

Journey of the Universe Conference

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A Language of Participation: feminism and the dynamics of the universe

It has been 100 years since the first International Women's Day. The 20th century saw the beginning of a global women's movement: women moving effectively into the social, political and economic spheres. The waves of feminisms now have some traction around the world. It is uneven, with gains and losses, backlashes, and much more to do. Yet, it is undeniable that there is a women's movement afoot in the world.ⁱ

Women's movements and feminist analyses:

It is easy to get lost in the maze of women's issues and feminist approaches. There are countless documented difficulties for women around the world. The most severe are the systemic and persistent lack of basic human rights: food, water, safety, shelter, education and health care. The United Nations deems that the gamut of violence(s) against women is the most serious and pervasive human rights violation anywhere, and everywhere, in the world.ⁱⁱ When we add the sexual divisions of labour, double workdays, patriarchal restrictions and glass ceilings, the life-world of most women is more than challenging. It is unconscionable.

We also cannot ignore that in spite of these systemic distresses, women continue to nurture and carry the survival of civilizations – acquiring and preparing food, educating and caring for children, tending to the elderly, the sick and dying, managing domestic tasks, and building communities – mainly unpaid. Women's unpaid and informal work is acknowledged to be the major portion of the global economy, but evaluated as unproductive and irrelevant to the GDP. Yet women's contributions are the foundational fabric of human societies.

Feminist analyses focus on identifying, understanding and critiquing the roots, causes and myriad forms of these realities. Patriarchy, hierarchy, misogyny, domination, ideological dualisms, women/nature constructs, and capitalism have been studied from many vantage points and with extensive theoretical tools. It is evident that the origins of the oppression of women go far into the past. Complex ideological substructures are embedded in cultural symbols and social, political and economic patterns of domination. The acumen of feminist theories is staggering and ongoing, with intense debates about theories, tools and strategies for change.

Ecofeminism, one of many feminisms, surfaced in the 1970's in North America and Europe. Ecofeminism is now an umbrella term for historical associations between women and nature, for indepth awareness of patriarchal structures and worldviews, and for theories and social movements that intersect the oppression of women and the domination of the natural world. Ecofeminism mirrors the plurality within feminist analyses and the diversity within environmental thought. It sheds some light on the *feminizing of nature*, the *naturalizing of women* and their reciprocal repression. Ecological ruin and social stress often function in tandem, and women are the first victims of both ecological and social stress, according to the United Nations.ⁱⁱⁱ Ecofeminism also brings diverse women's voices to concerns of ecological degradation and restoration.

Planetary Women's Movements: A revolution of consciousness

The insistence that women gain equity and autonomy has reverberated globally. Albeit dissimilar, there are women's movements around the world. They happen at the micro level; that is, on the ground, in specific communities and cultures. The women's movement is also meso, representing a planetary change of human consciousness. It is a revolution of massive proportions within human social structures, ideologies and symbolic systems.

Stepping back from the myriad issues and analyses, it is easier to see that the women's movement is a revolution of consciousness. It is arguably the largest shift of consciousness humanity has made since the Neolithic revolution and the emergence of symbolic consciousness. From this vantage point, feminism is not only an ethical claim or political movement. It is a revolution in cultural symbolic consciousness. It is a change of reference points of all forms of social organization, bringing forth a radically new perception of human capacity, differentiation, and complexity. It is important not to underestimate the depth of challenge '*the women's movement*' brings to human social organization, ideological and cultural constructs, identify formation systems, and all the related and embedded symbolic facets.

It is useful to ponder, even for a moment, that patriarchy has been the ruling social, ideological and symbolic organization for known human history, and for at least 10,000 years.^{iv} It has been, and is, the governing form of social organization virtually everywhere. Although there are many theories of the origins of patriarchy, none are conclusive. There are even more theories about male subjugation of and violence against women, and the pervasive realities of misogyny. The roots of these are buried deep in an obscured past, probably beyond the Neolithic era.

Yet, what is occurring now is an awakening of consciousness regarding human social organization, and one that has never occurred before. Something new is emerging within human consciousness, sparking a revolution. It is early days still. Yet, it is much more than an ethical transformation. It is about an amplified, intensified and strengthened understanding of humanity, genuinely including women and men. Humanity has to expand to incorporate women: our inherent value, variations, inclusion, and participation in the planetary project. What is also occurring is that the subjectivity, diversity and elegance of the human, as a species, are being expanded and enhanced.

It is crucial to note that I am not proposing any gender essentialism or complementarity, socio-biology, or retrieval of the feminine. Rather, it is that women, in all our diversity and complexity, are entering human consciousness as full planetary participants.

Language of Participation

The women's movement conveys an innovative language of participation to human communities. This language of participation is often an ethical language: women's worth, rights, inclusion, contributions, voices, analysis, concerns condemnations and commitments. Historically, these are new images of participation. They are emerging and *enroute*. Feminists bring a novel language to rewrite the social imaginary. From another angle, feminists are trying to articulate something profound that is evolving from the creative and imaginary depths of human consciousness. The articulated goal is to change the gendered social schemas, to enlarge the space, and to shift what is alleged to be essential or peripheral. They contest what is codified and symbolized as human, decentering men. This, of course, challenges and changes cultural worldviews and praxis, and is a destabilizing and uncertain process.

