

Post Human Feminists' View on 'Women and Nature' in comparison with Ecstatic Naturalism¹

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue how posthuman feminists such as Rosi Braidotti deconstruct the relationship between women and nature which has been connected in many ways. The reason of the deconstruction for Braidotti is that connection between women and nature in many ways lead another type of anthropocentrism. Meanwhile the parties which relate women and nature seek the improvement of women and nature because they, for example, Ecofeminists see that there is close relationship between the degradation of women and that of nature. In this way I introduce mainly two types of views on the re-

<http://dx.doi.org/10.26590/madang..28.201712.30>

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1 This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2016K2A9A2A19938729)

lationship between women and nature. After investigating post human feminists' management of the connection between women and nature, I will move to Ecstatic naturalism's assumptions about 'women and nature' which in some ways connects to Ecofeminism's perspective. When Robert Corrington explains 'serving process' and chora, it seems like he ties nurturing (and giving birth) with nature. This assumption does not fit well with his suggestion that 'nature nurturing' cannot be fully expressed in human language and sign because nature exceeds human gender identity and traits. In this way, I would like to delicately argue that in what ways 'nature' can be connected or disconnected with women in academic discourses of posthuman feminisms and Ecstatic naturalism.

- **Keywords**

Women and Nature, Post-human Feminism, Rosi Braidotti, Ecstatic Naturalism, Essentialism

1. Introduction

Is it necessary to disconnect 'women and nature' to free 'nature' from anthropocentric point of view? Or the link between them makes both women and nature prosperous? In this paper, I would like to discuss how posthuman feminists such as Rosi Braidotti and Elizabeth Grosz deconstruct the relationship between women and nature which has been connected in many ways in the discussion of ecofeminism. After introducing post human feminists' investigation of nature, I will move to Ecstatic naturalism's assumptions about 'women and nature' when Robert Corrington ties nurturing (and giving birth) with nature in his discussion of 'selving process' and chora. In this way, I would like to delicately argue that in what ways 'nature' can be connected or disconnected with women in academic discourses of posthuman feminisms and Ecstatic naturalism.

2. Post human feminists' liberating 'women' from nature (and vice versa)

There have been so many arguments about the relationship between 'women and nature.' The most well-known theory would be 'Ecofeminism.' Their most well-known concern is that women and nature has been degraded in similar ways. For example, women and nature haven been considered less intellectual and less civilized and even premature compared to 'civilized Western men.' Ecofeminism connects the oppression of women, animals and nature as symbolically or politically similar.

Vandana Shiva, for example, criticizes Western culture, colonialism

and capitalism. And she suggests that these ideologies have produced a dualistic view that put “man” and “nature” separately. Therefore, “men” are permitted to destroy and control ‘nature.’ The same dualistic thinking sustains the dichotomous gender system that enables male domination and it equates women with nature. Ecofeminists stresses a relationship between patriarchy and environmental destruction. For them, the oppression of women and ecological disaster goes hand in hand.

In the first place, many ecofeminists are eager to accept a “natural” link between nature and women for their reproductive capacities. It produces essentialism which assumes a common essence shared by all women. However, ecofeminists who are more concerned with political and practical issues refused to suppose an essence shared by nature and all women.

In 1990s, several case studies had been published and they emphasized livelihood issues and field researches. Their works emphasized specificity and complexity of women’s relationship to nature in different contexts. When they consider the relationship, they question the historical understanding of globalization and colonization. For example, issues of land and nature of India cannot be understood without analysis of British colonialism.

Another key institutional issue brought by eco-feminists is the way in which marriage tends to mediate women’s rights to natural resources. Women in resettlement areas gain access to resettlement land mainly through marriage. They are vulnerable to losing their access to land, communal wood lands through widowhood and divorce. Through this livelihood example, it is known that women’s relationship to natural resources are shaped by social system that give women

secondary rights to nature, and men primary rights.

