

Feminization of Nature: Rationalization of Subjugation

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This research is predominantly a literature review of ecofeminist works pulling from research on ecofeminism, the philosophical origins and imaginings of nature, and the divisive Anthropocene and accompanying extinction events. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of some ecofeminist arguments and introduce some key voices in ecofeminism. It is by no means exhaustive. In this paper, I will summarize and synthesize a variety of arguments detailing the initial conceptions of nature and humanity, the association of nature with femininity, and the consequences of such an association. I will compile and organize arguments for how a female nature came to be through Western philosophy and religion, and how the association further rationalized the subjugation of nature and femaleness. These arguments are oftentimes cyclical and build off of each other, so I have isolated key arguments to thematically walk through this phenomena. The primary arguments I will discuss are humanity being defined in opposition to nature, the initial Western conception of nature, the reconceptualization of nature during the Scientific Revolution, and how the perception of nature acts as an ethical and moral constraint.

Operational Definitions

I concede the multicultural approach to the enormous topic of ecofeminism and its correlates requires an infinite, intimate knowledge that I do not possess. To combat my personal, cultural bias, I have set operating definitions to clarify my perspective and will endeavor to draw on a number of voices.

I define culture as a set of shared attitudes, arts, social institutions and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group. I will be referring to a generalized conception of “culture” unless specifically stated in examples and references.

The relation of biological sex and gender expression will not be discussed, though I acknowledge that this most definitely plays a part in historical discussions. In this paper, female and its correlates - femaleness, femininity, and feminization - refers to traits regarded as characteristics of the biological female. Typically in past works female is equated to women. Women in this paper refers to all people that would identify as a woman and female relates to biological sex or stereotypically female (feminine) traits.

In this paper, I will not concern myself much with proving the pan-cultural fact of women's subjugation nor the abuse of nature as many of these authors do. It jumps off this stance in an attempt to explain how the association rationalizes this subjugation; a negative feedback loop that results in the domination and oppression of over half the human population and the Earth itself.

Humanity defined in opposition to Nature

Culture is an integral aspect of this argument in the culturally-informed values that guide society's behavior, world views, and legislation. Pan-cultural values then have global effects in its reach. In *Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?*, cultural anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner analyzes the nature-culture connection and how it relates to women's oppression. She defines culture as a "notion of human consciousness... by means of which humanity attempts to assert control over nature" (Ortner, 72). Many of humanity's defining characteristics spawn from this separation from and domination of nature. Culture then is a purely human affair, mutually exclusive from nature and further requiring the inferiorization of the natural and those nonconforming to particular defining characteristics. This conceptualization creates a diverse, landslide effect.

