

Original Paper

Xenosociology: Meeting the Predator in the Theory of Val Plumwood

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Abstract

Plumwood as a famous eco feminist, Delveaux (2001) had influenced the analyses inside the ecological ethic and deep ecology, and formed specific approach in ecological disputes, defined as ecosophy (Warren, 1996), involving ecological approach as inherent to human, especially female nature. Female attributes are celebrated, since they can influence the development of feminist ethic, as care ethic, global care ethic (Adam, 2004). This form of ethic influenced development of animal ethic, or Xeno Ethic in her works. Disputes around the position of female identity, (especially inherent to an educated professor such as herself), are caused by her encounter with the crocodile in Cacadu national park; after she was assured that she can use canoe in that area, safely. Val Plumwood, with her book Meeting the predator, had influenced the changes in discussions about animal ethics, transpecism, and the importance of human body and environment, that involves different forms of organisms, from predators to dangerous and exotic plants, that can also be seen as xeno organism threatening the life.

Keywords

Xenosociology, Xeno Ethic, ecosophy, predator, transpecism

1. Introduction

Xenosociology, as a sub discipline of sociology investigates the xeno organisms, trans species, trans terrestrial, and their environment. Plumwood's essay Meeting the predator, develops this questions as Jacobean metaphor, as it follows: "Of course, in some very remote and abstract way, I knew it happened knew that humans were animals and were sometimes—very rarely—eaten like other animals. I knew I was food for crocodiles that my body, like theirs, was made of meat. But then again in some very important way, I did not know it, absolutely rejected it. Somehow, the fact of being food for others ad not seemed real, not in the way it did now, as I stood in my canoe in the beating rain staring down

into the beautiful, gold-flecked eyes of the crocodile. This encounter emphasised the importance of adequate situation of human inside the environment, or the hierarchy inside the “great” chain of beings. Her encounter with a crocodile, happened in tropical Australian, Kakadu national park, where she was canoeing. This experience influenced the following insight:

“How had I come to make this terrible mistake about myself, my place, my body? I asked myself, with that sinking sense of serious stupidity that mars many a final moment. Was it a philosophical mistake about identity, the self as disembodied consciousness dissociated from the food-providing self as material body? Or the idea that humans are special, above and apart from other animals? I had no real opportunity to ponder the cultural genesis of my false consciousness, for at that moment the crocodile made its move, leaping from the water so fast I saw only a flash, and grabbing me painfully between the legs before pulling me down into the water. Nor did I pursue the issue later that day as I lay, terribly injured, in the path of the oncoming flood. But I have had many years since in which to think about these disastrous illusions, and to try to track them down” (Plumwood, 2012). Until that moment, I knew that I was food in the same remote, abstract way that I knew I was animal, was mortal. In the moment of truth, abstract knowledge becomes concrete. You gaze with dumb astonishment at your own death, known only as a shadowy, distant stranger, suddenly rises up right before you in terrifying, techno-coloured detail and gasp in disbelief that some powerful creature can ignore your special status and try to eat you”. (Plumwood, 2012)

Question of being anthropocentric and ignoring the laws on natural division, in relation to xeno organisms, such as animal organisms, in entering their own space, as dominant human being, becomes more important after the encounter with the deathly jaws of the crocodile. Human disrespect for the xeno organisms, and their environment, as the one that is not subject of dispute in who it belong to, and how we should approach it, has left significant impact in the contemporary, in the necessary education and sensibilization of especially youth, in Aquatic parks and Museums, all around the world. Anthropocentric and dominant human nature, has to be educated about all sorts of different species, that exist in different natural surroundings, since those surroundings are their only home. Entering into their home, can result in fatal consequences, as risk of becoming the living meet, or food for the predator. Plumwood had encountered crocodile, driving a canoe in 1985-ties, and the education on xeno organisms and trans species, and predator animals, has evolved in formation of different centres, where the visitors can see different species, and learn the basics of their way of life, through the gathering for feed large animals, at exact times, to walking through the area with basins filled with different species. Necessity to warn the humans, on their difference to larger animals, in recent times, is existent in different form of tv series, emitted on National Geographic, Animal Planet, with plethora and plaids of metaphorical titles such as Being Prey, I am alive, The Monster inside me. Therefore, the importance of knowing Your place inside the Universe of being, is still important as it was in Val Plumwoods text, but this popular tv shows, make it easier to understand the Jacobean metaphor felt by Plumwood, after the encounter with the crocodile:

“This was a strong sense, at the moment of being grabbed by those powerful jaws, that there was something profoundly and incredibly wrong in what was happening, some sort of mistaken identity. My disbelief was not just existential but ethical—this wasn’t happening, couldn’t be happening. The world was not like that! The creature was breaking the rules, was totally mistaken, utterly wrong to think I could be reduced to food. As a human being, I was so much more than food. It was a denial of, an insult to all I was to reduce me to food. Were all the other facets of my being to be sacrificed to this utterly indiscriminating use, was my complex organisation to be destroyed so I could be reassembled as part of this other being? With indignation as well as disbelief, I rejected this event. It was an illusion! It was not only unjust but unreal! It couldn’t be happening” (Plumwood, 2012).

2. Animal Ethics: Meeting the Predator

Animal ethics, as a sub discipline of ethics, questions the moral dimension of encountering with the living life, besides human. There are different life forms, from plants, humans, small animals, to large predators that can eat human alive. The strong feeling of being self-confident human professor and lecturer, and being wrongly promised that that area was a safe area for canoeing, which resulted in famous Val Plumwood becoming the prey, later on produced different thoughts on position of female identity in the environment:

“After much later reflection, I came to see that there was another way to look at it. There was illusion alright, but it was the other way around. It was the world of ‘normal experience’ that was the illusion, and the newly disclosed brute world in which I was prey was, in fact, the unsuspected reality, or at least a crucial part of it. But all I saw then was the lack of fit between the experience of being prey and the framework of belief and life I took to be normality. If the framework of normality was true, the lack of fit could only be explained if this experience of being prey was an illusion was a dream or nightmare. But if it wasn’t, I had to face the possibility that the lack of fit was there because both I and the culture that shaped my consciousness were wrong, profoundly wrong—about many things, but especially about human embodiment, animality and the meaning of human life (Plumwood, 2012).

This encounter with the predator, and meditation on the actuality of being prey, for some large jaws that grabbed her, influenced reopening of philosophical questions on the importance of human life on earth, and the corresponding in between the different forms of life that surround us. Arctic circle as the outer point of earth surface, and museums dedicated to investigation of indigenous species in this area, already presuppose that humans will have to resign and give back those areas, to the animals, since they had borrowed it only for finite period in the time. This vast area, covered with ice, is not fitted for human to live. Many sorts of different large predators, had influenced the disappearance of people, in great number, involving the different age group, involving even small children:

“The illusion revealed by the crocodile encounter was of a different, more philosophical kind, about the meaning of everyday experience. But in the same way it revealed that it was possible for people—as individuals, groups, perhaps whole cultures that subscribe to a particular dominant story—to be

completely and systematically wrong about quite simple and basic things—our relationship to food, to one another, the intertwining of life and death, the fleshly, embodied character of human existence—and be quite unaware of it. A few people may come to see the illusion for what it is because they stumble across certain clues, experiences that do not fit the dominant story. Suppose that in the same way as the illusion that the land was on the level, the fact of being always on the ‘winning side’ of the predation relationship tricks us, conceals from us the real slant of things, the real measure of our animality and embodiment.” (Plumwood, 2012)

This question falls into binary division section, when we compare humans to non-humans, male to female, pleasure to pain. Nature is observed as place of spiritualistic embodiment, while Western culture teaches us that nature is divided from spirituality that simultaneously represents the origin of human parting with nature, moreover devaluation and objectification of nature. Eisler’s Ecofeminist Manifesto (Eisler, 1987) states that the only reason for contemporary era ecological problems is creation of dichotomies male spiritual principal vs. female natural principle, in addition supported by transition from religious to secular worldview. Technology as such is not a problem, thinks Eisler (Eisler, 1987), problem represents the anthropocentric masculine culture of violence that uses the technology for the same purposes. Demands of ecofeminism, contained in Ecofeminist domination. Shared cooperation (2004) between male and Manifesto are oriented towards the returning to egalitarianism and cooperation in order to overcome the system of female, negation of dichotomies is the only way to annulated mentioned system. Return to nature is the only presupposition for desalination.