Using 'space' as a lens through which to view social relationship can help see patterns of gender power dynamics. However, it is dangerous to simply equate space and gender. It is not simply a case of mapping which areas belong to women and which areas belong to men. Hence while a spatial map of the nature is marked by patterns of women's benefits, these patterns do not represent a firm demarcation between "male space" and "female space".²

Feminist political ecology reads gender as a "meaning system" which is produced not only by cultural and social institutions but also by natural resources. At the same time, nature is not supposed to be approached as human use such as land and wood but as part of total social system shaping human life. Among ecofeminists, there have been some attempts to free 'nature' from human understanding and emphasize human embeddedness in nature because human evolve as part of nature. In this way, they try to overcome dualism and essentialism. Plumwood, for example, sees dualism as oppressive because all the oppressed class is regarded as the same, without singularity or in-class differences.³

I would like to suggest that it is possible to stop the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women without a natural link between them. Among ecofeminists, there are some movements who assume a subject outside the narrow anthropocentric understanding.

This trend which destabilizes the anthropocentric understanding of a subjectivity, however, is more central to post-human feminists such

2 Allison Goebel, "Women and Sustainability: what kind of theory do we need?," in *Canadian Woman Studies* 23, No.1 (2003): 79-80.

3 Ibid., 81.

as Rosi Braidotti and Elizabeth Grosz. They attempt to overcome nature-culture, nature-human and women-men dichotomy. Human men are reinforced 'culture' side over the 'nature-women' side. For this reason, post humanism is concerned with deconstructing our ontological understanding of nature, culture and matter. Braidotti introduces her nomadic thought as a "materialist approach to philosophy that rests on monistic vision of matter in opposition to dichotomous and dualistic ways of thought"⁴ 'the nomadic self' works to overthrow the oppositional dualism by becoming the binarily posited other.

While essentialist ecofeminists praise female embodiment and reproductive ability because they resemble natural cycles, post-human feminists emphasize "corporeality" because it makes human realize themselves as part of nature (or non-human being). Rosi Braidotti's nomadic account of the "becoming" embraces the human body as part of post-human being. Nomadic self can become an animal, a woman, and minorities. Braidotti deconstructs the concept of 'embodiment' in the sense that every being becomes itself because of some specificities proper to its species, its gender or its race. She explains "a nomadic becoming -woman starts from the recognition of the dissymmetry between the sexes and the emphasis on female subjectivity as the starting point for the process of redefining subjectivity."⁵ In so doing, the nomadic becoming woman not only identify herself with nature but also with powerless beings. For Braidotti, women can be linked to nature because they share their corporeality with nature not because they have some reproductive capability. Braidotti sees humans (not just

4 Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti* (New York : Columbia University Press), 3.

5 Ibid., 41.

women) have bodies and “the body is a surface of intensities and an affective field in interaction with others.”⁶

Post human feminists do not put women in any special place in relation to nature. The reason is because by connecting women to nature, it provides the feminization of nature and naturalization of women. It makes us think that ecosystems and human beings are all connected. This assumption makes the dichotomy of women vs. men and culture vs. nature intact. By doing so, ironically, the connection of human beings (women) and nature make nature stuck in anthropocentric framework. Post-humanism is concerned about the interaction of matter and technology and culture and nature. That interaction, therefore, challenges our notion of subjectivity.

For Braidotti, woman is not an essential subject which has a static and coherent characters. Rather she is “a subject- in- process, a mutant, the other of the Other...cast in female morphology who has already undergone essential metamorphosis.”⁷ The dichotomies of women/ men, and sensible/ reasonable are in some ways embedded in feminism as the result of European phallogocentric identity. Traditional separation between ‘artificial and natural’ ‘feminine and masculine’ are all products of anthropocentric power dynamics. For example, we define a disabled woman ‘a cyborg’, because she wears robot leg. However, we do not call a woman who has had plastic surgery ‘a cyborg’ because we assume that the surgery is not for a disability. Likewise, we keep the definition of “who (normal) woman is” so strong that the dualism of ‘disabled and abled’ remains unchallenged. How-

6 Ibid., 50.

7 Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphosis: Towards A Materialists Theory of Becoming* (Malden, MA: Polity press, 2002), 12.

ever, “the boundaries between the categories of the natural and cultural” and normal and abnormal “have been displaced and to large extent blurred”⁸ as technological progresses goes on and extended.

By blurring the boundaries between human and nonhuman, post-human feminists reconceive ‘humans’ as animals, materials and others. The displacement of human definition challenges “who woman is” and “what nature is.” If women and nature are linked in static ways, this link captures both women and nature in anthropocentric characters of rationality.

