

## THE CREATIVE IMPACT OF FEMINISM ON BIOPOLITICS

### ***MARRIAGE OF ECOPHILOSOPHY AND FEMINISM - A RECIPE FOR A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT***

[Hilkka Pietila, M.Sc.](#)

Secretary General, UNA Finland  
Vice President WFUNA

*"All patriarchal culture, scholarship, institutions and history have reflected and amplified male experiencing, and then universalised it as if it were human experience". - Hazel Henderson*

The mythology of humankind is full of parables and expressions combining woman and nature, mother and earth, the fertility of woman and nature. The goddesses of fertility are always women. There are many names for the goddess of Earth, Nature and Fertility - the Universal Mother - Gaia, Astarte, Isis, Ceres, Diana, Venus, Ilmatar, also Lilith and Maria.

The indigenous American cultures held the Earth highly sacred as universal Mother. The Squeamish Chief Seattle from the West coast of Northern America once said this to the white man:

Teach your children what we have  
taught our children, that the Earth  
is our Mother, Whatever befalls the Earth  
befalls on the sons of the Earth.  
If men spit upon the ground,  
they spit upon themselves.

In 1979 Winona la Duke, a native American woman, brought a message to the people of Europe concerning the hazards of uranium mining. This message of the International Traditional Elders ended like this:

They tell us to farm the land - how dare you ask us  
to cut our mother's hair,  
They tell us to mine the land - how dare you ask us  
to level our mother's breast,  
They tell us to plough the land - how dare you to ask us  
to cut our mother's side.

A modern Finnish theatre director recently said in a television interview: "Woman holds the mystery of life. She has the keys to the secrets of life." The ancient belief still prevails!

#### **HOW DOES A WOMAN FEEL?**

What is the experience of women themselves? How would they define their relationship with Nature? Do we, women, associate ourselves with these ancient myths?

We can read something about the relations of women with Nature in the folklore of many nations, in traditions and also in the indigenous poetry, where women have expressed themselves.

It is said that women invented agriculture at the dawn of history when their men were out hunting and thus acquired a dominant position in the community. They also tamed the cubs of wild animals by feeding them with their own breasts. This was the beginning of animal husbandry. These inventions helped women to provide food for the family even when their men didn't bring any catch from fishing and hunting. Women invented the more reliable means for sustaining.

Already we see a relationship between women and nature which is co-operative, not only exploitative or plundering. It develops easily into a relationship of caring and nurturing, mutually giving and receiving. Women have also been collecting wood and water, gathering berries and flowers, herbs and plants for using them as medicine and dyes. At the same time Nature, trees, wild animals, plants and flowers have given

woman solace, experiences of beauty and harmony, and taught her the skills and know-how to use the products of nature for healing and magic.

Quite early it is women who have invented medicine by learning from the realities of life around and within themselves. They studied the effects of plants, herbs and whatever other extracts they had available. But these skills made them so powerful and uncontrollable that this kind of healing tradition was cruelly uprooted in the Middle Ages by burning the most advanced women as witches and heretics. This interrupted the development of natural healing and reduced medicine to merely biological and technological methods for centuries.

Women's own body already provides an excellent and ever-present bridge to nature. The menstrual cycle follows the stages of the moon, even fertility follows the rhythm of the seasons to some extent. Woman finds herself as part of the eternal cycle of birth, growth, maturation and death, it flows through her not outside her. In this way women experience nature, the process of life within themselves. It is a natural part of existence uniting all living things and it is nothing to fear, to suppress or even to control.

## WHAT DOES HISTORY APPROVE?

The Western contemporary science and philosophy have long roots of dualism from Plato and early fathers of the church to the authorities of the 19th- 20th century. It implies the dichotomy between physical - spiritual; body - mind; nature - culture; irrational - rational; emotional - intellectual; evil - good; object - subject; private - public etc. In common understanding, women and femininity are linked with the former and men and masculinity with the latter thus creating a deep dichotomy between man and woman. According to this kind of thinking women are seen as part of nature, associated with the physical world and thus submitted to the role of man, since the physical, material, is subjugated to the spiritual and intellectual. In this way the suppression of women and nature are linked together historically and ideologically.

