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Women as Ecological Subjects: Care and Political Ecology of War in Kristin Hannah's *The Women*

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Abstract
Through a close reading of *The Women* (2024), using the framework of feminist political ecology, this paper examines how women nurses, as ecological subjects in militaristic landscapes, come under institutional neglect, and how this neglect of their embodied experiences in war zones further renders their lives more vulnerable and precarious. It also studies how the emotional and ecological labour, care and maintenance offered by the women combat nurses is undervalued and masculine spectacular violence at war is privileged. It also analyses how women and men engaged in combat were perceived differently at their homes as well.

Keywords: care, emotional labour, institutional neglect, ecological subject

Introduction

Canonical war narratives have presented men as crucial and critical participants with agency, relegating the role of women to the margins or to invisibility. But feminist interventions have attempted to dismantle such hegemonies and extend the space of war beyond battlefields to include acts of care, body, labour, etc. Feminist Political Ecology, in particular, places gender as a determining axis in terms of allocation of resources, policy framing processes and places war in a gendered ecological premise. Studying the American novelist Kristin Hannah's *The Women* through the Feminist Political Ecological framework reveals it as a counter-war narrative, highlighting the role of women during and after war and reclaiming their voices and significance from historical erasure and institutional neglect.

Feminist Political Ecology emerged at the intersection of feminist theory, political ecology, and critical geography, challenging gender-neutral analyses of environmental and political systems. Central to FPE is the recognition that power, labour, and vulnerability are unevenly distributed across gendered bodies and environments. Rather than treating ecological harm or vulnerability as natural outcomes, FPE insists that they are politically produced through institutional arrangements that privilege certain lives while rendering others expendable. Although early FPE scholarship focused on development, agriculture, and resource management, more recent work has extended its insights to militarisation, environmental violence, and war. When applied to war, feminist political ecology reconceptualises conflict as a political ecology in which landscapes, infrastructures, and bodies are reorganised through militarised power. War produces damaged environments—jungles turned battlefields, hospitals turned triage zones, homes turned sites of disillusionment—and relies on gendered divisions of labour to manage the resulting human and ecological fallout. Feminised care work becomes central to sustaining life within these environments, even as it remains politically and historically marginalised.

Through a close reading of *The Women* (2024), this paper examines how women nurses, as ecological subjects in militaristic landscapes, come under institutional neglect, and how this neglect of their embodied experiences in war zones further renders their lives more vulnerable and precarious. It also studies how the emotional and ecological labour, care and maintenance offered by the women combat nurses is undervalued and masculine spectacular violence at war is privileged. It also analyses how women and men engaged in combat were perceived differently at their homes as well.

Living in the McGrath Estate at Colorado Island, California, Frances McGrath, the daughter of …and brother to Finley McGath, has been brought up as a 'well-bred young lady' (Hannah, 3). The turmoil and unrest going across the country was quite alien to her, 'as incomprehensible as the conflict in a faraway Vietnam' (3), and she was expected to contain any untoward emotions as she was taught 'at home and at church and at St. Bernadette's Academy for Girls' (3). The office of her father had a hero's wall with photos of men in uniform and women in wedding dresses. Frances believed that the hero's wall was to honour the sacrifices made by the family members in service of their country, which was solely represented by the photos of the male members in uniform and it never occurred to her that women could also be heroes till Joseph Ryerson Walsh, a friend of Finley pointed it to her. Her confrontation with a young man who worked as a short timer at Vietnam, who lost his leg, during her job as a newly appointed nurse made her realise that there are nurses in Vietnam which ignited the spark in her.

Frances never knew about women working on the warfront because 'newspapers never mentioned any women. Certainly no one talked about any women at war.'(14). This dawned on her as startling news, and coupled with the memory of Rye's statement that women can be heroes, Frances decides to join the warfront. She does not seek any counsel, even though she

carefully thought over it, and finally, 'she knew what she wanted to do' (15). She got herself enrolled on the Army Nurse Corps as Second Lieutenant Frances McGrath.

