



Talking Conservation

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Is Nature Female?

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*On behalf of Sedgfield
Ratepayers Association.*

The simple answer would be yes, because we refer to Nature as *Mother Nature*, and the Earth as *Mother Earth*.

Lord Byron wrote:
*But mighty Nature bounds as
from her birth,
The sun is in the heavens, and
life on earth,
Flowers in the valley,
splendour in the sunbeam,
Health on the gale, and
freshness in the stream.*

But why would nature be genderised?

Nature is often genderised because societies have historically linked women with the natural world, portraying it as nurturing, moral, graceful, kind, and beautiful yet subordinate, which perhaps justified their exploitation. This association persists today in philosophy, literature, and environmental discourse, though feminist and ecological thinkers both challenge it.

Nature was thus seen as the embodiment of all the characteristics that women possess and there are frequent references to this in literature, especially poetry. Nature was also feminised in mythology, folklore and in early as well as modern literature and art, reinforcing associations of fertility, nurturing, and meekness.

Women are also associated with Mother Earth because so many aspects of nature are 'born' from the earth. Further, ancient and medieval thought equated women with nature and men with culture, positioning culture as superior. This contrast justified male dominance over both women and the environment.

Men and women were put across as different in terms of their characteristics. Men were seen as hard-working, industrious, rational, assertive, independent, and proud. None of these are easily connected with nature.

But what if nature was masculine?

Would the world be different if nature had historically been considered masculine, and treated with the same respect bestowed upon men, as seen throughout history? Is there a possibility that the femininity of nature is a cause for climate change? Historically mankind has clearly exploited nature and continues to do so today. Would this have happened if nature were instead viewed as masculine, and thus associated with adjectives which demand respect such as strong and domineering, independent and proud?

A study done by Liu et al. from the Pennsylvania State University {Journal of Environmental Psychology, (Vol. 61, 2019)} found that men can be reluctant to perform environmentally-friendly responsibilities, such as recycling or using reusable bags, as they refer to these behaviours as gendered. Notably, a high proportion of men in the study also indicated that "if people think it's important to be viewed as heterosexual, they will opt out of gender nonconforming behaviours in order to avoid any associated stigma."

This study and others concluded that "toxic masculinity, coupled with an archaic brand of small-minded homophobia, might actually be contributing to the destruction of the planet." Furthermore, both women and men in the study associated nature more with women, and the women-nature association induced pro-environmental intention and

behaviour.

According to Lui, some researchers have supposed that humanising nature as a woman would prevent some people's pro-environmental intention and behaviour while others have found that it might help people develop their desire to protect the environment. Ecofeminist researchers [assume] that similar treatment of women and the natural environment results from an overarching patriarchal society which manifests itself as "domination of men over women".

Why It Matters Today

It can be argued that shifting from viewing the Earth as a living organism to a resource enabling machine, facilitated the exploitation of both women and nature. The woman-nature association defines both women and nature as special and in need of protection. However, it also portrays nature as being similar to women in that it is subordinate to humans. There is now, however, a strong theoretical critique that the environment should not be treated simply as a resource to be used for human welfare and that the natural world has a moral standing, not simply as an accessory to human well-being.

The environmental problems we face today have been caused directly or indirectly by our presence and our behaviour. Environmental scientists realise that there are no quick fixes and that only through understanding and changing human behaviour can there be any hope for a world fit to live in. Equally important is the realisation that without the recognition of the natural processes and laws that govern the life sustaining processes of the earth, there is no hope that any change in human behaviours or policies will have any remedial effects