According to the critique of the American feminist theologian, Rosemary Radford Ruether(\*), such dichotomising constitutes an ideology in the strong sense of the term. It creates a strong hierarchical structure which is reflected in the policies and practices of social institutions as well as in science. The hierarchical relationship between body and mind, physical and intellectual implies:

- that all physical and material (woman and nature) is ontologically and morally inferior to consciousness and spirit,
- that the tension between the body and mind is also related to the relationship between social classes and different sexes,
- that women and slaves are identified with physical world and inferiority, while the overclass male identifies with transcendental spirituality and power,
- that women (and slaves) are excluded from the spheres of religion, education and politics and subjugated to biological processes only,
- that the Nature is feminine; controlling it is identified with controlling women: raping it is symbolically raping women.

Concerning the relationship of men and women and their differences, man the subject, the one who defines and woman the one who is defined. "The essence of male ideology can be said to be contained precisely in this cultural relationship, where the woman is the one acted upon and defined by the male perception and "use", and her own self-definition and perspective are never heard or incorporated culturally. Women, as all oppressed people, live in a culture of silence, as objects, never subjects of the relationship."

According to the experience of many of us, contemporary women, this principle is still very alive. Women are confined to silence, even in the so-called progressive countries in this respect, like Finland and Sweden. It can be seen, for example, on the pages of every newspaper, where practically only the ruling men are interviewed and referred to, and in the list of references of any book written by men.

## DEFIANCE OF BODY - DEFIANCE OF LIFE

This kind of dichotomy leads to the interpretation that man represents the spirit, intellect - and as the image of God, the soul - and woman the body, the physical life. The basic human characteristics are divided between the sexes instead of being seen harmoniously in both sexes. (E.V.)

This schizophrenia in the prevailing concept of human being has led throughout the ages to fatal consequences for men themselves. Since maleness implied the domination of inferior things the body, nature and women, it developed, when being exercised to the extreme, into a flight from body, nature and woman. Male consciousness focused its energy primarily on this world-fleeing agenda for centuries, which developed its adorable heroes such as ascetics and hermits, who tried to rid themselves of the flesh, to sever the connections of mind and body thus achieving the qualifications for eternal spiritual life.

Rosemary Radford Ruether describes how this kind of thinking led to the total overturn of the facts of life when it was connected with the fear of mortality as an obsession of the Late-Antiquity. "All that sustains physical life - sex, eating, reproduction, even sleep - comes to be seen as sustaining the realm of 'death', against which a mental realm of consciousness has been abstracted as the realm of 'true life'. Women, as representatives of sexual reproduction and motherhood, are the bearers of death, from which male spirit must fall to 'light and life'."

In this thinking, women symbolised on the one hand the inferior despised elements of the male ego (masculinity = humanity) and on the other hand the origin of life, motherhood, creativity and thus divinity. (E.V.)

We can observe manifestations of the male fear or escape from their own body, their own physical being even in the everyday life around us. Men often know their physical functions very poorly and they damage their body directly by smoking, drinking or excessive physical strains or indirectly by tanking irrational risks in specifically male exercises like mountain climbing, motor racing etc. and ever by forcing themselves to overdo in their work.

Ruether parallels the techno-scientific progress-belief with the theological body-mind dualism, because they both aim to transcend the man (male) above nature and the material. This kind of thinking is the matrix of both patriarchal religion and society. But basically the issue is to deny one's own mortality, to escape the necessity of the coming-to-be-and-passing-away cycle.

Interestingly enough an American alternative economist and futurologist Hazel Henderson has independently come to the same conclusion, when she is discussing the industrial "machismo", "the need to compete with each other and the fearful need to control, dominate and "own" not only each other but women, children, plants and all of Mother Nature". She says that these unhealthy drives are rooted in the fear of death, the sense of alienation from the natural world.

"Any separate, egoistic consciousness, to the extent that it feels separated from all life, will fear its individual death as a final extinction, a total loss of meaning that must lead to existential anxiety... These same fears of death and loss of meaning led to the neurotic notion of scientific objectivity... We see it in the long saga of patriarchal literature, from the Greek myths of the hero and the hero's journey to the "angst" and alienation from Nature echoed from Hegel, Marx and the Frankfurt School to Herman Hesse, the existentialists and Sigmund Freud and his followers."

Rosemary Ruether calls this "the patriarchal self-deception", which according to its own logic leads to the suppression of those who are identified with Nature - like women - and to the destruction of the Earth. Paradoxically enough, the fear of death transforms itself into an ideology which unavoidably leads to destruction and death. In her view the patriarchal religion has lost its ground in modern society only ostensibly, in reality it appears in many new disguises. The identification of women with nature and sexism are the oldest and most essential forms of social suppression but not the only ones.

