



THE
RECOVERY
OF *love*

PAPER SIX

*Voices of Women:
Feminism and More*

SEPTEMBER 2021

A Series of Discussion Papers by

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I hope you enjoyed the story in Paper 5 and I wonder what you thought the ending was. But talking of the Divine Feminine and the Divine Masculine, and of the mythic threefold Woman and Man, can leave us still with feelings of separation and, possibly, opposition, and it leaves us without an answer to the final question set out in *Love and the Divine Feminine*:

Is it useful to work with notions of ‘the feminine’ and ‘the masculine’ or do these notions create harmful divisions and cloud our understanding? And what would we be able to say about a discourse that was un-gendered, but which spoke of qualities to be found in all of us?

How then might we begin to work toward an ungendered discourse, and what might it say?



To do this work, we must question and challenge those modes of thought that insist on separation and division, and, of course, one such challenge, primarily concerned with matters of gender, comes from feminism. As an old man born into patriarchy and therefore undoubtedly shaped by it, I hesitate to speak of this voice, but I know that it is of the utmost importance. To deny it, would be to deny part of who we all are, and part of who I have become.

I asked my question about an ungendered discourse because I knew that gender prejudice was something that has been, and still is, a matter of great concern for women, and I wanted to hear their voice. However, until I began to look more closely, I did not know that, within feminism, there has been, and still is, a deep and long debate about the nature of this prejudice and how to challenge it, with many variations of view. Much of the debate has centred around the matter of has been termed ‘essentialism’, which is said to describe the troublesome view that we must take for granted that there are inherent, and somewhat fixed, qualities or characteristics of being a woman. As one writer has put it,

essentialism is the view that:

...there are properties essential to women, in that any woman must necessarily have those properties to be a woman at all.¹

In the 1970s and 1980s, many leading feminists rejected this view, and claimed that women could not be defined as a single category. One particular contribution to this debate came from Judith Butler, in her book *Gender Trouble*,² which was published in 1990. Observing the arguments amongst feminists about what it meant to be a woman, she questioned all fixed identities such as masculine/feminine or straight/gay, showing that 'sex', 'sexuality' and 'gender' are not the same thing, and that notions of 'gender' are very much socially constructed. If, for example, I were to follow her example, I would say that I am biologically male, have a preference for heterosexual relationships, but am fluid in terms of my gender, having a mixture of qualities that might otherwise be seen as masculine or feminine.

Later, in the 1990s, many feminists came to challenge ideas of anti-essentialism, since this was thought to limit the political possibility of women speaking as a distinct, disadvantaged and oppressed social group.³ Then, in 2004, this point of view was itself challenged by Alison Stone, in a paper in which she explored the arguments for and against 'essentialism'. Finding all of the earlier propositions to be problematic, she proposed her own idea of what she called 'genealogy', which suggested that whilst women were "a group with a distinctive, and distinctively oppressive, history,"⁴ they lacked any common properties that constituted them all as women.⁵ In this way, her 'genealogy' reconceived women as a determinate group "without reverting to the descriptive essentialist claim that all women share a common social position or mode of experience."⁶

Reconceiving women, and feminism, in this way, she said:

...provides a way for women to identify women as a definite social group without falsely attributing to them any common characteristics that constitute them as women.⁷

And she went on to say:

Thus although women do not share any common characteristics, they are defined as a group by their participation in this history... [And] despite their lack of common characteristics, women can still exist as a determinate group, susceptible to collective mobilisation.⁸

This notion of women being defined by a shared history of oppression, may go some way to help us understand another element of contemporary feminism, which is the way in which women have increasingly seen themselves as part of a shared suffering. This is expressed in the notion of ‘intersectionality’ in which women see themselves as part of a wider, and diverse, marginalised community, which also includes those who are racially and sexually marginalised. The term ‘intersectional feminism’ was first used in 1989 by an American woman, and civil rights activist, Kimberlie Crenshaw, and in a recent interview in *Time* magazine she said that it was:

... a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant status. What’s often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts.⁹

So, now we have not only a feminism defined by the history of women’s oppression, but a feminism that sees itself coming together with all other forms of marginalisation, a community of people who are oppressed simply for being who they are.

