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## WOMEN AND NATURE: IS THERE A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP? ANALYZING THE WOMEN = NATURE EQUATION

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### ABSTRACT

Nature and literature have always shared a close relationship in almost all cultures of the world down the ages. In recent time, the concern for ecology and the threat that the continuous misuse of our environment poses on humanity has caught the attention of the writers. It is this sense of concern and its reflection in literature that has given rise to a new branch of literary theory, namely Eco-criticism. Eco-critics explore human attitudes toward the environment as expressed in the nature writings.

Eco-feminism emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as myriad forms of feminist and environmental theories and activism intersected. It acts in both and neither of these broad movements, simultaneously serving as an environmental critique of feminism and a feminist critique of environmentalism. Thus, it regards the oppression of women and nature as interconnected and combines the philosophy of feminism with the principles of ecology and environmental ethics. More recently, eco-feminist theorists have extended their analyses to consider the interconnections between sexism, the domination of nature (including animals), and also racism and social inequalities. Consequently it is now better understood as a movement working against the interconnected oppressions of gender, race, class and nature.

In the present paper, my aim is to analyze the interconnections between the status of women and the status of non-human nature based on four central claims viz. the oppression of women and the oppression of nature are interconnected; these connections must be uncovered in order to understand both the oppression of women and the oppression of nature; feminist analysis must include ecological insights; and a feminist perspective must be a part of any proposed ecological solutions.

**Key words:** Women, nature, interconnection, eco-criticism and eco-feminism.

It is for the union of you and me  
that there is light in the sky.  
it is for the union of you and me  
that the earth is decked in dusky green.  
It is for the union of you and me  
that night sits motionless  
with the world in her arms;  
dawn appears opening the eastern door  
with sweet murmurs in her voice.  
The boat of hope sails along on the currents of  
Eternity towards that union,  
Flowers of the ages are being gathered together  
For its welcoming ritual.

(Tagore 15)

Nature is a mysterious force that has been a concern of some of the greatest writers. Nature Writing is a form of creative nonfiction in which the natural environment serves as the dominant subject. It is perhaps best defined by reference to the related concepts of place and time. Traditional definitions of nature writing often limit the genre to nonfiction essays that concern the relationship between humans and the nonhuman world. Such definitions generally trace the lineage of nature writing back no further than the late eighteenth century, particularly to Gilbert White's *Natural History of Selborne* (1789), and usually exclude works of fiction, poetry, and drama, in addition to forms of nonfiction other than the essay, such as speeches, diaries, memoirs, and travel narratives. Such formulations seem unnecessarily limiting, given the tremendous wealth of writing about nature found in earlier periods and other literary forms. A less restrictive definition of nature writing would focus upon the expansive subject, rather than the generic circumscription, of this literature. It would include any text or portion of a text, regardless of its time of composition that examines the interaction of nature and culture in a particular place.

Nature and literature have always shared a close relationship in almost all cultures of the world down the ages. Today, the intimate relationship between the natural and social world is being analyzed and emphasized in all departments of knowledge and development. The literary critic tries to study how this close relationship between nature and society has been textualized by the writers in their works.

The two components of nature namely organisms and their environment are not only much complex and dynamic but also interdependent, mutually reactive and interrelated. Ecology, relatively a new science, deals with the various principles which govern such relationships between organisms and environment. Ecology is defined as the way in which plants, animals and people are related to each other and their environment. In this relationship, they are so much interdependent on each other that any disturbance in one disturbs the other. History has proved this every now and then that with every change in the civilization, the relationship of animals and human beings have also changed and the effect on civilization of the changes in environment has been so acute that sometimes it has wiped the whole civilization from the face of the earth. Therefore, concern for ecology is one of the most discussed issues today. It is the concern of every country to replenish the diminishing factors of ecology which threatens human beings the most.

Literature, well known for reflecting the contemporary issues, could not have remained unaffected from this theme. The world of literature throngs with works dealing with beauty and power of nature. However, the concern for ecology and the threat that the continuous misuse of our environment poses on humanity has only recently caught the attention of the writers. It is this sense of concern and its reflection in literature that has given rise to a new branch of literary theory, namely Eco-criticism. It is said to be the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. At present, eco-criticism is in full swing and is a readily

accepted theory worldwide. Its practitioners explore human attitudes toward the environment as expressed in the nature writings.

Eco-feminism emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as myriad forms of feminist and environmental theories and activism intersected. It acts in both and neither of these broad movements, simultaneously serving as an environmental critique of feminism and a feminist critique of environmentalism. Thus, eco-feminism regards the oppression of women and nature as interconnected and combines the philosophy of feminism with the principles of ecology and environmental ethics. It asserts that all forms of oppression are connected and that structures of oppression must be addressed in their totality. Oppression of the natural world and of women by patriarchal power structures must be examined together or neither can be confronted fully. These socially constructed oppressions formed out of the power dynamics of patriarchal systems. In one of the first eco-feminist books, *New Woman/New Earth*, Ruether, states:

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 one of 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 [modern industrial] society (204).