War narratives are often gendered with the glorification of bravery, sacrifice, and stoicism as masculine ideals, overlooking the participation of women as combat nurses, soldiers, administrative officers, spies, and civilians enduring violence, assaults, neglect and silence. A substantial number of narratives of the Vietnam War, waged against Vietnam by America from 1955 to 1975, leading to massive deaths and environmental destruction, have a similar element. At this instance, *The Women,* through the experiences of Miss McGrath, Barb and Ethel, foreground the turbulent lives of combat nurses at war. Unlike how women like them were trained to be – docile, pleasant, fragile, obedient- they, particularly Frances, owing to separate reasons, eventually decide 'to be good at something that mattered' (88).

The political ecology of war is a vulnerable environment wrought with violence, indiscriminate destruction of nature and man, pain, grief, denial of human rights and access to resources for a dignified life, relentless labour and death. The combat nurses in the novel can be considered as ecological subjects whose lives are directly structured by environmental conditions produced through political processes. Stationed in field hospitals carved out of jungle landscapes and overwhelmed by mass casualties, they inhabit spaces where human bodies and environments are simultaneously degraded by militarisation.'The Army was full of terms like back in the world. That was how everyone referred to the life that they'd left behind' (50). The nurses and doctors live in shackles and mean conditions, tending to the wounded soldiers with absolute attention and vigilance. As ecological subjects, the nursing work performed by the combat nurses stabilises fragile human ecologies within spaces of destruction, transforming chaotic sites of violence into temporary zones of care. Feminist political ecology prioritises such maintenance and repair work and places it as foundational to political life, especially within damaged systems. But this labour is often feminised and therefore naturalised as instinctive rather than recognised as skilled, essential work.

In addition to the physical treatment, the nurses provided the emotional care and support they needed at the crucial moments of battling with death and loss. Unlike the Marxist understanding of work as manufacturing wage labour that produces goods to be exchanged for money (Bauhardt 18), feminist analysis views labour as producing value. This emotional labour involved holding the hand of the wounded and dying soldiers, smiling at them, and giving them hope through gentle words. The constant regulation of fear, grief, and urgency becomes a survival strategy within the war zone for the nurses. It demanded that women develop self-help mechanisms to manage the distraught situation- 'she'd developed a hard shell to protect her heart from what she saw and the confidence to move past her own fear to help the men -and women, and children- who ended up in the OR. That was the only way to survive' (89).

Arlie Russell Hochschild in *The Managed Heart* (1983) uses the term emotional labor 'to mean the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value.' (7)

> This labor requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others-in this case, the sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place. This kind of labor calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality. (7)

Being a woman who is trained more to manage her emotions, she identifies herself with the pain and suffering of the wounded soldiers and the Vietnamese with almost negligible sense of detachment. This conjugality with her job, with a deep-seated guilt if she abandons it when people around her need her, burns her completely. The emotional labour offered selflessly at times of war surpasses the desire to return to the comforts of one's own home. 'How could she leave this hospital and the casualties … who needed her?'(178-179). Yet this emotional labour accumulates over time, leaving lasting psychological and bodily residues.

The active intervention of the war nurses enables sustainability in war zones through ecological practices of care and repair. Working under conditions of precarity and neglect at the field hospital, evacuation centres and emergency rooms, the nurses' service is indispensable.In *Moral Boundaries* Joan C. Tronto offers a definition framed by him and Berenice Fisher. 'On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web' (103).

The disownment of her experiences and identity as a nurse by her family members destroys her further. Frances's father presented her reason for absence at Colorado Island using a fib (that she was elsewhere for studies), which shocks her. 'He was ashamed of me? Ashamed of my service, after all those stories, all that hero talk?' (227). Unlike the men glorified at the hero's wall of her house, the participation of his daughter in war is considered a despicable act deserving no credit. The father of Frances resisted accepting her daughter's involvement in the war. At a party hosted by the family, his dual treatment becomes evident. Having never acknowledged Frances, he cheerfully welcomes the male soldier Lieutenant Commander Leo Stall. 'He lifted a glass. "To the men who serve! From a grateful nation." Frankie slammed her empty glass on the bar. … *The men who serve. A grateful nation.* She felt a surge of anger, downed her second drink, and looked back at the gate. Could she leave yet?' (331). The reluctance to validate and the urge to invisibilise and erase leads to self-doubt and loss of self-worth and confidence in the women.

