

Review: *The Evolutionary Journey of Woman: From the Goddess to Integral Feminism* by Sarah Nicholson

Sarah Nicholson's "The Evolutionary Journey of Woman: From the Goddess to Integral Feminism" is an ambitious endeavour, pulling together as it does many disciplines ranging from studies of mythology, various strands of feminist theory, both individual and cultural developmental theory, psychology, archaeology and, most importantly, integral theory. This she does with notable success, considering the tensions inherent to the project, which are considerable, and which this reviewer, as a long-time integrally informed man, also felt within himself.

As Nicholson discusses in detail, other authors such as Maureen Murdock have raised and drawn out the theme of 'the heroine's journey' as a contrast to 'the hero's journey', as set out magisterially by Joseph Campbell, but few can have pursued it with the subtlety and tenacity that she has. In the process of developing this theme she develops critiques of both certain tendencies within feminist theory and also perceived 'androcentric' biases within integral theory, most particularly within the work of Ken Wilber. I find the former rather more compelling than the latter, of which more shortly.

One of the central themes of the book is the need for the heroine's journey to centrally involve the move out of the 'village' of conventional society where women have traditionally been required, or at least strongly pressured, to adopt self-abnegating roles in service to their families and husbands. Nicholson stresses that this move is attended with significantly greater difficulty than the corresponding move in the 'hero's journey', often conceptualised as the break from the primary maternal bond so as to prove himself in the quest and so grow into mature manhood:

"I argue that for women as heroine a central problematic on the path has been her self-abnegation. To overcome this, the heroine must confront the Conventional image of the 'nice girl' and 'good wife' ... It is in claiming the right to her post-Conventional, post-patriarchal eccentricity that she leaves the village and enters the forest to claim her true self." p.164

It would be a mistake, though, to suppose that this move into more mature selfhood for women must involve the sense of dissociation and alienation so often noted as the characteristic pathology of the masculine developmental path. Indeed, Nicholson notes that post-conventionality need not have this consequence for either sex:

"The Conventional masculine ideal of the separative masculine self is surpassed and out-grown as development moves into the post-conventional realm." Also 'Growth ... requires the reintegration of the communal modalities marked as feminine. The later stages "are associated with greater nurturance, trust, interpersonal sensitivity, valuing of individuality, psychological mindedness, responsibility and inner control"' pp. 166-7

These are very important themes indeed, with enormous implications for the parenting, education and socialisation of both girls and boys, though of course the focus here is on girls and women, and the book repays attention amply for this reason alone. I do have some criticisms, however, as alluded to earlier. First, however, I note the very important point, surfaced after extensive exposition and discussion of various feminist positions, that a simple reversal of patriarchal conceptualisations will not serve:

“Radical feminist philosophy has been particularly guilty of a strategic dualism which responds to the patriarchal symbolic by establishing and expelling the male and masculine as Other... As long as the practice of creating and projecting an Other continues, dualism continues unabated. Whether employed consciously or unconsciously, duality denies our intimacy and interconnectedness with the Other... In continuing through and beyond the process of deconstructing God (and without suggesting a return to Good Old God), it remains necessary to acknowledge the sacredness of male bodies, the mind, agency and the masculine divine, alongside the feminine divine, the female body, communion, feelings and earth.”

Having made this critical point, Nicholson goes on to explore the notion of the female archetype of the Self, various ‘third wave’ feminist theories and, finally, integral theory, as most influentially set out by Ken Wilber. While largely endorsing Wilber’s integral framework as ‘the most appropriate’ for the exploration of feminist consciousness, she does have some criticisms. She demurs from Wilber’s endorsement of Jürgen Habermas’ views that ‘social labour’ started with the organisation of male hunting parties, and that the shift from hominid bands to *Homo sapiens* was bound up with the ‘familialization of the male’ as father. As well, she very much disagrees that men and women could be said to have ‘co-created’ patriarchal society. I will take these issues in turn.

Nicholson points out, rightly in my view, that the paucity of material evidence for social arrangements for hominid and early *Homo sapiens* societies lends itself to the imposition of broadly ideological master narratives which cannot be easily refuted, for that very reason. One of these is, arguably, ‘Man the Hunter’. The historical circumstance that artefacts of hunting tend to be better preserved in the archaeological record than those used in foraging does make it plausible that women actually had a much greater hand at that time in what Habermas calls ‘social labour’ than he allows. It may also be just too neat and suspiciously in line with easy nineteenth century assumptions to suppose that the development of the role of father can be used as a convenient delineator of the emergence of ‘true’ human society. It is fair, nevertheless, to point out that neither of these points is in any way crucial for Wilber’s argument, as Nicholson herself notes:

Wilber’s presentation of prehistoric evidence is littered with ‘just so’ knots of assumed knowledge with regard to gender. This homogeny is at odds with his Integral multi-perspectival methodology.