Ruether makes clear a central tenet of eco-feminism: earth and the other-than-human experience the tyranny of patriarchy along with women. Classism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, naturism (a term coined by Warren) and speciesism are all intertwined. In other words, eco-feminism is a movement that makes connections between environmentalisms and feminisms; more precisely, it articulates the theory that the ideologies that authorize injustices based on gender, race and class are related to the ideologies that sanction the exploitation and degradation of the environment" (Sturgeon 23). Eco-feminism seeks to recognize the interconnectedness and battle these injustices; as Greta Gaard suggests: "More than a theory about

feminism and environmentalism, or women and nature, as the name might imply, eco-feminism approaches the problems of environmental degradation and social injustice from the premise that how we treat nature and how we treat each other are inseparably linked" (Gaard 157-172).

Eco-feminism is multi-faceted and multi-located, challenging structures rather than individuals. By confronting systems of patriarchy, eco-feminism broadens the scope of the cultural critique and incorporates seemingly disparate but, according to eco-feminism, radically connected elements. Combining feminist and deep ecological perspectives, in and of themselves extremely varied ways of thinking about reality, is a complex, transgressive process that is often in flux.

Eco-feminists, or ecological feminists, are those feminists who analyze the interconnections between the status of women and the status of non-human nature. At the heart of this analysis are four central claims:

- The oppression of women and the oppression of nature are interconnected;
- These connections must be uncovered in order to understand both the oppression of women and the oppression of nature;
- Feminist analysis must include ecological insights; and
- A feminist perspective must be a part of any proposed ecological solutions (Warren, 4).

A closer look at each of these claims will illuminate the concerns of eco-feminism.

### **The Oppression of Women and the Oppression of Nature are Interconnected**

One way to talk about the connections between women and nature is to describe the parallel ways they have been treated in Western patriarchal society. First, the traditional role of both women and nature has been instrumental (Plumwood 120). Women's role has been to serve the needs and desires of men. Traditionally, women were not considered to have a life except in relation to a man, whether father, brother, husband, or son. Likewise, nonhuman nature has provided the resources to meet human needs for food, shelter,

and recreation. Nature had no purpose except to provide for human wants. In both cases the instrumental role led to instrumental value. Women were valued to the extent that they fulfilled their role. Nature was valued in relation to human interests either in the present or the future. Women and nature had little or no meaning independent of men.

A second parallel in the treatment of women and nature lies in the way the dominant thought has attempted "to impose sharp separation on a natural continuum" in order to maximize difference (Plumwood 120). In other words, men are identified as strong and rational while women are seen as weak and emotional. In this division of traits those men who are sensitive and those women who are intellectually or athletically inclined are marginalized. They are overlooked in the typical (stereotypical) description of men as opposed to women. The same holds true for distinctions between what is human and what is not. The human being is conscious, the nonhuman plant or animal is not; the human is able to plan for the future, to understand a present predicament, the nonhuman simply reacts to a situation out of instinct. These distinctions are drawn sharply in order to protect the privilege and place of those thought to be more important.

These parallels are instructive but they do not explain why they developed. Two theologians were among the feminists who first articulated the link between women and nature in patriarchal culture. They were Rosemary Ruether, in *New Woman, New Earth* (1975), and Elizabeth Dodson Gray, in *Green Paradise Lost* (1979). Both of them focused on the dualisms that characterize patriarchy, in particular the dualisms of mind/body and nature/culture. In her work Ruether traces the historical development of these dualisms in Western culture. She points to the way in which Greek thought, namely dualistic thought, was imported into ancient Hebraic culture. The triumph of this dualism came in the development of a transcendent or hierarchical dualism in which,

Men master nature, not by basing themselves on it and exalting it as an independent

divine power, but by subordinating it and linking their essential selves with a transcendent principle beyond nature which is pictured as intellectual and male. This image of transcendent, male spiritual deity is a projection of the ego or consciousness of ruling-class males, who envision a reality, beyond the physical processes that gave them birth, as the true source of their being. Men locate their true origins and natures in this transcendent sphere, which thereby also gives them power over the lower sphere of "female" nature (Ruether, *New Women...* 13-14).

In this way, transcendent dualism incorporates and reinforces the dualisms of mind/body and nature/culture as well as male/female. In addition these distinctions are read into other social relations, including class and race. As a result, ruling-class males lump together those whom Ruether calls the "body people": women, slaves, and barbarians (Ruether, *New Women...* 14; Plumwood 121-22).