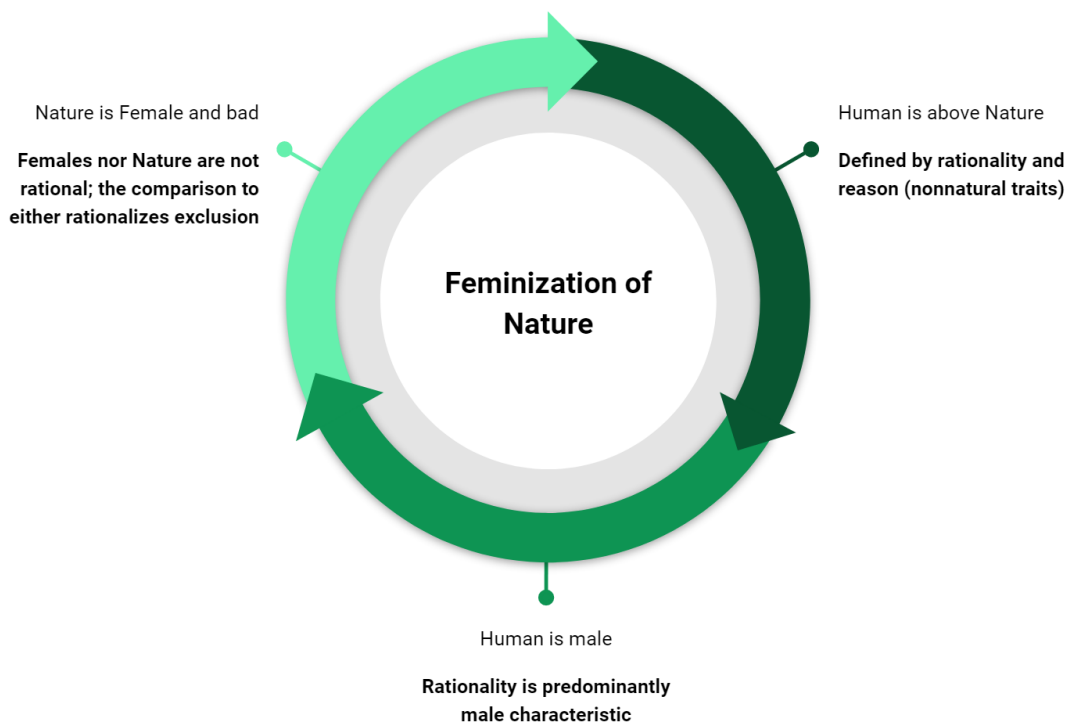
The transition from nature to culture is even cited for some as the start date for the Anthropocene, a proposed geological epoch in Earth's history as defined by humanity's significant impact on the environment. Much debate surrounds the conception of a new epoch, definitions of significance, and even the possible start-date of this era. Ashley Dawson, an author specializing in postcolonial cultural studies, writes in *Extinction: A Radical History* about some possible start dates, one of which is the creation of language, from that, the start of human culture. He refers to it as a shift "from biological evolution through natural selection to cultural evolution," and notes the

attempted emancipation as a cause for planetary environmental destruction (Dawson, 21).

In addition to opposing natural connection, humanities (preferable) defining characteristics are steeped in their superiority over the proverbial “other” and these characteristics are inherently masculine coded. The environmental philosopher Val Plumwood argues that the normative conception of proper humanity as a positive attribute rationalizes the inferiorization of nonnormative identities, peoples, or other nature. Rationality as this base characteristic sets a masculine framework that forever prioritizes masculine traits. For Western culture, Aristotle and his ilk did much of the defining philosophical groundwork. While I will touch on the initial conception later, here it is important to note the language of passivity and activity and their association with femaleness and maleness respectively. Ecofeminist philosopher and scientific historian Carolyn Merchant noted Aristotle's argument for male rule through this passive-active conception: “as the soul rules the body, so reason and deliberation, characteristics of men, should rule the appetites supposedly predominant in women” (Merchant, 13). Simply, male reason trumps female passivity, thus awarding them authority. Rationality and reason are listed as tenets of the human experience and serve as the symbol of human superiority over nature (Plumwood, Merchant).

Taking it step-by-step, nature is made inferior through humanity's prioritization of logic and reason (which nature does not have). These are predominantly male-characteristics that elevate an individual, and thus femininity is closer to nature and worthy of subjugation.

- 1) There exists a pan-cultural identification of humanity as superior to nature.
- 2) Human characteristics are predominantly male-coded, making females less human.
- 3) Females are thus closer to nature than males.
- 4) Females are inferior.



“The dignity of humanity, like that of masculinity, is maintained by contrast with an excluded inferiorised class” (Plumwood, 26). The defining characteristic of humanity is then the exclusion of the inhuman and nonmale.

Initial Conception of Nature: The Goddess Natura

Western philosophers strike again
by writing things down and
not getting burned at the stake.

