

Dewi Candraningrum
Editor



BODY MEMORIES

**Goddesses of Nusantara, Rings of Fire
and Narratives of Myth**



Body Memories:

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and Narratives of Myth

Dewi Candraningrum (Editor)

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**Body Memories:
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Integrating Islam and Ecofeminism: A Monotheistic Approach to Earth Crisis

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Introduction

When Qatar was hosting a United Nations conference in December 2012 on climate change, Muslim leaders or imams still focused on ritual and politics. Only few imams in the country were reported to have talked about climate change and the importance of preserving environment. One imam invited mosque attendants to plant trees, shun extravagance, and conserve water and electricity. The majority of Muslim scholars, leaders, and activists, as I told the Associated Press, had not seen the environmental issues their immediate concern as they had viewed human beings as superior over the natural world.¹ This chapter seeks to examine some of the ways in which some Muslim scholars and activists have quite recently began to address environmental issues at the local and global levels, although they have approached nature as either separate or connected to gender problems. Muslim views of ecology and gender relations can be regarded as part of monotheistic approaches to ecological and gender injustices—recently named ecofeminism.

The Sacred, Ecology, and Gender: Still In Disconnect

Ecofeminism, itself a contemporary (more precisely the 1980s) concept, has been defined in quite different ways, but it shares something in common: the interconnection between the destruction of nature and the oppression of women. There is the role of modern science, technology, and capitalism in creating and exacerbating human and non-human injustices.² The starting point of ecofeminism is that, as Karen Warren put it, “the domination of women, other human Others, and nonhuman nature are interconnected, are wrong, and ought to be eliminated.”³ Ecofeminism has been regarded as being a holistic feminist approach to the problems of the earth. However, ecofeminism has not become an issue of interest among feminists on the one

hand and environmentalist scholars and activists on the other. There have been some criticisms against ecofeminism such as its essentialisms—equating women with nature and conflating women with another, but these have been countered by ecofeminists who argue that “women and nature have an age-old association—an affiliation that has persisted throughout culture, language, and history.”⁴ History and culture have been part of humans’ relationship with nature. In the West, the philosophical debate has also occurred between deep ecologists and ecofeminists around masculinist, patriarchal, Western anthropocentrism and ethnocentrism of the former, and the shallowness of the latter, despite the fact that both ideologies celebrate nature and address ecology and claim responsibility for comprehending human relationships with the elements of the nonhuman world such that they are equal albeit different.⁵ Setting aside the debates which are themselves important, the problem of environment and the problem of gender discrimination are not a simple issue: both are connected to other dimensions of society: politics, economics, social class, culture, history, religion, and more, depending on contexts.

In some Western contexts, the relationships between ecofeminism and the sacred have been explored primarily from within Christian theologies, although other religions have been invited to participate in meetings and other forms of collaborations. These religious scholars have collaborated to formulate connections between the sacred and ecology, with some tackling them also in relation to women and gender.⁶ For example, some religious leaders have initiated the Interfaith Declaration on Climate Change, with concepts such as “green religion”, “greener faith”, “eco-theology”, “green Islam”, “environmental ethics”, and so forth, with movements such as the Evangelical Environmental Network promoting clean energy and calling for less consumption.⁷ For example, a Christian theologian-activist made a concluding remark as follows:

As religious environmentalists, we want to save the world, but right now we do what we do because we wish to be the kind of person who lives like this: who honors God’s creation, feels and responds to the sacredness of the earth, and tries to love all of our neighbors as ourselves. Ultimately, perhaps, we are religious environmentalists because we just cannot live any other way.⁸

However, most faith-inspired activists have been yet interested in the direct connection between nature and women. Only some Muslim scholars and activists have addressed gender issues and feminism, with some

emphasizing gender complementarity and others resisting what they regard as Western, secular, atheistic approach to sexuality and gender. Muslim feminists such as Amina Wadud have offered a feminist interpretation of the Qur'an, although she does not specifically address ecology.⁹ And only a handful of activist-scholars have particularly addressing nature and women problems. Among Islamic religious scholars who tend to focus on issues of faith, ritual, and human social relations, ecofeminism is simply absent.