This is a complex story of the ways in which one group of people, in this case women, have tried to express their opposition to an old damaging and failing hegemony of persistent prejudice and ignorance; and how, through their own exploration of their differences, they have come to see themselves as part of a wider community of those who have also been, and are, oppressed. This

tells us much about the broad and dominant reach of patriarchy, and yet how, even in its failing, it persists because it is so deeply embedded in our consciousness. This domination has prevented any voice other than its own from being heard, and, as we have already seen, its regimes of dominance are still found in politics, religion, education, commerce and healthcare. Indeed, the dominance remains so prevalent that we may hardly notice it, but just assume that this is how things are.

Feminists are amongst those (including me) who find such a proposition utterly unacceptable. Now they are aligned with all who suffer, and this reinforces the feminist proposition that whilst there are many forms of oppression, they all have a root cause founded in the base qualities of patriarchy: dominance, selfishness, divisiveness and control. In looking forwards we must assume that feminism will seek the removal of all these oppressions. The National Organisation for Women has suggested that this would include: understanding that patriarchy is harmful to everyone; that all gender identities and sexualities should be respected and acknowledged; that all genders and races should be treated equally; and that all people should be treated with respect.¹⁰

Whilst patriarchy has been, and still is, a dominant language, we must surely expect that as a growing number of women begin to be heard what is said will change. If they challenge the established patriarchy with a new voice, and if this voice is their own and not one distorted by patriarchy, then dialogue will change. If, at the same time, this means that all of those who have been marginalised are also able to speak and be heard, then this, too, will change what is said and heard, and a new discourse will arise. Another aspect of ourselves, men and women alike, will be voiced and this will, perhaps, begin to shape the future. This new language has not yet taken hold, but if, as seems at least possible, there is an aspect of our humanity that has been suppressed and is now to be expressed and listened to and honoured, nothing can be the same. None of us can be, will be, the same as we have been, and are.

In terms of the question that I asked about an 'ungendered discourse', one of the problems of feminism is sometimes said to be that in identifying itself as being a women's movement it points to the very division it contests, even if this division is somewhat

removed in the more recent feminist focus on a single oppressed community, which includes men and women. In any event, the debate, and the struggle that goes with it, does show how difficult it is to tackle prejudice with words already framed and defined by the oppressor.

This is where Judith Butler's work is of great help, since it raises the necessity to speak of what is normal and what is queer, or rather of what is said to be normal and queer.¹¹ This is important because, by implication, it also speaks of what is possible and what is not. As she puts in the 1999 Preface to *Gender Trouble*:

...no political revolution is possible without a radical shift in one's notion of the possible and the real.¹²



Whilst I regard the work of feminists as being of the utmost importance, it seems to me likely that within their discussions and proposals there may be no place for my exploration of the Divine Feminine, since this might well be regarded as being caught in arcane perceptions, and as failing to address the contemporary and systemic nature of patriarchy. Indeed, this must be so, since even to speak of 'the feminine', even the Divine Feminine, would perhaps be regarded as slipping back into the rejected 'essentialism'. However, there are many other expressions of 'the feminine', by women, who may or may not classify themselves as feminist, but who are most certainly challenging the way things are. I have chosen to have a look at four: Starhawk's *The Fifth Sacred Thing*,¹³ Annie March's *Butterfly's Children*,¹⁴ Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*,¹⁵ and Genevieve Boast's and Lorna Howarth's *The Soulistic Journey*.¹⁶ Each of these offers a view of another possible future, the first three set in the distant future.

The website of the American woman called Starhawk describes her as a practitioner of permaculture and "Earth-based spirituality",¹⁷ and her book, *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, first published in 1993, describes a world divided in two. In the Northlands,

there is a non-violent society who care for the Earth. Sexuality is fluid and abundant, but without prejudice and without traditional constraints. Couples, men and women alike, become close and sometimes exclusive, but only by consent and without domination. The lives of the people are centred around a right relationship with Four Sacred Things: air, fire, water and earth. It is said that none of these can be owned since they are given by Nature, and so they are shared. In the Southlands there is a tyrannical and violent society governed by the Stewards. Prophetically, since it was written over thirty years ago, the story tells of a virus that is deliberately spread by the Stewards, who also manufacture, limit and control the antidote, breeding men to be soldiers and women to be whores. The time comes when the Northlands are threatened by the armies of the Southlands, but the Northlands' people defend themselves without the use of weapon, again and again speaking the following words to their enemies: "There is a place for you at our table."

