

A Study of Women and Sustainability: Starhawk's *The Fifth Sacred Thing*

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Abstract: Looking through an Eco-feministic lens at Starhawk's *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (1993), this essay tries to take on women's efficiency in sustainable development. Ecofeminism depicts insights of ecology and feminism to show the ideologies behind the oppressions of women and nature is the same. Dualistic mind sets, as the main standpoint of ecofeminism, cause hierarchal fashion between entities and create imbalance power relationships which give the right to men to dominate nature, animals, and women. This paper which is a qualitative library-based study, analyses Starhawk's *The Fifth Sacred Thing* from ecofeminism perspective. It focuses on women's role in achieving sustainability on earth, which demands using water sustainably, utilizing renewable energy, and protecting the biodiversity of lands. In this Utopian/Dystopian novel, natural elements such as air, water, fire, and earth that sustain all life are considered sacred in the utopian North which its management and defence groups' members are mostly women. On the contrary, the dystopian South which is governing by a totalitarian regime is experiencing many irreversible problems through unsustainable development. This study shows the privileged position of women in attempting to reach sustainability on earth, to concern about the natural environment, and to maintain the endurance, diversity, and productivity of nature.

Key Word: Ecofeminism, dualism, utopia, dystopia, sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

This Eco-feministic study of Starhawk's *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (1993), provides some visions and strategies for a sustainable way of life by the help of women, who had been reached to awareness and became more conscious about their environment. The novel is the story of a black woman who lives in the egalitarian community of the utopian city "The North", and her travel as a healer to the dystopian "The South" city which are under the control of military regime. It is through this travel which the possibility is given to the readers to compare the situation of the North with the South, and see Starhawk's solutions for environmental problems to maintain the equilibrium between humans and nature and reach to sustainable development.

In this qualitative library-based research, the main standpoints of Ecofeminism is under focus in order to find some keys to avoid the upcoming crises that are predicted by Starhawk. Oppression of women, devastation of nature, and the ways that these two are connected, is taken under consideration in this article. The main argument in ecofeminism is that ecological crisis and

women oppression, both are the results of the assumption called "Dualistic" thinking (Warren, 1991). So, the only way to prevent those crises to happen is to change such this kind of thinking. As Eco-feminists believe differences between entities, such as men and women, mind and body, humans and the rest of nature, are related to one another in a hierarchal fashion, in dualistic thinking. In this way, the patriarchal Western philosophy by creating imbalanced power relationships, associates women with the downside of each emergent pairing. Thus, women are likened to be more akin to nature than culture, to body rather than to mind, to the primitive rather than to the civilized. Men, from their superior position, can appropriate and use nature, animals, and women (Warren, 1991). This historical denigration of nature and women can be challenged only by post patriarchal and radical alternatives for reconstituting life on Earth.

Starhawk (June 17, 1951 –) is an ecofeminist who gradually became one of the most respected voices in modern earth-based spirituality. She is also well-known as a global justice activist and organizer. Her writings which are about twelve books including the classics *The Spiral Dance* (1979), the ecotopian novel *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (1993), and her latest novel *The Empowerment Manual: A Guide for Collaborative Groups* (2011) are mostly about spiritual practice for observation of nature. As mentioned, in this study Starhawk's *The Fifth Sacred Thing* is under analysis through eco-feministic theories. This novel is about a community that is conscientious, compassionate, and have respect for integrity of nonhuman animals, nature and natural elements such as air, water, fire, and earth. Outside this community Resource scarcity leads to poverty, illness, drug addiction, violence, and death. Among all these crises, Starhawk provides strategies for sustainable development through the perspectives of her main characters Maya, Madrone, and Bird.

The ninety-eight year old Maya, her granddaughter who is a healer and her grandson Bird let the readers find out how it is possible to reach sustainability by changing human's attitudes toward nature. Describing their community's strategies in using water sustainably, utilizing renewable energy, and protecting the biodiversity of lands they maintain the road to sustainability.

Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is a philosophy and movement born in 1970s from the union of feminism and ecology and the belief that the social mentality that leads to the domination and oppression of women is directly connected to the social mentality that leads to the abuse of the natural environment. As Jim Cheney (1987) believes ecofeminism is "a sensibility, an intimation, that feminist concerns run parallel to, are born up with, or, perhaps are one with concern for a natural world which has been subjected to much the same abuse and ambivalent behaviour as has women". Karren Warren (1990) defines ecofeminism as "the position that there are important connections – historical, experiential, symbolic, and theoretical – between the domination of women and the domination of nature, and understanding of which is crucial to both feminism and environmental

ethics.” It is clear that ecofeminism is the position that ecology and feminism are fundamentally related.