Muslim environmentalist scholars and activists in Iran, Egypt, India, the U.S., United Kingdom, Indonesia, and others, have offered their perspectives of natural protection, only rarely in connection with women and gender.¹⁰ Some have formulated approaches to the problems of deforestation, natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, uncleanliness, diseases, animal extinction, and global warming.

Albeit still a minority within their religious communities, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, and others of the Parliament of the World's Religion are increasingly concerned with ecology and social justice, open to gender equality and ecumenical dialogue. They gathered in Chicago in 1993, in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1999, and in Barcelona, Spain, in 2004.¹¹ In Bogor, West Java, on April 22, 2014, a Catholic bishop, a Christian priest and a Muslim imam planted a tree to commemorate the Earth Day, sending the interfaith symbolic message of nature conservation.¹² Others have also addressed wars and their impacts on women and children, as well as the environment, and have called for peace and conflict resolution.¹³ The writings about Islamic environmental ethics and those about Islamic feminism or Muslim women in many contexts hardly make conceptual and practical connections between the natural environment and women subjugation.

The lack of concern amongst Muslims'—and other non-Muslim feminists for that matter, has also been pointed out by Rosemary Ruether who writes in a section the way in which some Muslim environmentalists have interpreted the Qur'anic passage about humans-nature-God relationships and how Muslim feminists have insisted gender equality before God despite their biological differences and functional differences. Rosemary Radford Ruether notes that with few exceptions, Muslim environmentalists have not drawn connection between women's subordination and the impoverishment of nature. Muslim environmentalists, she points out, tend to see the Western view of science, technology, and unlimited consumerism as the root of the environmental problem, which has destroyed the sustainability of human-nature relationship. There has been some awareness about the fact

that Muslim societies have suffered pollution and ecological destruction because they have become modernized along Western path without critical judgment and control. Many Muslim conservatives have used the modern technology while condemning “moral decadence” which they say originated from the West. Under these circumstances, some Muslim environmentalists seek to strike a balance between secular modernization and religious fundamentalism in an attempt at dining a model of sustainable care for nature as human responsibility before God and other beings and creatures. Some have suggested environmental law through reinterpretation of Islamic jurisprudence and its philosophies and others say that neither Muslim leaders nor governments seem to pay serious attention to environmental crisis.¹⁴

It is therefore important and timely to explore some of Muslims contributions to the cultivation of culture and politics of mainstreaming ecofeminism among predominantly Muslim societies—although nature or the environment belongs to everyone regardless of faith. There are multiple interpretations of Islam and its relationship with sexuality gender, and environmental issues, as well as diverse meanings of feminism and ecofeminism among those who use the terms. Ideas and actions do not always match. In the next section, I deal with some of the narratives and religious sources for natural and woman problems as put forward by contemporary scholars and activists in different parts of the world.

Normative Muslim Approaches to Nature

Muslim environmentalists have formulated ideas concerning nature in general, which include non-human worlds, such as plants, animals, soil, water, and many others. The key reference has been the Qur’an, with its concept of *tauhid*, the unity or oneness of God. This unity of God has been believed to have included the unity of humankind and the unity of the all, including natural, worlds. This inclusive notion of *tauhid* has been an important Muslim contribution to a holistic view of the cosmos: micro-cosmos and macro-cosmos become an integrated existence.