In the Northlands, women and men together govern and heal, and it is the older women who have influence. The 'old crone' Maya speaks:

This moon brings a time of hope and danger: fire season. We watch the dry hills anxiously, knowing that the rains are weeks or months away. Those of us who are old have seen the fire destroy our drought-baked cities and smoke eclipse the sun. We've seen rich croplands shrivel into glass-hard deserts, and the earth itself collapse on its emptied water table. We have seen diseases claim our children and our lovers and our neighbours. We know it can happen again.¹⁸

In 2021, we know it has. All these things, fire and drought and pandemic are happening in our time.

In the story, Maya continues:

We hope for harvest, we pray for rain, but nothing is certain. We say the harvest will only be abundant if the crops are shared, that the rains will not come unless water is conserved and shared and respected.¹⁹

In the Northlands, each house has its water cistern and the sharing of water is governed by a Water Council.

We believe we can continue to live and thrive only if we care for one another. This is the age of the Reaper, when we inherit five thousand years of postponed results, the fruits of our callousness toward the earth and toward other human beings. But at last we have come to understand we are part of the earth, part of the air, the fire, and the water, as we are part of one another.²⁰

And surely, that is what we are doing, living with “the fruits of our callousness toward the earth and toward one another.”

In *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, in this woman’s voice, the answer to the suffering is living with Nature, communal sharing, gender fluidity and non-violence. Generosity and courage. And the matter of non-violence is also explored in Annie March’s *Butterfly’s Children*, where she imagines a future world in which endemic male violence is no longer accepted as just being inevitable. It is diagnosed as ‘Rebound Syndrome’, to be treated as an illness, an addiction, to be controlled by medication and social governance. In her notes, at the beginning of the book, the author explains Rebound Syndrome (RS) as follows

The origins of RS, named for the way violence (enacted, or in extreme cases intended), fatally rebounds on the perpetrator and causes death by endocrine meltdown, continue to baffle virologists. The virus is latent in all humans, yet unrelated to any known...pathogens. There is passionate speculation and furious scoffing over the possibility of an extra-terrestrial source.

RS continues to flare up sporadically across all cultures and populations except for the First Inhabitants..., a peaceable people among whom morbidity and mortality from RS is zero. Immunity from RS is extremely rare.

Research on the genetic and epigenetic consequences of RS is still short-term and inconclusive. Survivors – 0.05 per cent – are intensively studied and rehabilitated. Some are

confined as a matter of public safety. Some choose to live in enclaves, such as the self-governing, self-supporting prison island of Quarm in the northern Deep and Dancing Ocean, whose culture is a stark reminder of our history.

A growing percentage of male survivors choose surgical castration, as testosterone is part of the complex biochemical constellation that triggers RS. The castrati...are now a thriving sub-culture.²¹

Universal Male Contraception, involves an annual implant recognised by law:

Young men normally have the first implant on their fifteenth birthday, marked by a contraceptive stud...in the ear; the younger the man, the larger and more public the stud. Exemptions...include avowed celibates and homosexuals... some meta-gender people, and men who are sacramentally committed to fathering a child.²²

Apart from these radical notions of the nature of violence and its link to male sexuality, Annie March's book explores what it would be like to live in a society in which the equilibrium and wellbeing of future generations was really a governing principle. In the years AE (Anthropocene Era) 7007-7010, the biosphere becomes critically endangered.

Key eco-systems...begin to collapse as a result of industrial pollution, rampant consumption, genetic engineering, over-population, electro-magnetic and nuclear radiation, war. Birth defects spike across all species. Robot- and cyber-wars turn upwards of a billion people into refugees.²³

And the in AE 7011-7014, the then unknown virus Rebound Syndrome, explodes across the land:

Both enacted, wilful violence, and extreme intended violence, trigger perpetrator death by endocrine implosion within forty-eight hours. Three in ten men, two in twenty women, die.²⁴

Famine, drought and natural disasters follow and the population falls by half, with a huge death toll from the coupling of war and Redound Syndrome. In AE 2018, two prophetic women “declare Year Zero...the Beginning of the End, the Great Choice, Hope,” and this leads to a new Ecozoic Era. A peaceable Realm is inaugurated but all is not well, and so the story continues. It waits for you to read it.