Parenthetically, it might also be added that the role of the father – at least in monogamy - probably properly crystallised much later than Habermas and Wilber suggest - around the end of the Upper Palaeolithic, when multiple lines of evidence suggest that the role of the male in reproduction was finally understood, possibly as a result of observation of domesticated dogs. (See Peter Watson: *The Great Divide*, Ch.7) This coincides with the beginning florescence of ‘Goddess’ cultures in the Old World, a circumstance that probably deserves much closer consideration by all scholars of the time, regardless of their predilections. In this context, Nicholson’s critique of Gimbutas’ rather extreme version of ‘Great Goddess’ theory is salutary.

There is no more charged issue around feminist theory than the nature of patriarchy: how it arose, what kept or keeps it going and what was or is required to end it. Thus it is no surprise that this is one of the trickiest areas of Nicholson’s argument, and one where I am not altogether in accord. For context, it seems fairly clear that in the Old World sometime in the late ‘Mythic’ period and continuing strongly into the ‘Mythic – Rational’ phase of civilisation, control of the ‘means of production’ and social power more generally passed increasingly into male hands, where beforehand there is evidence of a more even power distribution. It is fairly clear that emerging technologies such as heavy ploughing, metallurgy, domestication of cattle and horses and the like put a premium on male physical strength and contributed strongly to restricting women to more ‘domestic’ roles than previously. Accompanying this were laws, social attitudes and finally theologies

and philosophies which assigned women secondary status and roles in society, as 'lesser' humans. Thus was the practice and theory of patriarchy born.

Wilber argues that this state of affairs was 'co-created' by men and women, in that, for instance, it was not in women's interests to undertake heavy ploughing, in contrast to the hoeing practices of the earlier horticultural stage, due to increased rates of miscarriage. (Although he does not say so, similar arguments may well be applied to such activities as metallurgy and horse and cattle husbandry.) Nicholson does not agree, because the nature of patriarchy has deprived women of the social power required for equal co-creation. It is true that that women exert power at certain levels in conventional society, but '[Wilber's] theory fails to address the broader context in which voluntaristic processes are framed by coercive ones.'

This is a tricky issue, and perhaps somewhat of a moot point. Nevertheless it seems to me that Nicholson's critique of Wilber oversteps the mark somewhat. For instance, she allows 'merit' to Wilber's argument that "[F]orms of oppression and subjugation...have to be judged, not against today's structures of consciousness, but against what could have been otherwise at a given previous structure", but nevertheless insists that 'it needs to be contextualised within a broader picture', in which equal co-creation was not possible for women into the twentieth century, the clear implication being that freedom from oppression and subjugation *was* possible but withheld .

I'm not so sure. It is of the nature of ideology that it provides a *post facto* rationalisation for already existing states of affairs, which is typically not seen as such by the ideologist, for the very important reason that they are embedded in the relevant world view and see the ideology as just an exposition of *how the world actually is*. Consequently it can often be hopeless to berate them for not seeing how oppressive their ideology is, as many people have discovered when talking to religious fundamentalists. There is a very real sense in which early forms of mental rationality *had* to take forms that we see as ideological, and some of these have proved to be very durable in sections of the world population. It is probably futile to dispute about when rationality became mature enough to move past patriarchal ideology. I tend myself to agree with Wilber that it did so (and does) more or less when it was (and is), though Nicholson and others disagree. This is not an issue which will be readily and quickly resolved.

Moreover, I should not finish on this note. Nicholson has done us a great service in synthesising so much material from feminist, integral, developmental and other studies, as part of the vital modern project of articulating the much neglected and undervalued experiences and understandings of women, without which no human flowering is even conceivable. The project of truly integral feminism is as vital as it is challenging to all of us, as it puts in question all our traditional gender stereotypes and causes us to enquire ever more deeply into the meaning of freedom and enlightenment for both men and women. A mature feminism like Nicholson's in which men are no longer the problematic 'other' but very much partners in the development of a synthesis in both theory and practice which is liberational for all of us is a truly important development. Let the journey continue!

Keith Price