In the Qur’an, nature is approached in ways that reveal its submissiveness (*islam*) to, and praises for (*tasbih*), the divine as well as its order and balance. Humans are portrayed as vice-gerents of God responsible for making use of them (*tasykhir*) without destroying them (*ifsad*). God has given humans His trust (*amana*) to do justice and care. According to Egyptian scholar Muhammad Abduh (d.1905), the Qur’an teaches believers about *istikhlaf* (53:24) and *taskhir* (12:45). There is anthropomorphism in this doctrine, but

not without limitations and ethics. The entire power of the earth is emphasized but the human spirit is believed to have greater power than this earth.¹⁵

Muhammad Asad, an Austrian convert to Islam, an interpreter of the Qur'an, for example, says, "in the light of religious perception and experience, the human, self-conscious self, and mute, seemingly irresponsible Nature are brought into a relation of spiritual harmony; because both, the individual consciousness of man and Nature that surrounds him and is within him, are nothing but co-ordinate, if different, manifestations of one and the same Creative Will." ¹⁶ God in his wisdom, as medieval Syrian scholar Ibn Taimiyyah (d.1328) said, created the creatures for reasons other than serving man, because in the Qur'anic verses, He explains only the benefits of these creatures to man. Human beings, men and women, are members of the community of nature and have responsibilities toward the whole environment as well as toward their families and other humans. They should prevent corruption on earth.¹⁷ The natural world has an ontological and objective existence as has been created by God and which reflects His Divine Names and Attributes.

All nature, Muslim exegetes maintain, praises and obeys God. "All nature obeys God by an "automatic volition"—except for man, who has opportunity equally for obedience or disobedience"; as a Pakistani-American scholar Fazlur Rahman (d.1988) put it. The whole natural world has surrendered (*islam*) to God's will and glorified Him (3:83); 57:1, 59:1, 24:41.¹⁸ The Qur'an emphasizes regularity and stability of the natural phenomena as well as the magnitude and utility for human beings. Only God is infinite and absolute. All things beside God are finite and relative. The laws of nature and the laws of God are identical because it is God who created these laws of nature. Nature is useful for human beings. Fazlur Rahman have emphasized "the unity, serviceability and exploitability of nature by men" as he read some Quranic verses (2:29; 31:20; 45:12, among others). However, Rahman stresses, the use has to be for the good and men are responsible for things they do the natural world. They are prohibited from corrupting the earth (*fasad fil al-ardh*), based on the verse: "Mischief has appeared on land and see because of the meed that the hands of men have earned. That God may give them a taste of some of their deeds in order that they may turn back (from evil)" (Quran: 30:41).¹⁹ God's creation was pure and good in itself. All the mischief or corruption was introduced by Evil, arrogance, selfishness, etc.²⁰ It is this prohibition of the destruction on the earth that has become the key aspect of the Muslim idea of nature preservation.

Fazlur Rahman comments that the Qur'an aims at strengthening the

weaker segments of the community: the poor, the orphans, women, slaves, and those in debt.²¹ Rahman makes no direct connection between lack of concern with nature and discriminations against women. For him, the Qur'an teaches division of labor and a difference in functions. Islam endorses no inherent inequality. The Qur'anic verse that suggests "men are in charge of women because God has given some humans excellence over other and because men have the liability of expenditure (4:36)", means functionality rather than superiority. Rahman argues, if woman becomes economically sufficient and contributes to the household expenditure, the male's superiority would be reduced since as a human he has no superiority over his wife. Men and women are equal parity: on the basis of *taqwa*.²² Although Rahman makes no connection between nature and women, one can infer that he emphasizes equality of men and women as having equal rights and responsibilities: they could become either victims or actors for either preservation or destruction of the environment.

Quite like deep ecologists in Western traditions, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, an Iranian-American Muslim Sufi-philosopher, the contemporary environmental crisis is attributed to the use of modern technology set by the West. Muslim fundamentalists and secularists are all guilty of using the technology without care for destructive impacts on the environment. Muslim theologians, he suggests, do not pay attention to theology of nature. He believes that the Islamic teachings about God, human beings, nature, and the relation between them all constitute a call for an awakening from scientism and selfish conquest of nature. In his terms, "Ultimately, God is, one of His Sacred Names, *al-Muhit*, tells us, literally, our "environment".²³

In the medieval time, Sufi poet Jalaluddin Rumi in his *Masnavi*, says that it is humans relation with nature that becomes the problem, not nature itself.