Another future world is described in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*,²⁵ first published in 1999. A self-declared feminist, she describes two different worlds – Urras and Anarres (Earth and Moon). Some time in the distant future Anarres has been colonised by human beings fleeing from the tyranny of Urras. It is a world in which women are treated equally with men and in which there is collaboration and no ownership. Urras is regarded as being hierarchical, unequal and propertarian. At one point the main character, the scientist and mathematician Shevek, who comes from Anarres but gets to visit Urras, explains to a revolutionary group of people on Urras, why he has come to them:

I am here because you see in me the promise, the promise that we made two hundred years ago in this city – the promise kept. We have kept it, on Anarres. We have nothing but our freedom. We have nothing to give you but your own freedom. We have no law but the single principle of mutual aid between individuals. We have no government but the single principle of free association. We have no states, no nations, no presidents, no premiers, no chiefs, no generals, no bosses, no bankers, no landlords, no wages, no charity, no police, no soldiers, no wars. Nor do we have much else. We are sharers, not owners. We are not prosperous. None of us is rich. None of us is powerful. If it is Anarres you want, if it is the future you seek, then I tell you that you must come to it with empty hands. You must come to it alone, and naked, as the child comes into the world, into his future, without any past, without any property, wholly dependent on other people for his life. You cannot take what you have not given, and you must give yourself. You cannot buy the Revolution. You cannot make the Revolution. You can only be the Revolution. It is in your spirit, or it is nowhere.²⁶

But there is a cautionary note, too, as the communal world of Annares is sometimes Overly bureaucratic and commanding. Longer-term sexual partnerships are frowned upon, and locations and types of work are limited by the command of society. This is a world in which there is mix of equality and obligation, and the book shows how tyranny has more than one face.

Another woman's voice comes from a friend of mine, and fortunately for me my publisher, Lorna Howarth, and if the previous stories are about the distant future, her work is present. She is part of a group of women who, like the people of the Northlands in Starhawk's *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, meet regularly, as she says, to weave together the gifts of the elements – fire, air, earth and water – sharing wisdom on healthcare, child-care and earth-care, based on integrity, love, authenticity and friendship. Theirs is a way of being rooted in Nature. And she says that although there needs to be a fruitful coming together of feminine and the masculine qualities:

...we can't build authentic systems in a linear, male-dominated paradigm, we have to create them in reciprocity and trust... anyone – male or female – who aspires to embody principles of love, respect, deep ecology, nurturing, joyfulness, ease and grace, is doing more to create Eden than they perhaps know.

Somehow, for these women, it seems to be possible to create ways of *being* that depend on being in those ways, and Lorna's own book, co-authored with her friend, Genevieve Boast, and titled *The Soulisitic Journey*, is subtitled, *A Pilgrimage to the Source of Your Being*.²⁷ Again, the emphasis is on *being*, and the notion of 'pilgrimage' and a 'source of being' carry this work into a realm quite unlike the rather more academic debate of feminist essentialism and intersectionality.

The women who follow the path described by Lorna Howarth and Genevieve Boast, take their cue from Nature and aspire to learn from Nature's intelligence, and when their book was complete, they gifted it to two hundred of their friends, family and colleagues. The book speaks of Solar (masculine) and Lunar (feminine) energies, of archetypal qualities, of Mystery (the

shadow element) and Wisdom (the gift element), and of the seven directions of the Soulistic Wheel – North, South, East, West, Above, Below, and Within.²⁸ Each of these has a capital letter as they carry essence and meaning. With an awareness of our innate interdependence with Nature,²⁹ the book speaks of the need for a new discourse in order to heal the ways in which we have become separated from Nature.

The authors acknowledge the sacred in all that is,³⁰ speaking of “a malaise at the heart of twenty-first century life,”³¹ a malaise that arises from the presumption that “humanity is somehow more evolved, superior to or separate from the natural world...a belief that has given rise to devastation of ecosystems to such a degree that we are now compromising our own future.”³² And they say that it is this view of an anthropocentric representation of god that “diminishes our understanding of the Cosmos and the Universal laws to which we are all connected.”³³ Their practice is to align their lives to the patterns and rhythms of Nature, and from this they and their companions draw solace.