Definition of Eco-feminism as a literary and cultural criticism can be quoted from Noël Sturgeon’s *Eco-feminist Natures*: “Ecofeminism is a movement that makes connections between environmentalists 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.”(1997: 23). According to ecofeminism, in western culture, patriarchal domination against women, and nature degradation both are rooted from an ideology called ‘Dualism’ (Warren, 1991). As a worldview, dualism creates hierarchies and imbalanced power relationships by splitting mind from body, spirit from matter, male from female, culture from nature , giving one side of the equation more value and greater worth over the other. So, a commitment to challenging all forms of oppression by creating an interconnected community absent of patriarchal or other forms of hierarchy is the main concern of ecofeminism. Eco-feminists argue that the dualistic conception of the relationship between nature and culture and the belief that human culture is superior to non-human nature justifies human’s domination and mistreatment of the rest of nature. So, the variety of ecology which ecofeminism draw upon is that the mistreatment of non-human nature is harmful both to humans and to non-human nature and in order to be ended, the underlying nature-culture dichotomy must be eliminated. The exploitation of the earth will continue till the complete destruction of nature, unless the dominant anthropocentric belief that the world is created for man change and a more mutually respectful relationship between humans and the rest of nature build (Mayer, 1994).

Dualism

The origins of the patriarchal mindset, as eco-feminists believes is based on "Dualism". The term dualism for the first time coined to denote co-eternal binary opposition to indicate a system which has two fundamental kinds or categories of things or principles. As a worldview, dualism creates imbalanced power relationships by splitting mind from body, spirit from matter, male from female, culture from nature, giving one side of the equation more value and greater worth over the other. Hawkin defines dualism as “a systematic construction of mutually exclusive oppressor and oppressed identities” (Hawkins 159). Dualism contrasts with monism, which is the theory that there is only one fundamental kind, category of thing or principle; and, rather less commonly, with pluralism, which is the view that there are many kinds or categories (Howard, 2012).

Val Plumwood (1994) in her book, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, argues that “Dualism” is not based on difference or hierarchy. She sets out it as the following:

A dualism, I have argued, results from a certain kind of denied dependency on a subordinated other. This relationship of denied dependency determines a certain kind of logical structure, in

which the denial and the relation of domination/subordination shape the identity of both the relata. (p. 41)

Plumwood (1994) argued that dualism have five characteristic features that allows the superior master to colonize the subordinated "Other". Minimization or denial is recognized as the first feature which is denying the importance and value of the contributions of the 'other'. Making inessential the reality of the 'other', such as when in culture/nature dualism human denies the necessity of nature to the existence and survival of humankind. The second feature is radical separation or hyperseparation, which emphasizes the differences between the master and the 'other' both in kind and value and eliminates the shared qualities.

The incorporation of relational definition is the third feature of 'Dualism'. It claims that the master is the 'norm' and the other is defined by lack. The abnormal 'Other', in this way cannot define independently of the master. The value of the 'Other' is related to qualities it possesses if they can incorporate into the master's needs and desires. Fourth feature is instrumentalism or objectification. In this case the other is only recognizes as the means of the master's needs. The other is an object which must serve the master and fulfil its needs. The final feature of dualism which Plumwood articulates is homogenization. Homogenization, or stereotyping here means to see the oppressed class as "uniform and stereotypic, stripped of all individuality or within-class difference. The result of this feature is reinforcement and naturalization of differences between the master and the "other" (Plumwood, 1994).

So, dualism by artificially dividing entities in half gives one side of the equation greater worth over the "Other" which is then demonized and discriminated against. Eco-feminists argue that men give rise to that "other" as a result of these separations and view the world in terms of a self-contained self and a separate 'other' that is the world (Plumwood, 1994). In the "dominant/subordinate duality pattern" all the others sets the following hierarchy of value: man, woman, children, animals, and nature. This analytic mind-set encourages the notion that the natural world is simply a mechanical system that humans can exploit.

Women and Sustainability

Generally, sustainability is the endurance of systems and processes. In ecology, it refers to the degree of diversity and productivity of biological systems. Also, in environmental science, sustainability is the quality of not being harmful to the environment or depleting natural resources, and thus supporting long-term ecological balance. The ecological foundations for sustainable development are consist of fundamental human needs such as the availability and quality of air, water, food, and shelter (Stallones, 2013). From a feminist critical analysis, an ethical perspective that is based on solidarity, reciprocity, and non-hierarchal and non-violence relationships within human societies and between humans, non-humans, and ecosystems are the necessary conditions of a feminist sustainability (Macgregor, 1999).