God has given milk and nourishment for babes: He has made the breast of every wife a fountain

He has given wine to drive away grief and care: He has made of the grape a fountain to inspire courage

He has given honey as a remedy for the sick body: He has given the inward part of the bee a fountain of honey

He gave water universally to high and low for cleanliness and for drinking.

The object is that you should follow the track of these derivatives towards the origins, but you are content with this offshoot... (1.1630-38).²⁴

Rumi's ecological message is that the laws of nature have their own moral sense, even if that is hidden from human beings. Nature is entwined with humans and all other living beings.

In Islamic law, there is a new Arabic term for the environment: *bi'ah*, sometimes to mean natural environment, sometimes socio-cultural environment. Thus, *fiqh al-bi'ah*, or the jurisprudence of the environment is a new, emerging field, but has not become well developed. Some attempts have been made, such as by Othman Abd-Ar-Rahman Llewellyn who formulated the basis for an Islamic environmental law. He outlines his view: the unity of God (*tauhid*) and the unity of His creation; *taqwa* (piety); compassion (*rahma*) and beneficial work (*ihsan*); and *khilafa* (stewardship). He states that jurists have generally agreed on the objectives of Islamic law: protection of religion, life, posterity, reason, and property, but have not specified the protection of the natural environment. Quoting "There is no animal on the earth, nor any bird that wings its flight, but it is an *umma* (community) like yourself" (Qur'an: 6:38), Llewellyn contends that Islamic law safeguards the lives of animals from destruction. In addition to that, Islamic law prohibits waste (*tabzir*) and corruption on the earth (*fasad fi al-ardh*). Moreover, some rules such as "the general welfare takes priority over individual welfare" and "the averting of harm takes priority over the acquisition of benefits", can be relevant and effective in preserving the environment. There were in the past *harim* zones including greenbelts and easements and *hima* (protected areas). The point is there is rich tradition that could become references for environmental ethics and law.²⁵ In the jurisprudential works, formulation of ethics at times of war usually include prohibition of harming women, children, elderly, plants and animals. This suggests some connection between women and nature.

Some Muslim scholars and organizations have begun to disseminate these normative formulations of the relation between nature, humans, and the divine in various occasions. The Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES) an international nongovernmental organization founded by Fazlun Khalid in Birmingham, England in 1991 and the Islamic Foundation for Science and Environment in Delhi, India, for example, have participated in these efforts. In Indonesia, some rural Islamic schools (*pesantren*) have started to incorporate environmental education into their programs.²⁶ Environmental conservation has become one of the various issues that Islamic organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, as well as semi-governmental organization the Council of Islamic Scholars (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*) have addressed, accompanied with recommendations to the government, private

companies, and the society at large. There were no significant differences in their views of the natural environmental, using the Qur'anic normative references, which contain the key concepts outlined above.²⁷

Muslim Feminists Addressing Ecology

The discussion of ecological justice and Muslim women has been almost absent. However, some have joined global movements. Nawal Ammar, a Muslim female scholar and activist from Egypt who teaches in the U.S., is among the very few who were concerned about ecological issues. She was interested in emphasizing the concept of *tauhid*, *khalifa*, and *amana* as other Muslims outlined above have elaborated as well.²⁸ Later on, she sought to connect ecology and women rights in Islam on her chapter "Ecological Justice and Human Rights for Women in Islam". In this later writing, Ammar sees ecofeminism as the view of the domination of the earth as directly connected to a set of cultural, psychological, and economic factors that create hierarchies which in turn oppress women and other vulnerable segments of society. She proposes that Muslim girls and women's relationship to the environment focus on poverty and limited resources as factors that influence their rights. She believes that Muslim women's connectedness to the natural environment should reflect ecological needs of social equity, including basic human needs and human rights. Ammar quoted the Qur'anic verse which she translated to support her argument about every Muslim's responsibility for protecting ecology and women.

