the anthropocentric mindset that underpins the state of the world today.

The rape of Gaia

Thus, as Merchant observes: “The new mining activities (have) altered the earth from a bountiful mother to a passive receptor of human rape” (op.cit p. 39).

Many other ecofeminists, such as Val Plumwood, Greta Gaard, Vandana Shiva, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Starhawk have also written movingly and eloquently of this correlation between the subjugation of women and that of the entire natural world.

Renowned environmental activist, physicist and philosopher, Vandana Shiva is insistent on this connection. In *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* she affirms that: “The ecological crisis is, at its root, the death of the feminine principle, symbolically as well as in contexts such a rural India, not merely in form and symbol, but also in the everyday processes of survival and sustenance.”

While this may appear to some western critics of deep ecology and ecofeminist arguments as “essentialism” with too much focus on the exploitation of women and nature to the exclusion of others who suffer oppression, I believe it should be taken within the context of another culture, in a country where many women work directly with the land, in extremely hard conditions, and in a socio-cultural

context that has so far continued to allow phallocratic attitudes to prevail in many areas.

In Asia and in other parts of the non-Western world, this is the reality of everyday life, and women carry a hugely disproportionate burden in preserving life for themselves and their families. As Greta Gaard comments in her 2015 paper *Ecofeminism and Climate Change*: "According to CARE, an international non-governmental organization (NGO), women work 2/3 of the world's working hours, produce half the world's food, and earn 10% of the world's income; of the world's one billion poorest people, women and girls make up 70%.

A broader vision of the roots of the subjugation of nature

That is not to say that menfolk are not also victims of abuse and oppression. As noted by social ecologist Murray Bookchin in his article *What is Social Ecology?*:

"Male rule ... takes on its harshest and most coercive form in *patriarchy*, an institution in which the eldest male of an extended family or clan has a life-and-death command over *all* other members of the group. Women may be ordered whom to marry, but they are by no means the exclusive or even the principal target of a patriarch's domination. Sons, like daughters, may be ordered how to behave at the patriarch's command or may be killed at his whim."

And later in the same article, with regard to seeking a more ethical ecological society, based on a notion of complementarity and of humans as "conscious ethical agents in promoting the well-being of themselves and the nonhuman world," Bookchin claims that social ecology "challenges the entire system of domination itself ... and seeks to eliminate the hierarchical and class edifices that have imposed themselves on humanity and defined the relationship between nonhuman and human nature."

Indeed, moving beyond the hypothesis that the subjection of nature "is akin to, and stems from, the subjugation of women", several of the aforementioned ecofeminists, as well as others, put forward valid and persuasive counter-arguments to assert "that all forms of oppression are connected and that structures of oppression must be addressed in their totality" (Laura Hobgood-Oster in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Nature*).

As Rosemary Radford Ruether commented as far back as 1975 in *New Woman, New Earth*: "Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this society."

Clearly the question under consideration had already suggested the need for a serious overhaul of the basic structural props of western society over 40 years ago. And 15 years later, in *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics*, ecofeminist author Starhawk offers deeper insights into the multiple threads of oppression, including those still woven through Western religions, noting that “the God of patriarchal religions has been the ultimate source and repository of power-over.”

She goes on to observe: “Historically, Christianity has reconciled workers, slaves, women and people of color to the position of inferiors by denying value to the conditions of this life and assigning it to some future existence in heaven, where the meek and submissive will be rewarded.”

This comparative image - of opposing values of the inferiority of life on Earth versus the superiority and promised rewards that await those who know how to practice patience and obedience - holds some clues as to how much of humanity slipped into such dysfunctional relationships and dualistic attitudes - not only amongst the human species, but also with the natural world.

Towards an ethical stance

In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* Val Plumwood quotes feminist activist, bell hooks, to explain why she (Plumwood) believes that “power-over” is at the source of this dysfunction and why she wants to develop a “critical ecological feminism”:

“Feminism, as liberation struggle, must exist apart from and as a part of the larger struggle to eradicate domination in all forms. We must understand that patriarchal domination shares an ideological foundation with racism and other forms of group oppression, that there is no hope that it can be eradicated while these systems remain intact.” (hooks (1989) *Talking Back*)

Plumwood argues that to tackle the many issues underlying the “oppressions of gender, race, class and nature” that we face in the world today, it is important to understand the logic and structure of “dualism”. She defines this (op cit p. 31) as “the process by which contrasting concepts (for example, masculine and feminine gender identities) are formed by domination and subordination and constructed as oppositional and exclusive.”

Dualism then is “a process in which power forms identity, one which distorts both sides of what it splits apart, the master *and* the slave, the coloniser *and* the colonised ... the egoist *and* the self-abnegating altruist... human *and* nature. “

And she then explains her theory that “The dualistic distortion of culture and the historical inferiority of women and nature in the west have been based... on a

network of assumptions involving a range of closely related dualistic contrasts, especially the dualism of reason and nature, or... of humanity and culture on the one side and nature on the other.”(op cit p. 33)

Thus, to “dismantle” dualisms that are based on hierarchical difference - as opposed to dichotomy and what she refers to as “relevant otherness”, or “distinctness” – requires a “reconstruction of relationship and identity in terms of a non-hierarchical concept of difference.”

Transforming the old patriarchal paradigm

So in seeking to address the issue of subjection or subjugation of any form of life – human or other than human – it seems it is fundamentally a question of relationships, of interconnectedness, of recognition of the extent to which we are dependent on each other (or denial thereof)... and of a willingness to waken ourselves up from a spell-bound trance and open our minds to a paradigm shift.

Rosemary Radford Ruether also emphasizes this when she considers how to move “toward an ecofeminist ethic and culture” (op.cit). Like Plumwood, she refers to reconstructing, including the need for:

- reshaping “our dualistic concept of reality”;
- reversing the denial that we are dependent on our planet to sustain life;
- changing the concept of God from a distant, hierarchical suprapower to an “immanent source” of all life,
- reconfiguring both female and male roles and responsibilities, notably in family life and in all forms of work; and
- repositioning our sense of “self” in relation to natural cycles of life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while it seems reasonable to acknowledge the postulation that “the subjection of nature is *akin to*”, I cannot endorse the statement that this “*stems from* the subjugation of women”.

Returning to the opening definition of “Nature”, what arises for me in this appraisal is the need to plead the cause of all – human and other-than-human beings – whose lives do not flourish because of the perpetuation of forms of oppression that have been so firmly entrenched in the collective western psyche that many, like myself, have been in deep denial.

Above all, it appears to me that it is the cultivation of a caring, ethical and embodied human/nature relationship that may be most helpful in repairing the pain of separation and oppression amongst humans ourselves, and between nature and ourselves. Perhaps then we may move out of denial and, from a more

humble, respectful position, again remember how it is to simply go with the flow,
of Life, together.

Flow of Life

*A hidden source
From deep below
Calls me to wait
"Be still, take seat"*

*Your rippling voice
Doth me entice
To know Thy flow
What guides Thee so?*

*And stirs my heart
To learn such art
Of blessed flow
No need for show*

*I yearn to be
As constant as Thee
To honour my line
Of women through time*

*Who brought new life
Despite Man's strife
And lies and excuses
As trueness he refuses*

*Misguided choices
Powerful voices
Insist and oppress
To make others feel less*

*But you just keep flowing
Inviting to knowing
That we need no pressure:
To be, is our treasure.*

*A heartfelt encounter
The rest does not matter
So I come to pay homage
To your blessed knowledge.*

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