In the twenty-first century which population and urban growth are making a lot of problems, the main concerns of ecofeminism is over sustainability. It is predicted that the global population will grow to nine billion in mid-century and about 70 percent of that population will be urban (United Nations, 2006). These rapid growths are increasing the pressures on ecology, regarding resource depletion, biodiversity loss, and climate change. Eco-feminists encourage others to make responsible decisions that will reduce the negative impacts of human's life on the ecosystems. Reducing the amount of waste in all producing processes, using less fossil fuels energy and replacing renewable energies such as solar, wind, rain, tides, and waves; recycling, reducing air and water pollutions, and lower greenhouse gas emissions all are important steps toward a sustainable life (Merchant, 1996).

In order to reach to sustainable development of environment, every individual and government must consider the long term impacts of his/her actions on nature and stop to causing damage to areas of environment. Since women have cultural and symbolic connection with nature, and they along with their children are the first victims of environmental degradations, eco-feminists persuade women to be the advocators of environmental sustainability. Some of the common environmental concerns which can be reduced by advocators of sustainability are: damaging of rainforests and woodlands, polluting and over-fishing of oceans and lakes, polluting the atmosphere through the burning of fossil fuels, and damaging prime agricultural and cultivated land through the use of unsustainable farming practices (Ponting, 2014).

Discussion and Conclusion

The Fifth Sacred Thing by Starhawk, is about two opposed societies in the year of 2048. In the utopian North, multicultural diverse people are living in peace and harmony with nature. As the novel's heroine Madrone, explains "We say that there are four sacred thing, [earth, air, fire, and water], and the fifth is spirit. And when you live the right relation to the four, you gain the power to contact the fifth." (p.300), they are participating actively in environmental protection in order to reach sustainability. In contrast, in the dystopian South which is controlling by an authoritarian regime, scarce natural resources especially water are under exploitation. In the South, sexism, racism, and the oppression of lower class exist as a result of power hierarchy.

Starhawk depicts utopian/dystopian literature in order to highlight the two completely different future which humanity can face based on their relationship with each other and with nature. Ecological utopia which emerged in 1970s is against technological exploitation of nature, environmental degradation, and extinction of species. Embracing an alternative style of live, utopian community emphasize the interconnectedness of human and nature. Dystopia in contrast to utopia is a community or society that is in some important way undesirable or frightening. It is characterized by totalitarian government, oppression, disease, overcrowding, resource scarcity, and environmental disaster.

The population in the utopian North which its main managers and consultants are women, does not suffer from environmental pollution and has enough to drink and eat. In her travel, Madrone who is a healer from the North describes their lives for the South's women in this way: "Everybody has enough food and water.

Everybody has a place to live and care when they're sick...we share and we have enough. Because everybody works, and works hard" (p.272). The streams and gardens can be seen in every street of the green city and every house is equipped with a small garden plot. So, regardless to people's money and power, everyone access to food. In this women leading society no one starves or is homeless.

The relation between the habitants of the North and nature is based on respect and sustainability. They do not dominate nature for their benefits; instead they nurture and protect the environment. Madreone narrates that, "The four sacred things are earth, air, fire, and water. Nobody can own them or profit from them, and it's our responsibility to heal them, that's the basis of our policy and our economy" (p.272). By valuing nature, people of the North attempt to compensate the damages which their ancestors caused to the environment over the years. They plant thousands of trees every year, walk or use bicycles and public transportations, and use renewable energy sources such as solar and wind to produce electricity.

It is important to know that this utopian North is not a primitive one as Madreone in her explanation about the North technology which is reevaluated based according to the Five Criteria of True Wealth, says:

"Usefulness. Sustainability – meaning that it must generate or save as much energy as it consumes and doesn't depend on non-renewable resources. Beauty. Healing for the earth, or at least not beaming destructive. Nurturing for the spirit. Private automobiles failed, for example. They are certainly useful and many people maintain that they can be beautiful, but they weren't sustainable. Computers based on our new crystal passed, and the Net we created also provides communication, news, accounting, lots of things. We have also made advances in solar and wind power and small-scale agriculture. Some industries disappeared – there are no vidsets or widescreens because couldn't support the infrastructure they needed. Others had to change. We print a lot of books, but we make paper from hemsps, not from trees." (p. 275)

In this way, these people try to gain sustainable environment, agriculture, energy, and transportation in order to ensure the diversity and productivity of their nature.