Now have defined humanity as Not-Nature, it is vital to understand how we define nature and what connotations are formed. This definition is constantly evolving and infinitely old, but as is true for the majority of the sciences and philosophy, Western imaginings stem from Ancient Greece. George D. Economou studied philosophical and literary backgrounds and traditions of nature's image in *The Goddess Natura in Medieval Literature*, predominantly focused on Western works. Most Western conceptions of nature have religious roots, perceiving the Earth and its creatures and materials as placed there by a God. The progressive prioritization of reason and rationality through Ancient Greece (and later the scientific revolution) turned a harmonious, equitable relationship into a competition. Humanity was special, chosen by God (of varying religions) to have reason and command of nature. Interestingly enough, this ability to reason (and thus take advantage of nature) is often read as a "gift" from Nature with the intent of making humans superior. "Reason, the *summum bonum* of human nature, is the key to his blessedness, to his fulfillment in the Aristotelian sense of *telos* or end" (Economou, 29). This is yet another example of humans' superiority, the ability to develop as an individual and a species. Tackling the rhetorical and normative

use of he/him pronouns is a larger concern within male-dominated philosophical writings. Though the usage here is noteworthy, I will not be addressing it directly here.

Nature's relation to God has infinite explanations varying from God as nature itself to a separate entity; one example being the Goddess Natura, an intelligent being that cares for the Earth serving directly under God. Natura is the one that would care for and direct mankind providing resources and the means (i.e. rationality) to develop (Economou). Whatever form nature takes, it is defined by its inferiority and what it can do for humans.

Organic to Machine - Reconceptualizing Nature

Investigations into the natural world attempting to explain matter created several definitions of nature in Ancient Greece: the genesis of growing things, a universal determinant of order, and a source of movement serving as the bridge between soul and matter (Economou, 24). Movement held a special role in explaining nature, *physis*, primarily in directing movement towards a perfect, Platonic, final state. The progression from Neoplatonism to vitalism theories took the once distinguished matter and movement and formed them together (Economou).

Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* argues that the scientific revolution and its proponents, namely Francis Bacon, removed the organic traditions in favor of dead nature. Traditional views had the universe as an intelligent organism: redefining nature as dead and passive shifted this cultural and ethical consideration of the nonhuman world (Merchant, 1990).

The scientific revolution mechanized the world view, to steal Merchant's parlance. The growth of Francis Bacon's naturalist science and mechanistic world view utilized a patriarchal, free-market framework that called for nature's alteration as a form of human progress, an effort that benefited all of humanity (Merchant, 1990, 80). Bacon played an informative role in reenvisioning nature as a human right, a tool to use and abuse (Merchant). He maintained the female-male, nature-culture, passive-active argument, setting it at the core of patriarchal, "objective" science that equated progress to domination (Dawson, 51). Human improvement necessitates extracting the "secrets" of nature to return to paradise, a dominion over nature, lost because of Eve's disobedience (Merchant, 2013). This reconceptualization furthered nature's oppression as inorganic and unfeeling and extended humanity's defining characteristics as male dominators.

Moral Constraints of Dominion - Madonna-Whore Archetype

The humanization/organicness of nature once served as an ethical, normative constraint on humanity's manipulation of nature but the mechanized world view pushed by Baconian scientists in the Scientific Revolution threw out the old conception and restraints.

Now that nature is unalive (not just dead, but never having been alive at all), humans are free to take advantage and manipulate the earth to their own use. The Mother Earth created order and cared for humanity and this anthropomorphization limited abuse (Merchant, 29). While this perception curbed some abusive behaviors,