Braidotti argues that ‘a hybrid, multi-layered’ subjectivity can be “the others of the Same...the phallogocentric master-code.”⁹ If we keep using the sameness and difference in Hegelian ways, we are supposed to be stuck in the logic of the Same and the Master. The supposition that women and nature are linked because they are all the oppressed of the European male subjectivity cannot deconstruct the chain of reversals.

3. ‘Women and Nature’ in Ecstatic Naturalism

Ecstatic Naturalism is a kind of ‘new metaphysics’ which connects itself with naturalism. Robert Corrington is influenced by Leibniz, Spinoza, and Hegel and American philosophers such as Charles Pierce and Justus Buchler. In Ecstatic Naturalism, Corrington reveals that the world is a natural totality. It has some assumption that “human process is but one process among innumerable others, even if it shares many features, via analogy or proportion, with the rest of

8 Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 3.

9 Braidotti, *Metamorphosis*, 13.

nature.”¹⁰

Nature, for Robert Corrington, should not be defined human concepts and languages. “Nature naturing” provides the transcendence of human being which is not bound to human orders. For “horizons have their own natural history and forms of embeddedness, transcendence, in many times, happens “against embodied horizons of the self.”¹¹ The transcendence which Corrington focuses on, have some creativity to free the subjectivity which is bound to semiotic closure. Nature naturing, according to Corrington, provides the transcendence of human being which is not bound to human orders.

This kind of hesitance against human language in speaking of subjectivity formation, can also be applied to human identity formation such as gender and race. This is where my argument can be made. Ecstatic naturalism’s idea about signs as ‘nature natured’ can help to question what sign can be used to ask who woman is. There is no such a thing as ‘essential and representative woman’ in talking about the complexity of gender, race and class.

We articulate ourselves with some signs and this kind of articulations happen as horizontal systems. However, these kinds of horizons cannot fully reveal human reality. As far as they are expressed in semiotic forms, the horizons are limited to finitude. They are all small parts of infinite, ongoing, and open varieties of “nature naturing.”

In his explanation of human embeddedness in nature, Corrington focuses on how ‘nature naturing’ surpasses human order. As a part of natural order, human semiosis symbolizes so much little part of na-

10 Robert Corrington, *Ecstatic Naturalism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 9.

11 Robert Corrington, *Nature and Spirit* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), 66.

ture. All orders stay fully small portion of nature which they emerge.¹² Although Corrington keep this resistance against languages and signs, there are some remaining linguistic link which stereotypes both women and nature. We can see some link between 'women and nature' in the explanation of 'birth trauma.'

If we consider that psychologists such as Freud, Jung and Otto Rank built their theory from their specific worldview which assume women are like 'nature' because they keep all lives in their wombs and give birth, can we say this assumption is free from gender bias and gender roles? They had some dualism that women and men are somehow different and can be clearly distinguished.

When Rank says that "the mother goddess could be everything, the world soul, world mind, world development, world pleasure, world pain,"¹³ I think of Elizabeth Grosz saying, "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess" because for her there is no specific relation between women and nature. Post-human feminists believe that "critically revitalized conceptions of nature"¹⁴ will make us open to understand 'who woman is' as well as 'who man is'

Corrington suggests that "there is strong connection between the mother, whether Great or biological, to the potencies of nature nurturing."¹⁵ Reading this one seems to be reminded of the similarity between 'nurturing mother' and 'nature nurturing.' It might be right to say that all beings have 'birth trauma.' By overcoming it, every being

12 Roger A. Badham "Windows on the ecstatic Reflections on Robert Corrington's Naturalism" in *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 82, no. 3-4 (1999), 361.

13 Corrington, *Deep Pantheism*, 32.

14 Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 38.

15 Corrington, *Deep Pantheism*, 36.

might be growing and become mature. However, I am curious about the way we become the part of nature (or nature naturing). For me it is not necessary to symbolize the process of human growing as if a weary child becomes somehow harmonized with maternal nature.