In the dystopian South, in complete contrast, the nature and natural resources is exploited. The totalitarian regime – Stewards – which oppressed all women, people of colour, and the poor people, also destructs natural environment. They deforest all jungles for their industries, and in order to sustain in power lots of wastes are made in nuclear power and modern military equipment. The poisoned wastes caused water and air pollution and as a result people are suffering from different disease, especially cancer. In fact, cancer is so common that everybody has to take pills, named "boosters".

Women are so oppressed in this unjust society, that even the educated and skilful women are deprived from their right to continue their occupations. Beth, one of the South's woman who was a doctor in the past, explains that the government arrested them and reaped them;

"They dressed us in prison clothes and locked us in separate cells, were we remain for a week. When our layer finally reached us, he advised us to sign a confession, take the Oath of Repudiation, recant. I took his advice. To this day I can't say if I am sorry or glad. They staged a huge public ceremony, a thousand women professionals paraded before the vidcams to parrot their oath and display their humiliation. They lit a huge bonfire, downtown it was ... and we each walked up and placed our licenses and diplomas in the fire. So, we survived. Mary refused and I never saw her again. I try not to speculate on her end." (p.325)

As it is obvious, in this dystopian city domination of women and exploitation of nature are interweaved and lead to unsustainable development.

In order to have a better comparison between the amount of sustainable development in the North which is free from men/women dichotomy, and the sustainability of the South in which women even are deprived from their primitive rights, it will be helpful to consider the following table.

Table 1. Comparison of cases in the North and South city regarding sustainable development

Instances from Novel	saving lives	Environmental protection	Saving Energy	Agriculture
Utopian North	1. Madreone tries to save the life of a fevered pregnant woman. (P.4) 2. Madreone rescues Katy that were arrested by Stewards. (p.391) 3. Lily, as the main member of defence council, she refuses perpetuating violence and the great waste – war. (p.285)	1.Madreone explains: "... [we try] healing of the earth, or at least not being destructive...we make papers from hemp, not from trees." (p.275)	1.Madreone explains: "we use bicycles and horses...and we have good public transport." (p.249) 2."...We've also made advances in solar and wind power..." (p. 275)	1.Madreone explains: "...We plant a garden, we create an ecosystem that can sustain itself..." (p.296)
Dystopian South	1.Morton explains: "we're ... all born back when the old reactor was still running ...what the hell they [the South government] cared? Of course, you don't see the ones who died of cancer." (p. 92)	1.Johnnycake explains about deforestation: "But there is something Panasia wants bad, always has. [It is] wood." (p.104)	1.Greta in her explanation about South's war waste says: "They will bring up trucks, they are well armed with laser..." (p.232)	1.Hijohn explains: "Down there, it's nothing but poison. There's grown men down there that have never seen a tree. But some like it." (p.206)

Source: Starhawk's *The Fifth Sacred Thing*(1993)

Through this utopian/dystopian comparison, the women's role is highlighted in reaching to sustainable development. In the North women as healers try to improve the condition of both nature and themselves. It is women who as nurturers through local agriculture provide food for their families. Nine elderly women who are the main members of the city's defence council insist on nonviolence resistance when Stewards invade the green city. Preventing war, they take a huge step toward sustainability. As Karin (2008) explains the North is "a utopia where women are leading societies but are doing so with the consent of men." (Karin, 2008: 22). But in the dystopian South which women are marginalized and exploited by the authoritarian, patriarchal government environmental devastation and unsustainability is completely obvious.

Conclusion

The world Starhawk describes in her dystopian part of novel, the South, is resulted from the way we are treating each other and the nature, nowadays. Environmental degradation and social inequality are the

obvious facts of our current time that if do not change will lead us to those crises which predicted by Starhawk in her novel – *The Fifth Sacred Thing*(1993). So, if we prefer that utopian North for our future generation, we have no other choice except putting aside domination of vulnerable groups and nature.

As ecofeminists claim, women’s oppression is linked to environment degradation. More specifically, the dualistic relationship between humans and the non-human environment and between men and women in patriarchal society results in the view of nature and women as the inferior. Based on ecofeminism’s believe that the natural world has been subjected to much the same abuse and ambivalent behaviour as has women, those who are in a privileged position to aid in reaching sustainability in earth, are women. A good example of this, is the women of the utopian North, who in providing food and nourishment of their families do sustainable agriculture, in protecting their lives and environment prevent war and military waste, and in order to save the depleting natural resources, use them sustainably. In the societies which women are deprived from their rights and oppressed, Environmental Sustainability is a farfetched aim.

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