Naturalized Woman and Feminized Nature

KATE SOPER*

WOMAN AS ‘NATURE’

[THE] ASSOCIATION of femininity with naturality represents a more specific instance of the mind–body dualism brought to conceptions of nature, since it goes together with the assumption that the female, in virtue of her role in reproduction, is a more corporeal being than the male. If we ask, that is, what accounts for this coding of nature as feminine – which is deeply entrenched in Western thought, but has also been said by anthropologists to be crosscultural and well-nigh universal1 – then the answer, it would seem, lies in the double association of women with reproductive activities and of these in turn with nature. As feminists from de Beauvoir onwards have argued, it is woman’s biology, or more precisely the dominance of it in her life as a consequence of her role in procreation, that has been responsible for her allocation to the side of nature, and hence for her being subject to the devaluation and de-historization of the natural relative to the cultural and its ‘productivity’. The female, de Beauvoir tells us, is ‘more enslaved to the species than the male, her animality is more manifest’.2 Others have pointed out that in virtue of their role in the gratification of physiological needs, reproductive activities are viewed as directly linked with the human body, and hence as natural. As Olivia Harris puts it, ‘since the human body is ideologically presented as a natural given, outside history, it is easy to slide into treating domestic labour as a natural activity, also outside the scope of historical analysis’.

In the argument of Sherry Ortner, woman’s ‘natural’ association with the domestic context (motivated by her natural lactation functions) tends to compound her potential for being viewed as closer to nature because of the animal-like nature of children, and because of the infra-social connotation of the domestic group as against the rest of society. Yet at the same time, her socializing and cooking functions within the domestic context show her to be a powerful agent of the

NATURALIZED WOMAN AND FREMIZENDE NATUR

SYMBOLIC ORDER. This does not mean that the neutral is the dominion to be

practiced in a democracy, but rather that the political order of the natural woman.

The term "natural woman" refers to a woman who, by virtue of her biological

gender, is endowed with certain innate qualities and characteristics that are

inherently different from those of men. These qualities include physical

attributes such as pregnancy, lactation, and the ability to menstruate, as well as

certain psychological traits that are generally associated with female

behavior. The term "natural woman" is often used in opposition to the concept of

the "natural man," which refers to a man who is thought to possess certain

innate qualities that are distinct from those of women.

The idea of the natural woman is based on the assumption that women are

innately different from men and that their differences are biologically

determined. This idea has been used to justify a range of social and political

practices, including gender segregation, discrimination, and the subordination

of women to men.

The concept of the natural woman is often used to support traditional

gender roles and stereotypes. For example, the idea that women are more

emotional than men is often attributed to the "natural woman," and this idea is

used to justify the expectation that women should be more nurturing and

supportive than men.

The concept of the natural woman is also used to support the idea that

women are naturally subordinate to men. This idea is based on the assumption

that women are biologically inferior to men and that they are therefore

capable of being ruled by men.

The idea of the natural woman is a powerful and enduring concept that has

been used to justify a range of social and political practices. However, it is

important to recognize that the concept of the natural woman is based on

false assumptions and that it is not possible to accurately describe women in

such a way that takes into account their diverse and complex experiences.

Instead, it is important to recognize that women are individuals with unique

lives, identities, and experiences, and that they should be treated with

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between the production of human beings and the production of armaments, or between the different kinds of work and activity involved when human beings transform natural materials. Feminists, for example, have pointed to the ways in which any economic theory (that of Marx, for example) that conceives of 'production' as essentially a matter of producing objects or commodities will tend to overlook the productivity of domestic labour and skew perceptions of its contribution accordingly. The adequacy of the 'object' model of production for thinking about agricultural production has also been justly questioned. Equally there is no denying that insofar as human reproduction is a biological process, the sexes are differently involved in it, and have tended to assume distinctive social roles as a result of that. The point is only that a simple mapping of the culture–nature opposition onto these various differences obscures rather than assists the discriminations necessary to thinking clearly about them.

**NATURE AS ‘WOMAN’**

If women have been devalued and denied cultural participation through their naturalization, the downgrading of nature has equally been perpetuated through its representation as 'female'. Looked at from this optic, too, the symbolization testifies to considerable confusion of thought, and its very complexity indicates some profound ambiguities about 'man's' place within and relations to the natural world.

Nature has been represented as a woman in two rather differing senses: 'she' is identified with the body of laws, principles and processes that is the object of scientific scrutiny and experimentation. But 'she' is also nature conceived as spatial territory, as the land or earth which is tamed and tilled in agriculture (and with this we may associate a tendency to feminize nature viewed simply as landscape – trees, woodland, hills, rivers, streams, etc. are frequently personified as female or figure in similes comparing them to parts of the female body). In both these conceptions, nature is allegorized as either a powerful maternal force, the womb of all human production, or as the site of sexual enticement and ultimate seduction. Nature is both the generative source, but also the potential spouse of science, to be wooed, won, and if necessary forced to submit to intercourse. The Aristotelian philosophy, claimed Bacon, in arguing for an experimental science based on sensory observation, has 'left Nature herself untouched and inviolate'; those working under its influence had done no more than 'catch and grasp' at her, when the point was 'to seize and detain her'; and the image of nature as the object of the eventually 'fully carnal' knowing of science is frequently encountered in Enlightenment thinking and famously pictured in Louis Ernest Barrias's statue of *La Nature devoilant devant la science*, a copy of which stood in the Paris Medical Faculty in the nineteenth century.

Nature as physical territory is also presented as a source of erotic delight, and sometimes of overwhelming provocation to her masculine voyeur-violator. Describing the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers, Thomas Jefferson writes:
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for a mother–child unity, this unity itself being a figure of a desired harmony and ‘at oneness’ of man and nature.\textsuperscript{11}

To pursue this idea further is to suggest that there is a parallel mapping of the regrettable but inevitable mother–child separation onto the relation to nature as inevitable object of ‘phallic’ intervention. The Oedipal drama, whereby the child acquires masculine subjectivity in ‘giving up’ incestuous desires for the mother in exchange for eventual possession of another female, is here inscribed in the ‘body’ of nature itself as both protective mother to be shielded from ravishment, and (as Thomas Morton described New England) the ‘faire virgin, longing to be sped / And meete her lover in a Nuptiall bed.’\textsuperscript{12} If viewed in this light, nature’s retributions on those who would force her to yield her secrets or submit to ‘husbandry’ can readily appear to be maternal punishments; or the desire to be overwhelmed by nature indicate a remorse felt for her violation.

Femininized nature is not therefore emblematic simply of mastered nature, but also of regrets and guilts over the mastering itself; of nostalgias felt for what is lost or defiled in the very act of possession; and of the emasculating fears inspired by her awesome resistance to seduction.

\textbf{NOTES}

5 Ibid., pp. 85–6.
7 Ibid., p. 68.
12 Ibid., p. 12.