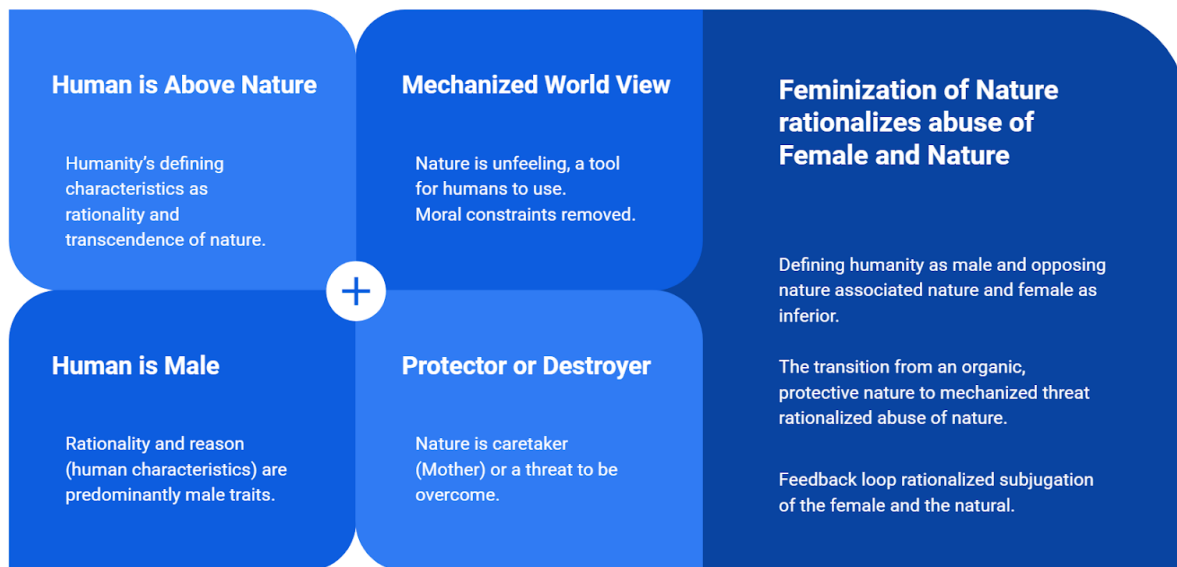
Merchant argues that this continued the masculine perception of nature as “mother and bride whose primary functions was to comfort, nurture, and provide for the wellbeing of the male” (Merchant, 9). Rationalizing the destruction of the Mother then necessitated the mechanized world view and even more than neutralizing nature, it was made evil. In addition to gaining resources, dominion over nature was also required for safety and restoring order by positing a dichotomy of destruction and caretaker. Killing Nature opened the doors for disorder and the Destructive Forces of Nature.

This extreme dichotomy of nature perfectly parallels the Madonna-Whore archetype, the polarized perception of women who fall into 1 of 2 categories: the perfect women (mother, innocent) or promiscuous and seductive whores. Nature falls into a similar dichotomy of savior and provider or destructive force that human’s need to overcome.

Conclusion:

While it may be reductive, the feminization of nature can be categorized into a few key events (or time periods) and ideas. The foundation lies in defining humanity in opposition to nature based on rationality and reason. Making these fundamentally human traits stereotypically male then debases females and starts the association on negative characteristics. Associations with either implicate inferiority. Nature as a tool for humanity’s unchecked abuse is implied, but the common perception of nature as God or Mother Earth set ethical constraints, as one wouldn’t hurt their mother or their God. Mechanizing the world view in the scientific revolution removed the organic

component of nature (and thus those moral constraints) and altered the Mother perception. Instead of entirely removing that particular anthropomorphism, it added a counterweight to the mother of a destroyer, a threat that needs to be overcome. Nature is then two things: a tool and provider for humans or natural disasters that threaten human life and must be stopped.



This topic is absolutely massive and requires considerations from a number of fields. To keep this project manageable, I noted lines of inquiry that I plan to continue with in later works, some of which I noted in the body of this paper. Some of these are direct questions and others entire fields of study.

- How does the relationship of biological sex and gender expression play into ecofeminism?
- Impact of he/him pronoun usage in scientific and philosophical writing

- Question of scientific objectivity: does it exist, what value-judgements are allowed, who defines objective? Is explicit subjectivity better than implicit subjectivity?
- Concern of separation of religion and science. How to define spiritual and religious in relation to nature and the study of nature.
 - Should science be objective and separated from religion?

In the interest of scope, I removed much of my arguments into the philosophy of science and how “objectivity” is defined. In my personal design work, a careful line is drawn between subjectivity (which lends itself to creativity) and objectivity (to make a product accessible). I plan to continue with this work in terms of objectivity’s male-coded definition to address accessibility for all users during design phases. I will continue to study women in predominantly male STEM fields to isolate exclusionary practices and habits and aim to redesign these spaces to further support underrepresented groups.

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