Table 1. Binary oppositions (Eisler, 1987; Aristotle, 1988; Bek, 2001; Jo Deegan & Mary Jo.,1990; Malory, 2008; Salleh, 1995; Shipley, 2000)

Male	Female
Culture	Nature
Ratio	Emotion
Father	Mother
Sun	Moon
Form	Matter
Active principle	Passive principle
Rational substance	Material substance
Contract	Nature
Free Will	Natural Law
Mind	Body
Artificial	Natural
Civilised	Primitive

Spirituality	Materiality
War	Peace
Public	Private
Master	Slave
Ethic of dominance	Care Ethic
Logic of dominance	Logic of care
Artistic work	Kitsch

Male stream, having the male in centre vs. female-stream, having the female in centre is binary that represents modern period (Giddens & Sutton, 2010), unlike the postmodern where the mentioned differences are annulated for academic marginalisation of women to be based on extremely rigidly formed differences between terms or dichotomies. The basic problem is identification of women with non-rationality, mindlessness, emotionalism, by which their exclusion from public and academic sphere is justified. Ecological consciousness of deep ecology (Dunlop, 2010) is considered to be deeper, because it involves the laws that caused certain phenomena. Ecofeminism with its powerful activism since Chupko movement in India, through the development of agricultural unions supported by Vandana Shiva, until the formation of Institute for Social ecology where the first ecofeminist Conferences were organised (Salleh, 2001), under the influences of ecofeminists Ynestra King, Val Plumwood until public demonstration against the oppression of feminine identity and nature, accomplishes the active fight with risk as mark of postmodern reality. Tom Regan in that period, in his speech, raises certain questions in USA, in relation to survival and destruction of animals. This binary logic, in the theory of Val Plumwood (Plumwood, 1991), involves another, different paradigm to consider, predator as the one who wins, and human being as the ones who can possibly lose, or can lose in fight with the higher forms of natural predator beings.

“That I think is what has happened to Western culture under the influence of the dominant story about our animality. For a modern human being from the first, or over-privileged world, the humbling experience of becoming food for another animal is now utterly foreign, almost unthinkable. And our dominant story, which holds that humans are different from and higher than other creatures, are made out of mind-stuff, has encouraged us to eliminate from our lives any animals that are disagreeable, inconvenient or dangerous to humans. This means, especially, animals that can prey on humans. In the absence of a more rounded form of the predation experience, we come to see predation as something we do to others, the inferior ones, but which is never done to us. We are victors and never victims, experiencing triumph but never tragedy, our true identity as minds, not as bodies.” (Plumwood, 2012)

Strong belief in the strengths of human ratio (Novalić, 2009), has been challenged by the ratio of predator. Western culture is based on this belief in human progress (Cochrane, 2012), that still ends in femicides, genocides, and concentration camps, refuges, internationally, and globally. That unlimited belief in being the ones who cannot do wrong, ended up in the Holocaust and Srebrenica (Dimitrijević,

2011). Therefore, the question of being wright must involve the limits of the integrity of other person, or in this particular case, other animal. Therefore, the Spengler did not foreseen the fall of Western cultures, for no reason. That is the Plumwood's idea as well:

"For thousands of years, Western religions and philosophies taught that the human was set apart from the animals and the rest of nature, made, unlike them, in the image of God. It was heresy to believe that any species other than humans could be saved or go to heaven, a place of sacredness and perfection reserved exclusively for human beings. God is transcendent, not material, apart from nature, and is for our species alone." (Plumwood, 2012)

Question of God, is never less important. In contemporary, the show with Morgan Freeman, investigates the perception of God, and God related concepts in different parts of the world. It is precisely and clearly emphasised that the question of God is the crucial to understanding of different race, nations and identities. She gives an example from Catholic perspective, and enforces the mistake in identifying the humans with God.