## **FEMINIST ETHICS - ECOLOGICAL ETHICS**

Rosemary Ruether is developing specific ecological ethics, which she also calls the "ecological-feminist theology of nature". This theology has to rethink

- the whole Western theological tradition of the hierarchical chain of being and chain of command, therefore it has to challenge:
- the hierarchy of human over non-human nature as a relationship of ontological and moral value,
- the right of the human to treat the non-human as private property and material wealth to be exploited,
- to unmask the structures of social domination, male over female, owner over owner that mediate this domination of non human nature,
- the model of hierarchy that starts with nonmaterial spirit (God) and continues down to nonspiritual "matter" as the most inferior, valueless and dominated point in the chain of command.

She points out that in the ecosystem the more complex forms of life are not the source and foundation of the less complex ones, just the opposite, they are radically dependent on all stages of life that go before them. The plant can happily carry out its processes of photosynthesis without human beings but we cannot exist without the photosynthesis of plants. The privilege of intelligence, then, is not to alienate and dominate the world without concern for the welfare of other forms of life, but it has the responsibility to become caretaker and cultivator of the whole ecological community upon which our own existence depends.

It is important to note that both ecophilosophers and feminist thinkers relate the social crisis with the ecological crisis. This point is emphasised by a Norwegian ecophilosopher Sigmund Kvaleoy and it is underlined by Ruether. She says: "The environmental crisis is basically insoluble as long as a system of social domination remains intact that allows the owners and decision-makers to maintain high profits for the few by passing on the costs to the many in the form of low wages, high prices, bad working conditions and toxic side effects of the techniques of extraction".

According to Ruether, women and nature go hand in hand in liberation too. Women are identified with nature and symbolised it in their own biology both in its primitive, mystical strength as well as objects of technical domination. Therefore "women must be spokesmen for a new humanity arising out of the reconciliation of spirit and body". They should see beyond their own liberation and reject the suppressive practices of masculine ethics and maintain and value their own feminine characteristics like nurturing, caring, communality etc.

"Such a revolution entails nothing less than a transformation of all the social structures of civilisation... It entails literally a global struggle to overthrow and transform the character of power structures... it's salvation myth will not be one of divination and flight from the body but of humanisation and reconciliation with the earth."

It is essential that the women's movement should not isolate itself from other movements of change - like the environmentalists, rejecters of nuclear power, peace movement, alternative life style movements etc. - but it should not assimilate either to the point that it would lose its genuine, authentic character. A horizontal, mutually considerate co-operation between the movements would be part of implementing and exercising a new kind of politics, which doesn't aim to dominate and suppress others.

## **WEAVING TOGETHER ECOPHILOSOPHY AND FEMINISM**

Both ecophilosophers and feminist thinkers are analysing the techno-industrial revolution, which is based on the emerge of the natural sciences from the 17th and 18th centuries. Such founding fathers of modern science as Francis Bacon, William Harvey, Rene Descartes, Thomas Hobbes and Isaac Newton are re-evaluated with sharp eyes in this process. They reconceptualised the reality as a machine rather than a living organism and thus created a new world view, which sanctioned the dominion of both nature and women. Only feminist thinkers, however, see the commonality of the consequences for both women and nature.

Hazel Henderson uses a very fitting parable on how ecophilosophy and eco-feminism - the term that she uses - could and should go together like the warp and the weft to make the fabric of liveable, viable life. However, so far the so-called ecophilosophers have not been interested in feminism and the women's movement. According to the references of their books most of them have hardly read anything that feminist thinkers and researchers have published. Maybe even they have associated women closely with nature, which does not articulate itself in writing or speaking.

The women's movement and the feminists have been interested in ecology for a long time. There are many women among early environmentalists.

Hazel Henderson is pondering the reasons why ecophilosophy and feminism have so far been developing almost totally apart from each other, though they document precisely the same insights. She thinks that "up to now there has been almost no communication between eco-philosophy and eco-feminism, because they have approached the same phenomena from different directions". Ecofeminists have arrived at their conclusions experientially - "feeling that in their bones" - and therefore often found these abstract, mathematical, rational patriarchal constructions of eco-philosophic thinking somewhat strange. Ecophilosophy is searching towards new insights mainly through theoretical, logical considerations in the male traditional manner.

Henderson expresses a crashing critique on the same techno-scientific transformation during the centuries which we have already discussed above. "In fact, Cartesian science's search for certainty, equilibrium, predictability and control is a good definition of death", she says.

She is exploring the phenomena which she calls paradoxes of today in terms of the global breakdown of the clearly unsustainable industrial order, with its competitive, expansionist, "macho", militaristic, patriarchal nation states.