Allah commands justice, the doing of good and liberality to kith and kin, and He forbids all shameful deeds, and injustice and rebellion: He instructs you, and ye may receive admonition. Fulfill the covenant of Allah, when ye have entered it and break not your oaths after ye have confirmed them, indeed ye have made them. All your surety; for Allah knoweth all that ye do. And do not like a spinner who breaks into untwisted strands that yarn she has spun after it has become strong... Whoever works righteousness man or woman and has faith, we will give then a new life and life that is good and pure and We will bestow on such their rewards (Surat al-Nahl, 78).²⁹

In her essay about Islam and ecofeminism, following Michel Foucault, Nawal Ammar attempts to connect ecology to culture and looks to ecofeminism, a critical ideology which sees such connection. Drawing a definition of ecofeminism by feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, who attributes the earth crisis to issues of justice, Nawal Ammar

finds it compatible with Islamic texts if read as being inherently ethical and egalitarian in spirit as proposed by such female scholars and activists as Asma Barlas, Fatima Mernissi, and Amina Wadud. Patriarchal readings of the Qur'an are for her and others the main reason why the Qur'an and Islamic legal tradition (*fiqh*) seem unjust, apart from the structure of religious and sexual power in Muslim societies. By reinterpreting the Qur'an, Ammar comes to support gender equality (49:13); 42:11; 16:72) and equality in responsibility (3:195; 33:35-36). After explaining deep ecology, Nawal Ammar contends that in Islam, nature is not inherently sacred, but it becomes sacred because it is a reflection of the will of God. She emphasizes that nature as God's creation is orderly, has purpose, and with function. Thus, for her, Islam has commonalities, but takes a different approach to nature and its relationship with humans and God, as exemplified in the idea of trust (*amana*) and oneness of God (*tauhid*). Ammar quoted a hadith by Bukhari to underscores compatibility between Islam and deep ecology as well as feminist ideas.

"Verily, this world is sweet and appealing, and Allah placed you as vice-regents therein; He will see what you will do. So, be careful of what you do this world and what you do to women, for the first test of the children of Israel was in women." For her, ecofeminists can take different steps: providing equity of access to all creatures (including women), improving conditions of life and use for all of them (including women), protecting their rights, maintaining harmony in all communities, reducing or eliminating violence against any creature, respecting the diversity and contributions of all creatures (including women).³⁰

Apart from Nawal Ammar, there have been other several thinkers. Iranian poet Forugh Farrokhzad (d.1954), for example, addresses the interconnectedness between women and nature. In here poem, "I Fell Sorry for the Garden", Farrokhzad visualizes Paradise as a garden like the Qur'an, but explores more complex nuances and conveys the message of no to domination of women and nature.

Our garden is lonely, O, so very lonely
 All day long
 The sound of breaking and explosions
 Can be heard behind the door
 Instead of flowers
 Our neighbors have planted
 Mortars and machine guns in their gardens
 ...

our garden is confused
and I fear

...

but I believe the garden can be taken to the hospital
I am convinced

...