While agreeing with the reasons for the development of transcendent dualism, Dodson Gray's response to it differs from Ruether's. Ruether's tack is to reject transcendental dualism outright; Dodson Gray appears to embrace the dualism but to reevaluate the pairs. In other words, she maintains the distinction but insists that being more closely tied to nature does not detract from women's worth. Instead, for Dodson Gray, it enhances it. As others have pointed out, Dodson Gray "come[s] dangerously close to implicitly accepting the polarities which are part of the dualism, and to trying to fix up the result by a reversal of the valuation which would have men joining women in immanence and identifying the authentic self as the body" (Plumwood 125).

A similar division of opinion can also be traced in other feminist writings. It is the difference between the nature feminists and the social feminists (Griscom 5). The nature feminists are those who celebrate women's biological difference and claim some measure of superiority as a result of it. The social feminists are those who recognize the inter-structuring of race, class, and sex, but who tend to avoid discussing nature exploitation

precisely because it invites attention to biological difference. Both kinds of feminists have positive points to express, but another sort of feminism, one that transcends these, is needed in order to understand the connections between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature.

### **These Connections must be Uncovered in order to Understand both the Oppression of Women and the Oppression of Nature**

Feminist analysis of the transcendent dualism identified by Ruether shows that there are three basic assumptions that govern the way the dualism's elements are treated. These assumptions lie behind the parallels between the oppression of women and nature described above. First, the elements in the dualism are perceived as higher and lower relative to each other. The higher is deemed more worthy or valuable than the lower. Second, the lower element is understood to serve the higher. In fact, the value of the lower is derived in instrumental fashion. Third, the two elements are described as polar opposites. That is, "the traits taken to be virtuous and defining for one side are those which maximize distance from the other side" (Plumwood 132). In other words, men are "not women" and women are "not men." The same holds true in traditional conceptions of human and nonhuman nature. These three assumptions lead to a logic of domination that repeatedly identifies differences and controls them in such a way as to protect the "higher" element in the dualism. In this way, from the point of view of the "higher," difference automatically implies inferiority.

In patriarchal culture these three assumptions are at work in a "nest of assumptions" that also includes (1) The identification of women with the physical and nature, (2) The identification of men with the intellectual, and (3) The dualistic assumption of the inferiority of the physical and the superiority of the mental (Plumwood 133). Once this nest of assumptions is unpacked the differences between the social feminists and nature feminists and the deficiency of each become more clear. On the one hand, the social feminists simply reject the identification of women with nature and the physical and insist that women have the same

talents and characteristics as men. These feminists focus on the interaction of sexism, racism, and classism (Griscom 6). On the other hand, the nature feminists embrace the identification of women with nature but deny that nature or the physical is inferior. But neither of these responses represents a sufficient challenge to the dualistic assumptions themselves since both leave part unquestioned. Social feminists do not ask about the assumed inferiority of nature, and nature feminists do not ask about the assumed identification of women with nature. In this way, both "remain within the framework in which the problem has arisen, and... leave its central structures intact" (Plumwood 133).

A thoroughgoing eco-feminism must challenge each of the dualisms of patriarchal culture (King 12-16). The issue is not whether women are closer to nature, since that question arises only in the context of the nature/ culture dualism in the first place. Rather, the task is to overcome the nature/ culture dualism itself. The task can be accomplished first by admitting that "gender identity is neither fully natural nor fully cultural," and that neither is inherently oppressive or liberating (King 13). Second, eco-feminists need to learn what both the social feminists and nature feminists already know. From social feminists we learn that "while it is possible to discuss women and nature without reference to class and race, such discussion risks remaining white and elite" (Griscom 6). And nature feminists remind us that there is no human/nonhuman dichotomy and that our bodies are worth celebrating (Griscom 8).

### **Feminist Analysis must include Ecological Insights**

One result of the way the oppression of women and the oppression of nature are linked in these dualisms is that feminist thought and practice must incorporate ecological insights. To do otherwise would not sufficiently challenge the structures of patriarchal domination. The most direct way to illustrate this is to discuss the repercussions of the feminist assertion of women's full humanity in light of the interlocking dualisms described above. The fact that male/female, human/nature, and mind/body dualism are all closely linked together means that feminism cannot

rest with proclaiming women's full humanity. To do this without also raising the question of the human/nature relationship would be simply to buy into the male-defined human being. In other words, if women and men are now to be re-conceptualized non-dualistically, the choices available are either to buy into the male definition of the human (as the social feminists tend to do) or to engage in a re-conceptualization of humanity as well. But, as soon as we begin to redefine humanity, the question of the human/nature dualism arises (Plumwood 134-35). This is also the case when we ask about the status of race or class. Thus, any thorough challenge to the male/female dichotomy must also take on the other dualisms that structure Western patriarchy.