"But if we are to prescribe for our almost terminal illness, we must dig deeply for our diagnoses. We can no longer skate around observing surface manifestations, such as those offered by economists: "unemployment"; "inflation"; "declining productivity"; "the need for national security"; "stopping communism"; "restoring the free market"; "more innovation" and "supply" to meet "demand", and all the rest of the psychotic language of alienation, fear and insecurity."

Hazel Henderson sees promising signs emerging "as a new planetary culture is struggling to be born, with ethics and politics more fitted for human survival in the rising Solar Age". (\*\*)

Today we see these alternatives emerging from the world's ethnic and indigenous peoples, from subsistence cultures and traditional wisdom: "from the world's women and from the rising female principle, whose nurturing energies can be seen in the new breed of gentlemen. They are throwing off the shackles of industrial "machismo", the need to compete with each other, and the fearful need to control, dominate and "own" not only each other, but women, children, animals, plants and all of Mother Nature."

Here she gives due credit also to the men who are bold enough to deviate from the prevailing political and economic culture and thus become able to transform themselves "from a chrysalis into a butterfly". She characterises the change which she sees taking place in the world today similar to the biological process when a chrysalis turns into a butterfly. Typical of this change is acceleration and inability to infer from any of the existing states of the system its future state.

Her optimism is also based on her belief that the two separate streams of eco-philosophy and eco-feminism are now beginning to approach

each other and thus giving hope of becoming parallel streams towards common goals.

"Both eco-philosophy and eco-feminism have shown capacity to deal with such dimensions of breakdown and breakthrough (as today). Their synthesis, together with insights from ecology and general systems theory, and the precentual philosophy shared by many of the spiritual traditions, may provide the ethics and the value systems for the Solar Age... This will produce a more honest science where the role and impact of the observer is clearly acknowledged as affecting the phenomena or experiment... Post-Cartesian science will be a science with reverence, gently descriptive and exploratory without the compulsion to intervene. It will produce a revolution in technology, so that we will think more carefully before intervening... we scan eco-systems for signs of redundant potential of places where natural ecosystem production can be augmented."

Henderson calls this type of view characteristic to both eco-philosophy and eco-feminism as "heterarchical" as opposed to hierarchy. It implies a New World Order which must be built on the basic principles of:

- the value of all human beings;
- the right to satisfaction of basic human needs (physical, psychological and metaphysical) of all human beings;
- equality of opportunity for self-development for all human beings;
- recognition that these principles and goals must be achieved within ecological tolerances of lands, seas, air, forests and the total carrying capacity of the biosphere;
- recognition that all these principles apply, with equal emphasis, to future generations of humans and their biospheric life-support-systems, and thus include the respect for all other life forms and the Earth itself.

Finally Henderson is contemplating whether we will face breakdown or breakthrough. She is of the opinion that stress is a tool of evolution and thus the growing awareness of the limits of resources, increasing environmental damage and other challenges are good news. "They are stressing us to grow up - to become all that we can be - to discover "the possible humans" that we are."

## **SISTERHOOD EMBRACES THE BROTHERS TOO**

It is often extremely difficult and problematic to discuss these kinds of basic issues without men feeling hurt and threatened. They seem to be so unused to the deviating and critical thinking from the women's side that it is difficult for them not to take it personally. It is, however, absolutely necessary to be able to enter into a genuine dialogue between men and women on these issues of the utmost concern for both of us, the issues of life and death of the whole of humanity.

Many feminist critics try to make it particularly clear that this kind of critical and innovative thinking is by no means directed against men in general. The American writer Marilyn French, among others, makes it explicitly clear that history has not been and is not the history of men and their deeds but the history of "power wielded by men" i.e. the story of those men who have had a lot of power in their hands whether it is political, religious, scientific, ideological etc. And she makes a strong point that both the majority of men and women in general "have been denied knowledge in their past, but for different reasons: women's history has been expunged in order to obliterate the record of female power: men's history has been censored in order to cloud the record of male powerlessness".

An altruistic humanity of many feminist thinkers is very well expressed in the definition of "Sisterhood" by the first and so far the only professor of feminist theology in Europe, Catharine Halckes from the Netherlands: "The concept of "brotherhood" has always been important in the Churches... If we now like to speak of "sisterhood", it is not only as a protest against it, as polarisation and apartheid: but it is a new symbol for those women who are in a process of growing awareness and for all women and men who, wherever and whoever, live in curtailment and non-freedom. Sisterhood is an alliance of women having common interests, showing an accepting, unconditional love and solidarity. It opposes the dual morality which condemns women and exonerates men, a superior power which crushes, a technology which dehumanises and depersonalises, sexual libertinism which makes woman again an object and sees her only as a body, the exploitation by the super-men and then the Capital, of slaves, blacks, the powerless, but also the rape of Mother Earth, of nature and the whole creation which is becoming unliveable and exhausted."