Quoting Kristeva who explains chora as “something nourishing and maternal”, Corrington shows that “the maternal is the incarnate spirit, which is itself the originating self-effacing source of power and meaning. All signs hunger for the incarnation, that is, for the maternal.”¹⁶

Corrington suggests that “the human psyche is not an order of orders, only orders with elusive contours combined with co-present knowable features found through a combination of ordinal phenomenology and semiotics.”¹⁷ However, in his explanation on ‘serving process’ and the functions of the Great mother in it, Corrington does not question elusive contours, unnecessary combination between mother and women. When it is said that “there is strong connection between the mother ... to the potencies of nature naturing.”¹⁸ This kind of connection make us re-imagine the transcendence as female not as male and patriarchal. And it reclaims femininity as a force more respectful and powerful of nature because of its connection to ‘giving birth’ However, this kind of symbolization also lead us to think that “women are supposed to be nurturing.” If we question this essential connection between women and nature from post human feminists it might be said that feminization of nature and naturalization of women is too anthropocentric. The reality of nature should be beyond human concepts of ‘subjectivity’ such as ‘who woman is’ and ‘who Asian is.

16 Corrington, *Ecstatic Naturalism*, 203.

17 Corrington, *Deep Pantheism*, 28.

18 Ibid.

Otherwise, nature could be represented and essentialized according to anthropocentric understanding of 'human being.'

We also see that in Ecstatic Naturalism there is a continuous caution that sings and languages are not perfect. "for pantheism, ... nothingness is the prior of all priors..." Nothingness is "the enveloping that enables all that is manifest." Nothingness cannot be defined as categorical terms but it is "the Same as the Encompassing"¹⁹ Picturing 'nature naturing as nothingness, Corrington leads us to the Transcendence which outrages any categories such as gender, race and so on. However, as I examined before, there are some essential imagery such as 'maternal, mother and nurturing. Therefore, somehow, I feel like in Ecstatic Naturalism, the divine is featured as feminine Transcendence.

Unlike posthuman feminists, Ecstatic Naturalism has tendency to like and connect 'women and nature' in the signs and imagery. It co-exists with the cautions that signs and images should be used carefully because they have their own limits.

4. Conclusion : A theological suggestion

Going back to the question that I raise in introduction, it is not easy to hold one's hand. In the first place, reclaiming and respecting feminine principle might lead us to respect women and nature together. I believe Ecstatic naturalism belongs to this position. If we imagine women and nature in diverse traits then they will not be trapped in essentialized representation. On the other hand, like post human feminists, deconstructing both 'what nature is' and 'who woman is' seem

¹⁹ Corrington, *Deep Pantheism*, 103.

to be more promising because they are themselves active, transforming and fluid. By insisting on 'agency' and 'zoe' they recast nature (and women) as a variety of different life forces which interacts with each other.

The divine, nature and women are supposed to be posited as mystery in order not to put them as 'other' of 'subjectivity.' They are embodied being immersed in their own habitats and systems. For this reason, Braidotti prefers the terms 'agency' and 'zoe' to 'subjectivity' and 'bios.' Braidotti suggests that we must rethink 'life' and 'human subjectivity' and decenter them from humanity. Shifting to life as zoe means to see life not that of only humans but also of all life forces.

Both sides, however, have their own limits. If women and nature are connected and essentialized, this view cannot go beyond anthropocentrism. Post human feminists can be criticized because of their neutralization of human inequity such racism and sexual violence. There are still so many human problems so it seems too early to get rid of 'humanity' and womanhood.'

If we apply this kind of deconstruction of 'who woman is' and 'what nature is' to theology (feminist theology), I think negative theology can help to build some productive theological debates.

Elizabeth Johnson is the one who challenges literal images of patriarchal masculine God and deconstruct it with many diverse images including female images. She suggests that traditional theology has featured God as monolithic, judgmental and dictating one has been idolatry because God is the one who exists beyond human language and prejudices. In this way she tries to deconstruct the connection between women and nature (nurturing and caring) and projects women who are involved in diverse activities and identities such as

preacher and transformers.

Negative theology's use of language such as 'paradox' and diverse traits can help us see that there is no essential and stereotyped entities of 'women' and 'nature'. For this reason, women and nature cannot be limited and essentialized. Rather they are put on the circle of 'unfinished' infinity.

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Received 2017. 10. 30.	Revised 2017. 12. 08.	Accepted 2017. 12. 13.
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