There is another dimension to this new language, or languages, of participation. Expansions of consciousness and new imagery open possibilities of new forms of behaviour. They offer genuine new insights into alternative modes of awareness and being. Symbolic consciousness, as the primary mode of human navigation, has functioned with impoverished images of humanity, and consequently has diminished human creativity and responsiveness. Patriarchal gender ideologies, as a form of symbolic language to clarify differentiated human forms, have limited the human potential, primarily that of women but also of men. The women's movement brings a language of participation to the human community, the source of which is best understood as a revolution and expansion of consciousness.

I also think it is time to expand the language of participation of the women's movement beyond ethics, political discourses, and the limitations of constricted rational modes of social analysis. The self-consciousness of what it means to be human is transforming.

For this we need inspired language, fresh images and insights, and much creativity to invent an adequate social imaginary.

Further still, there is a larger project of expansion of consciousness occurring that requires our attention. In tandem with the image of humanity being stretched and redefined, we are discovering ourselves as members of an earth community, in a dynamic and creative universe. The women's movement deconstructs the restricted symbol of 'woman' and opens the possibilities of reinventing the social order. This opening of consciousness is also the opportunity for greater dimensions of reality to seep into our awareness, disorienting and reorienting the human community in the larger projects of the earth and the universe. An inclusive social imaginary needs to be situated within a new ecological imaginary.

Journey of the universe

The Journey of the Universe represents the macro dynamics of the phenomenal order. It is new knowledge within the human community, pressing into human consciousness what is known about the structures, processes and creativity of the universe. It is persuasive and compelling, and with unfathomable significance. We must recognize that we know a great deal, and very little, about these larger horizons and dynamics of the universe.

It is evident now that the earth is a process of the universe, and all evidence suggests that humans are a process of the earth. As such, consciousness and self-consciousness are also primarily processes of the earth, and secondarily a dimension of humans. This is simple to claim, yet radically new to any current worldview or social imaginary.

These novel insights about the universe and the earth are emerging into human consciousness. If we attend to the insights offered by the journey of the universe, we awaken to dimensions of reality not only recently perceived, but which have immense consequences. In brief, humans can awaken to the universe: to its grandeur, dynamics, and elegance. Just that is stunning and staggering. But it is much more, because we see that we are a dynamic of the universe: a form of self-reflecting consciousness, which is also of the universe. Therefore, we can say that the universe is awakening within human consciousness. That is a new imaginary!

The journey of the universe offers a unique language of participation: our participation in the larger projects of the earth, within an emergent universe. This is of extreme importance to the challenges of our era. It is blatantly obvious that the worldviews and symbolic forms within which we operate are ill equipped to respond to the social and ecological crises of the planet. We need new symbols, images and worldviews that enhance our continuity with and participation in the earth's dynamics.

The earth, in all its elegance, differentiation, subjectivity and suffering, is awakening in human consciousness. The tension is difficult to manage. At the same time the realities of women in their elegance, differentiation, subjectivity and sufferings are awakening in human consciousness. A language of ethics, and a vision of redistribution of resources are insufficient for both of these.

What of the journey of the universe and the women's movement? To start, women do not have any distinctive knowledge or awareness of the universe, or of the earth. Women may have particular expertise and familiarity, but due to their experience not essence. Certainly many women are engaged in ecological change. However there are tensions between the primary goals of women's movements and a radical consciousness such that the journey of the universe provides.

The work of these dual awakenings, or expansions of consciousness, need to collaborate, and at profound and operational levels. Thus, any ecological consciousness must embrace the women's movement. Further, the women's movement offers insights into radical transformations of consciousness and social change. It is also true that most of feminist work does not address ecological issues in depth. The women's movement needs to attend to what is emerging into human consciousness about the journey of the universe, and the earth's processes and dynamics. It is a bleak future for women within a ruined planet. We can imagine more than equity and autonomy for women as planetary participants, and we cannot accept less.

The journey of the universe is taking form in bringing the subjectivity and significance of women to consciousness, and women are responding as engaged participants for the well being of the human community. The invitation is larger: to be engaged participants in the project and journey of the universe!

ⁱ In this essay the terms *the women's movement* and *feminism* are somewhat interchangeable. Whether women consider themselves to be feminists is not of primary consideration here, or to the fact that there are women's movements around the world, and feminism represents analytic tools to understand and foster these.

ⁱⁱ UN Women: The United Nations Entity for Gender Equity and the Empowerment of Women. <http://www.unwomen.org/>

ⁱⁱⁱ The United Nations as early as 1989 observed, "It is now a universally established

fact that it is the woman who is the worst victim of environmental destruction. The poorer she is, the greater is her burden.” From Pamela Philipose, “Women Act. Women and Environmental Protection in India,” in Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism, ed. Judith Plant (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1989), 67.

^{iv} Although there are debates about matriarchal, matrilineal, or matri-focal societies, there is little unambiguous archeological or other evidence of how these cultures functioned. There is no solid evidence of non-patriarchal societies, even with emancipatory Goddess symbolism. There is considerable data that patriarchy emerged over several millennia and in unrelated parts of the world, seemingly with the rise of organized agriculture. There are other theories about the effectiveness of domination, hierarchy, and sexual control which then became enshrined and embedded within complex cultural formations. See, Bennett, Judith. History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. Lerner, Gerda. The Creation of Patriarchy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986. Mies, Marie. Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale. London: Zed Books, 1987.