31

In South Africa, Christian and Muslim activists have struggled for liberation from apartheid and other forms of violence. Tahira Joyner, for example, who wrote an essay about earth-healing in South Africa together with a Christian activist-author Denise Ackermann, called for “green and feminist Muslims”, who are critical of both the natural crisis and women subordination. Tahira Joyner contends that the masculine language has been an effective vehicle for socio-cultural and religious ideology and therefore proposes feminine images of the divine: “courage, creativity, self-confidence, resilience, loyalty, the capacity for passion, clear insight, and solitude”. She mentions Bismillahirrahmanirrahim: with the name of Allah, who is Most Compassionate, Most Merciful.” The nouns which mean compassion and mercy, derived from the word *rahim*, “a feminine root noun meaning womb”. She says, the primary metaphor for Allah is maternal and implies the analogy between womb and macrocosm. God is beyond male and female and men and women are *khalifah*, “vice-regents” over the earth, quoting chapter 33:72 on trust (*amana*). She also cites Al-Hafiz Masri who wrote that early Muslims regarded all elements of nature such as land, air, water, fire, sunlight, forests, as the common property of all creatures, and translates the Quran chapter 7:31: “Eat and drink, but waste not by indulging in excesses; surely Allah does not approve of the intemperate.” Tahira Joyner then argues: “the Qur’an clearly indicates that the term *khalifah* is relational and thus a vital ecofeminist task is to examine and critique how these relations are defined. The Qur’an repeatedly insists that the trust implied is a privilege balanced by duties, and not an absolute right of ownership, usage and disposal of the physical environment and all it contains.”³²

Conclusion

Feminists agree that women have become the main victims of environmental crisis. Until the present time, there is still no direct connection with gender issues and other forms of injustice among

Muslim environmentalists and feminists. They have begun to make their contributions and have increased participation in addressing issues of ecology and gender justice. Muslim environmentalists have played their part in interfaith and ecological meetings, but they could also join feminists and others in approaching gender problems as part of a more holistic approach. The situation remains: Development needs have taken priority over environmental issues in Muslim countries. At the same time, Muslim feminists have yet to incorporate ecological concerns and solutions to earth crisis. Gender issues have not become a mainstream and everybody's concern. With few exceptions, Muslim scholars and policymakers have not studied economic development and environmental issues and social injustices seriously.³³

Regardless of the lack of efforts at making direct connection between nature and women problems, Muslim scholars and activists surveyed above normatively agree on the need for protecting nature as well as humans, and women as well as men. They too agree on the spiritual equality of men and women before God, although they still contest the extent of such equality and remain far away from implementation in the real life. Muslims have pointed to the Qur'an, hadith, Sufi poems, and legal thought, and some have proposed some normative recommendations to governmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as individual and groups, but much more are critically needed for them to rethink ecology and gender in a more holistic manner so that human and nonhuman societies could live in peace, in a better, interconnected world.

Endnote:

- 1 "Some Wish Islam would inform climate debate", Associated Press, December 1, 2012. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2012/12/01/muslims-islam-climate-environment/1738835/>
- 2 Carolyn Merchant, *the Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: HaperOne, 1990); Charis Thompson, "Back to Nature? Resurrecting Ecofeminism after Poststructuralist and Third-Wave Feminisms", *Isis*, vol.97, No.3, September 2006, p.505.
- 3 Karen Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy* (2000), 155. Cited in Chris Cuomo, "On Ecofeminist Philosophy", *Ethics and the Environment*, vol.7, No.2, Autumn, 2002, 1-11. See also, Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Ecofeminism: Symbolic and Social Connections of the Oppression of Women and the Domination of Nature", in Carol J. Adams, ed., *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* (New York: Continuum, 1993), 13-23.

- 4 Cited in Charis Thompson, "Back to Nature?", *Isis*, 510.
- 5 Robert Sessions, "Deep Ecology versus Ecofeminism: Healthy Differences or Incompatible Philosophies?", *Hypatia*, Vol.6, No.1, Ecological Feminism, Spring 1991, 90-107.
- 6 Conferences at Harvard from 1996 to 1998 have produced books on religions and ecology, including Christianity and Ecology, Buddhism and Ecology, and Islam and Ecology.
- 7 For example, Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Mary Grey, "Ecofeminism and Christian Theology", *the Furrow*, No.51, No.9, September 2000, 481-490.
- 8 Roger S. Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 243.
- 9 See Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). See also, Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992); Fatima Mernissi, "A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam", in Charles Kurzman, ed., *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 112-126.
- 10 In Egypt, for example, Muslim feminists who have emerged from the late nineteenth centuries to the present day have not addressed environmental issues as directly connected to women problems. Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).
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