The extractivist ideology of the state is detrimental towards the care and emotional labour offered by women at militarised environment. The disparity between the American government's portrayal of the war and the reality faced by the soldiers and nurses was startling. The reports never mentioned women, and this terrible neglect of the lives and experiences of the combat nurses was deeply unjustifiable. This deeply harrowed the women who returned from war, as people refused to accept their participation in the war, let alone their experiences. In addition, Post-traumatic stress disorder destroyed the chance of their lives getting aligned

with the societies to which they belonged before they ventured into their lives in militarised spaces. The spaces, such as the Veterans Administration Outpatient Clinic, meant to help the veterans, turned down Frances even though she is a veteran. Now this refusal to attend to her psychological malfunction is based on the assertion that 'she hadn't seen combat, hadn't been wounded or tortured' (275). On the other hand, they offer help to the men who participated in the combat. The affective labour of the nurses was crucial to sustain life at war zones but the embodied experiences of these women are dispossessed once the need is over. Memorialisation privileges combat and sacrifice while neglecting the infrastructures of care that sustain life during conflict. Tangible, 'productive' combat work performed at the war front by soldiers is valued. In contrast, the experiences of the combat nurses are overlooked and devalued, and the harm caused by the war on these women is not recognised.

> "I'm a veteran," she said''…
> There weren't women in 'Nam. …
> Just move to the side Ma'am. This is for the men who were fighting. In combat, you know?"…
> What the hell?
> … "I WAS THERE,'' she screamed in frustration. (295)

Thus, the distress caused by the emotional labour and the hangover of the emotional turmoil remains unaddressed due to insufficient mechanisms to address the trauma of the nurses who worked in Vietnam, alleviating the injustice meted out to them in private and public spaces. The choices made in the domestic space and by the nation are severely gendered. Through administrative silence, denial and erasure, the state chooses to hold back the credit due to the women. Women's labour, especially in caregiving roles, is frequently excluded from official histories, memorials, and veteran narratives. This erasure has material consequences as recognition often determines access to resources, legitimacy, and care. The absence of women from institutional memory thus reproduces their exclusion from institutional support. Thus, the combat nurses become disposable bodies suffering under slow violence. The human rights and environmental justice deserved by them are withheld. Their desire to recuperate and return to their normal selves is denied by the state through constant and systematic denial of their experiences and stories. Institutional neglect thus operates not only through absence but through active misrecognition of women's labour as non-political and non-ecological. By naturalising these women's suffering, the system perceives the emotional and psychological damage sustained by the nurses as private failure rather than a public consequence of war.

In addition the ecological destruction done at the Vietnamese landscape affect the bodies of the women and its function. From a feminist political ecology perspective, this damaged environment is not incidental but politically produced, shaped by military strategies that treat land as expendable and instrumental. The use of Agent Orange has been deeply detrimental, affecting the reproductive capacities and leading to miscarriages and stillbirths. '"I had four miscarriages," Liz said, tears bright in their eyes. "A baby might have saved me, us, you know. And all that time, they were spraying that shit, killing us all slowly"'(452). These

destructive policies are never regretted or their impact adequately addressed. Nevertheless, the repeated protests and claims for acceptance led to the establishment of a War Memorial recording the history and memory of a period seeped in deaths, sacrifice, labour and care.

On the other hand, the novel resists dominant political ecologies that prioritise control, extraction, and visibility, instead foregrounding care, interdependence, and vulnerability as central to understanding conflict. The marginalisation of nurses within war memory reproduces their post-war vulnerability, reinforcing institutional neglect as a continuation of wartime power relations. Militarised institutions rely on feminised care during periods of crisis and subsequently withdraw responsibility once that labour is no longer required, displacing the ecological and psychological costs of war onto women's bodies. *The Women* exposes the political ecology of war as a system that depends on feminised repair while systematically denying its long-term consequences.

The women, despite post-war vulnerability and trauma created by emotional labour, institutional neglect, reclaim themselves through women's groups as well. 'We are the women who went to war- the nurses of Vietnam- and many of us felt silenced at home. We lost who we were, who you wanted to be. But I'm living proof that it can get better. … It starts here. In these chairs, reminding ourselves and each other that we are not alone.''(452). The novel thus advances a feminist counter-history of conflict that redefines war through care, vulnerability, and environmental entanglement, demonstrating the critical value of feminist political ecology for literary analysis of war and memory.

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