I have maintained that women are the largest alternative movement in the world, a hidden, subversive, invisible counterculture to this overt masterculture of our time, which has brought us to the brink of disaster. The feminine culture could provide an untapped source of tradition, values, skills and insights for the service of humanity to start to create a sustainable way of life and economy. This view is slowly gaining support if only from women so far.

Ariel Kay Salleh from Australia has pointed out "that if women's lived experiences were recognised as meaningful and were given legitimisation in our culture, it could provide an immediate "living" social basis for the alternative consciousness... The traditional feminine role runs counter to the exploitative technical rationality which is currently the requisite masculine norm. In place of the disdain that the feminine role received from all quarters, "the separate reality" of this role could well be taken seriously by ecologists and re-examined as a legitimate source of alternative values".

The foremost two obstacles to the utilisation of these untapped sources of the feminine culture are the following: First, most of the women themselves are not aware of the value and importance of the culture which they themselves represent consciously or unconsciously. Only after they have become aware of their womanhood and of intrinsic values of being a woman, will they be able to make their indigenous contribution towards the change in politics and culture. The second obstacle naturally is the attitude of men. Even the men subjugated by the patriarchal culture still have deeply ingrained attitudes and values of that culture in their minds and it means that a long process of male liberation is needed before they can rid themselves of their "masculine mystique" in order to meet feminine culture without prejudices.

Ariel Key Salleh is anyhow anticipating a new ally within the personality of men themselves and it is "the original androgynous naturally unity... the feminine aspects of men's own constitution" within the man himself. The men within whose personality this unity will start growing stronger are that "new breed of gentlemen, who are throwing off the shackles of industrial "machismo", the need to compete with each other and the fearful need to control dominate and "own" not only each other, but women, children, animals, plants and all of Mother Nature", which Hazel Henderson spoke about earlier. The same thought was expressed in the latest meeting of the Study Group of Women, Disarmament and Militarism of the International Peace Research Association when we said, that "the Woman most in need of liberation is the Woman hidden within each Man".

## REFERENCES

1. Elina Vuola: "Uusi nainen - Uusi maa". (New Woman - New Earth). M.A. thesis on the feminist theology of Rosemary Radford Ruether. University of Helsinki 1985.
2. Hazel Henderson: "The Warp and the Weft. The Coming Synthesis of Eco-Philosophy and Eco-Feminism". Development 1984:4. (Journal of SID, Rome)
3. Rosemary Radford Ruether: "Sexism and God-talk. Toward a feminist Theology". Boston 1983.
4. Catharine Halkes: "To a New Image of Man based on Feminist Theology". A lecture held in Groningen in an international meeting, 1977.
5. Ariel Kay Salleh: "Deeper than Deep Ecology: The Eco-Feminist Connection". Environmental Ethics Vol. 6.No.4 (1984)
6. Hilkka Pietila: " Women as an Alternative Culture Here and Now". Development 1984:4. (Journal of SID, Rome) (First published in Finnish 1980)
7. Hilkka Pietila: " Kvinnoperspektiv pa nuet och framtiden". Article in a book "Alternativen", edited by Friberg & Galtung. Stockholm 1986.
8. Hilkka Pietila: "Tomorrow begins today. Alternative development with women in the North". Paper for ECDA/ISIS Workshop in Forum 1985 Nairobi.

---

(\*) Concerning the analysis and synthesis of the thinking of Rosemary Radford Ruether I am deeply indebted to a young Finnish feminist theologian, Elina Vuola, for being allowed to draw from her M.A. thesis "Uusi nainen - uusi maa" (New Woman - New Earth) on Rosemary Radford Ruethers thinking and works. Her personal conclusion on R.R.R.'s thinking are signified with her initials E.V.

(\*\*) "Solar Age" is referring to the book "The Politics of the Solar Age: Alternatives to Economics" (New York 1981) by Hazel Henderson

---

**Hilkka M. Pietila** received her M.Sc. in Nutrition, from the University of Helsinki. She has been a member of the Executive Committee of WFUNA, a member of the Finnish National Commission for UNESCO, the International Foundation for Development Alternatives Council, the Association of Home Economists in Finland and is now vice-President of WFUNA. She has published articles in a great number of international conferences and for her feminist ideas and activities.