At this point it becomes clear that eco-feminism is not just another branch of feminism. Rather, eco-feminists are taking the feminist critique of dualism another step. What eco-feminism aims for transcends the differences between social and nature feminists. What is needed is an integrative and transformative feminism that moves beyond the current debate among these competing feminisms. Such a feminism would: (1) unmask the interconnections between all systems of oppression; (2) acknowledge the diversity of women's experiences and the experiences of other oppressed groups; (3) reject the logic of domination and the patriarchal conceptual framework in order to prevent concerns for ecology from degenerating into white middle-class anxiety; (4) rethink what it is to be human, that is, to see ourselves as "both co-members of ecological community and yet different from other members of it"; (5) recast traditional ethics to underscore the importance of values such as care, reciprocity, and diversity; and (6) challenge the patriarchal bias in technology research and analysis and the use of science for the destruction of the earth (Warren 18-20).

#### **A Feminist Perspective must be Part of any Proposed Ecological Solutions**

Just as feminism must challenge all of patriarchy's dualisms, including the human/nature dichotomy, ecological solutions and environmental ethics must include a feminist perspective:

Otherwise, the ecological movement will fail to make the conceptual connections between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature (and to link these to other systems of oppression), and will risk utilizing strategies and implementing solutions which contribute to the continued subordination of women [and others] (Warren 8).

In particular, two issues in the ecological movement and environmental ethics need to be addressed in the context of eco-feminism: the status of hierarchy and dualism, and the place of feeling.

As already indicated, eco-feminism works at overcoming dualism and hierarchy. Much of current environmental ethics, however, attempts to establish hierarchies of value for ranking different parts of nature (Kheel 137). It does this by debating whether particular "rights" ought to be extended to certain classes of animals (Singer). This is another way of assigning rights to some and excluding them from others and of judging the value of one part as more or less than that of another. These judgments, then, operate within the same framework of dualistic assumptions. As a result, this debate merely moves the dualism, as it were; it does not abandon it. Human/nonhuman may no longer be the operative dualism; instead, sentient/non-sentient or some other replaces it.

Another way in which environmental ethics has perpetuated traditional dualist thought lies in its dependence on reason and its exclusion of feeling or emotion in dealing with nature. The dualism of reason/emotion is another dualism under attack by feminists. In this case environmental ethics has sought to determine by reason alone what beings have value and in what ranking and what rules ought to govern human interactions with nature (Kheel 141). This procedure is flawed according to eco-feminists since "the attempt to formulate universal, rational rules of conduct ignores the constantly changing nature of reality. It also neglects the emotional-instinctive or spontaneous component in each particular situation, for in the end, emotion cannot be contained by boundaries and rules" (Kheel 141).

Ethics must find a way to include feeling, but including feeling does not mean excluding reason. Again, the task is to overcome the exclusive dualism. Eco-feminism, then, involves a thoroughgoing analysis of the dualisms that structure patriarchal culture. In particular eco-feminists analyze the link between the oppression of women and of nature by focusing on the hierarchies established by mind/body, nature/culture, male/female, and human/nonhuman dualisms. The goal is to re-conceptualize these relationships in nonhierarchical, non-patriarchal ways. In this way, eco-feminists envision a new way of seeing the world and strive toward a new way of living in the world as co-members of the ecological community.

What eco-feminism lacks, however, is an analysis of what Ruether and Dodson Gray agreed was hierarchical or transcendent dualism, the dualism that they think undergirds the others. Eco-feminists, largely philosophers and social scientists, have not attended to the specifically theological dimensions of patriarchy. Meanwhile, feminist theologians and ethicists have focused primarily on the interrelationship of sexism, racism, and classism without sufficiently articulating or naming the interconnections between these forms of oppression and the oppression of nature. Yet the analysis of these critically important social justice questions would be strengthened when it is understood that the same dualistic assumptions are operative in each of these forms of oppression.

Furthermore, feminist theology needs to explore the relationship between human beings and God in light of those dualistic assumptions and the impact of the new way of seeing human beings those results from linking the oppression of nature with other forms of oppression. When re-conceptualizing the male/female dualism entails re-conceptualizing the human/nature relation because male/female is embedded in human/nature, as eco-feminists argue, then the human/divine relationship also needs reworking, since male/female is also embedded in human/divine. In other words, if feminist theology is serious in attempting to transform patriarchal dualisms, it must go further than reworking the dualistic imagery used to refer to God; it must discover how the images themselves

support a dualistic relationship between human beings and God with the same assumptions as the traditional male/female and human/nonhuman dualisms.

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