"For example, Papal doctrine until recently, instructed us that our bodies may have evolved from other animals, but that the real basis of our humanity, our minds have not—they are God-given, and in no way comparable to those of animals. We remain special, as the real owners of the world, the pinnacle of evolution, the ultimate species for whom it was all designed and to whom it all leads." (Plumwood, 2012)

How did Human beings evolute, what are different perspectives in relation to the creation. There are feminist perspective inside the evolution theory. This perspective state that there is the egalitarian perspective in creation, inside the Genesis, why not focus onto that one. The Catholic tradition involves, the idea of the embodiment and blood inside the religious practice. The notion of being inside the flesh, onto which Plumwood alerts is felt only after the animal attack, or the meeting with the animal in it's own house.

"This way of viewing the world makes it very painful to come to terms with features of conscious animality, insofar as our culture has made of it a painful contradiction—a sidereal identity in a fleshly, decaying body, thinking flesh, knowing flesh, singing flesh, flesh that knows of its own vulnerability. Being food confronts one very starkly with the realities of embodiment, with our inclusion in the animal order as food, as flesh, our kinship with those we-eat, with being part of the feast and not just some sort of spectator of it, like a disembodied eye filming somebody else's feast.

We are the feast. This is a humbling and very disruptive experience." (Plumwood, 2012)

Plumwood notices different position of Human in Great chain of Beings, as the ones who can not only eat meat and be predators, but are the ones that can become the food for the predators. Humans can eat animals, use their skin, bones, and meat in different consumer cultures such as branded stores, industry of meat, or even for the cure. But this still, even though it gives the human culture the godlike position, does not represent the reality of the position of human femininity, in the environment. Therefore, femina xenologica investigates the encounters with feminine and xeno organisms.

“But humans are food, food for sharks, lions, tigers, bears and crocodiles, food for crows, snakes, vultures, pigs, rats and goannas, and for a huge variety of smaller creatures and microorganisms. An ecological animalism would acknowledge this and affirm principles emphasising human– animal mutuality, equality and reciprocity in the food web.” (Plumwood, 2012)

3. Conclusion

Plumwood as an ecologist, thinks how to solve the puzzle, of being the democratic in ecological terms. She envisions the dichotomy of being live/becoming prey in her own terms, and proposes following:

“My proposal is that the food/death imaginary we have lost touch with is a key to re-imagining ourselves ecologically, as members a larger earth community of radical equality, mutual nurturance and support. Our loss of this perspective has meant the loss of humbling but important forms of knowledge, of ourselves and of our world. We can learn to look for comfort and continuity, meaning and hope in the context of the earth community, and work in this key place to displace the hierarchical and exception. My proposal is that the food/death imaginary we have lost touch with is a key to re-imagining ourselves ecologically, as members a larger earth community of radical equality, mutual nurturance and support. Our lost of this perspective has meant the loss of humbling but important forms of knowledge, of ourselves and of our world. We can learn to look for comfort and continuity, meaning and hope in the context of the earth community, and work in this key place to displace the hierarchical and exceptional cultural framework that so often defeats our efforts to adapt to the planet. This involves reimagining ourselves through concrete practices of restraint and humility, not just in vague airy–fairly concepts of unity, cultural framework that so often defeats our efforts to adapt to the planet. This involves re-imagining ourselves through concrete practices of restraint and humility, not just in vague airy–fairly concepts of unity”.

Democratic approach in the theory of Val Plumwood, involves, therefore, necessity to always remember that we are only a part of environment. She, herself, has to remember that sometimes, since living in those area she has to meet the great predator herself, in hope that the time of the encounter will be postponed.

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