This is work that requires great openness and sensitivity since Lorna says that whilst she and the women she works with are recovering and weaving their divine feminine energies, and in doing so bringing their deepest-held dreams into being – not least, the birthing of ‘the New Earth’ – there is still a sense that something is missing, which is expressed as a question that without the complementarity of evolved masculine energies, there may be the danger of the scales swinging out of balance once again in the opposite direction, to extreme matriarchy and all that may entail; and not only that, there is a sense of incompleteness. The whole, harmonious, balanced life impulse is akin to the symbol of the caduceus staff: the entwining masculine and feminine energies embodied by the serpents and the unifying, evolutionary energy symbolised by the wings. And so, whilst feminists agree that now is the time for their voices to be heard and for the scales to come back into balance, there will also come a time in the not-too-distant future when the evolved feminine and masculine unify into an ‘ungendered whole’ that marries the qualities of both, allows humanity to manifest its true, cosmological potential.



Of course, as an elderly man I have no more place in these gatherings of women than I do in the internal debates of feminism, or, perhaps in Starhawk's world of imagination, but above all else it seems to me that these women, and no doubt others like them, are opening the doors of possibility and widening the discussion of the ways in which, however we might call it, 'other' qualities might arise for us. They seem to include: collaboration, a care of the Earth, non-violence, nurture and healing, gender fluidity and an absence of a rigid and dominant hierarchy. Looking back to what I said in Paper 2 in this series of papers, I would say that these 'other' qualities can be found, only found, by the mysterious presence of Love. The many and varied forms of feminism and their more recent associations with marginalised and oppressed racial and other groups, accompanied as they are by queer theory, are much concerned with sex, sexuality and gender. They are of interest to me not only because of this, but also because, at their core, they question the definition of what is to be taken as 'normal', which brings us back to the matter of language that I discussed in Paper 1 – to the constraints and damage of dominant forms of discourse.

Feminism and queer theory, in all their voices, are aligned with the question of that gendered discourse of which I spoke at the end of *Love and the Divine Feminine*. However, I need to take the exploration further for there is another matter that I believe drives patriarchy. This is the matter of violence. In 2017, my colleague Scherto Gill, of the Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace, and I edited a collection of essays titled *Peacefulness*.³⁴ The idea for the collection arose from a symposium we had attended which claimed to be about peace, but which, we felt, spoke only of conflict and violence, with peace as a bandage to heal wounds mostly after the event. I had asked Scherto whether it was possible to speak of peacefulness in and of itself, for itself. What do we know about peacefulness as a practice? The essays sought to explore the expression and practice of peace in a variety of different settings including in economy and in the Introduction we said:

[This] book poses that an appropriate understanding of peace cannot be limited to that which it is not. Indeed, such an understanding can only come about by appreciating and perceiving peace in and of itself, most especially through exploring peace not as something that is imposed from outside, but as a shared human aspiration, rooted in our innate peacefulness, and our relationship with others and within our communities and societies. When presenting peacefulness as connected to the state of being human, we are able to overcome the simplest division between inner and outer peace, and positive and negative peace.

For these reasons, we suggest that peace and peacefulness be explored within the three domains: first, within our state of being, as an aspect of spirituality; then in our relatedness, including communal relationships and social harmony; and, thirdly, in the public realm, including socio-economic systems, political structures, and global collaborations.³⁵

But, however much we may have proposed such a notion, I remain shocked at the prevalence of violence, and most especially in our unquestioned assumptions about its necessary place in our communities and between nations. Global arms sales are something like three times the amount given in foreign aid.

I am not a scholar of these matters, but I have a deep sense that a significant cause of the oppression that people like Starhawk and Annie March and Ursula K. Le Guin talk about, is the problem of endemic violence, expressed not only in the violence of patriarchy towards women and towards those who have been marginalised, but, more generally, towards all of us and towards Nature. It astonishes me that despite all the evidence to the contrary, we continue to condone this violence, not least in forms of economy, in the language of 'takeover battles' and 'making a killing'. It may well be the case that crimes of violence have declined over long periods of time, but this only covers those acts of violence that we have deemed to be criminal. Within the all-pervasive culture of dominance, violence still persists and is still accepted as a necessary form of defence. And yet, as the stories that we have looked at in

this paper suggest, accepting violence as ‘just the way things are’ is the same sort of unspoken prejudice as that towards people of another gender, sexuality race or religious belief.

I shall return to this later.

Endnotes

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4. Op cit, Alison Stone, 3.
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35. Ibid. 8-9.