

Bedtime Stories

by

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Abstract

Bedtime Stories is an expression of privacy and intimacy, mother and daughter relationships and their complications, fabric, needles, and storytelling.

This work is made of 100 small and large pieces of pink and blue soft sculptures, all handmade. Attention to detail is important in this work. On the first encounter, it resembles a playful and colorful piece. However, as the viewer approaches the artwork, they will notice unfamiliar shapes associated with the human body, contrasting with the space of a domestic bedroom and creating a sense of uncertainty and foreboding.

The installation incites an intimate experience for the viewer through its invitation to a private space. A bed may be the most personal thing in our everyday life: where we sleep, where we cry, where we rest when our bodies are not working as they should, where intimacy is shared, where we explore things about our bodies, and where we are able to heal.

Keywords: Intimacy; mother-daughter relationships; human body; soft sculpture

To all the women and mothers of my country.

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Defence Statement

Background of the work in relation to previous work

Over the past two years, I have been working with different materials and processes, such as paint, stitching, sculpting, photography, and video-making to explore and investigate my ideas. Even though I have tried many kinds of material, there is always a thread connecting my works and research. Coming from a background of painting and illustration, my previous works mainly were illustrations on paper or paintings on large canvases, including careful and delicate drawings of plants and flowers— mostly wild plants that I collected while travelling around the countryside of Iran. I used plants' forms and shapes to represent the human body and its mortality and fragility. My interest in the human body and human hair begins in a collection of drawings I made in 2017.

The first project I did after moving to Canada was *Pink Lacquer*, for the MFA spring show. *Pink Lacquer* consisted of three black boxes suspended on the wall, open on one side. There were paintings on the inside and outside of each box. The paintings were inspired by the old Persian style *Gol o Bolbol*, or rose and nightingale, an important motif in Persian literature and imagery. The origin of lacquer painting in Iran goes back to the late Safavid period and extends to the Qajar dynasty.

I was inspired by these motifs, personalizing them by adding my own style and interpretation of the symbolic and poetic original by adding more thorns, and making the stems of the flowers thicker and fleshier, and by exaggerating the flowers. My association with this style of painting goes back to my family history and to my grandfather, who was a professional traditional painter in this style in Esfahan. Inside each box were something related to my country, my mother, and memories of home.

This is a work about grieving losing my mother, about emigration, about my country, about being a woman and motherhood and spending hours in bed from depression. Every time I would think about or miss “home” I would think about my mother as if my mother was Iran. This is when I became interested in the notions of women and nature and land relationship. I continued working on these subject matters, and I was naturally drawn to work with fabric, stitching, and embroidery. Although it was

something I was always curious to use as a serious tool for making art but never felt the urge and necessity. I had some basic knowledge of the materials since I learned some techniques from my mother. She was very good with fabric and threads. She was an excellent quilter.

I started a new project that involved fifty pieces of embroidery, primarily in small sizes. For getting the textures and colours that I wanted, I used organic natural ingredients such as beets, pomegranate skin, turmeric, etc. to dye the fabrics. I chose to work with natural ingredients as this project was about the relationship between women and land. I wanted to explore the options of working with all-natural ingredients and see how labour-intensive the process was. One of my inspirations for this technique was how nomadic women produced *gabbeh* and dyed the yarn in their natural environment.

Natural dyeing gave me a beautiful result of rich and earthly colours and little surprises here and there throughout the process. I am also experienced with eco printing, using real flowers and leaves on fabric with different techniques such as steaming or pounding on natural fibers. The colours used in these pieces are different shades of pink. Layers on layers were stitched by hand or sewing machine, producing a collection of shapes and forms. I used photography and painting as well. Layers of fabric represent wrinkles, spots, internal tissues, hair, etc., like skin. My goal was to play with the themes of art and craft and femininity, to find the lines between what is accepted as art and what is accepted as craft, to explore how some materials are inherently associated with women, and to ask how we can challenge these narratives to find a position in the contemporary art world. Within this debate, finding my own identity as an artist who values skill and technique in her art practice. I sometimes catch myself trying to look at my art through a male perspective or seeking validation by men: attitudes which I believe were rooted in the culture and the life experiences I had. It was always hard to be seen and be valued in art school back home, if the work was “too feminine.”

So, it was time to dig deeper within my work into my embodiment as a woman. Is this work not worthy of attention because of its delicacy and feminine qualities? Will this work be taken seriously? Or am I just playing the role of a woman that my family and my society wanted me to play? And if this is the case, how can I unlearn that? How much are the culture and nature of my environment affecting my art? Is this necessarily a bad thing, or is there something that needs to be fixed? These are some of the questions I

was personally dealing with while working with fabric and threads. And still, I have no clear answers for them.

Judy Chicago writes about her famous work *The Dinner Party* 1979 in her book *The Flowering*. Here, she explains how she learned china painting on porcelain, a traditional technique of painting on plates that is mostly associated with women and craft. Chicago raises the question of why porcelain paintings were not considered art. She argues that this is related to gender and that some techniques and skills are gendered throughout history. She quotes Elissa Auther from her book, *String, Felt, Thread*:

In the art history...there is a matching up of gender and aesthetic hierarchies: art, associated with mind and the idea, is implicitly coded as masculine, while craft, associated with materials as end in themselves...is implicitly coded as feminine.¹

Auther explains in her book *String, Felt, Thread* how some female artists, such as Chicago and Miriam Schapiro or Claire Zeisler, in the 1970s, validated the use of feminine craft skills and the use of fiber in the contemporary arts, while making a feminist statement, since the fiber was mostly associated with women and domestic work. Auther focuses primarily on a specific artistic material, the fiber in the western hierarchy of art over craft.

Traditionally, distinguishing between art and craft seems obvious. Chicago writes: “one could say that, the main historical distinction between art and craft is that in art techniques are customarily put in the service of personal subject matter, whereas in craft they are generally employed for other purposes, including the simple demonstration of skill.”² She continues how nobody ever questioned her choice of material, probably because they were associated with the more masculine materials of the art world until she decided to take up china painting, a “crafty” technique mostly associated with women. She later mentions; “it is ridiculous to associate a technique with a particular gender.”³ As much as I agree with this statement, I believe this association is still very

¹ Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

² Judy Chicago, *The Flowering: The Autobiography of Judy Chicago* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc, 2021), 118.

³ *Ibid.*, 119.

rooted in the art world. There is space to challenge and explore the genderizing and hierarchal system of art and craft, my goal is to investigate more and break the barriers through my art practice while also challenging myself to find new ways of visualizing the material since they have been used in so many ways by well-known female artists around the world such as Elaine Reichek, Orly Cogan, and Ghada Amer.

I moved on to photography and collage-making for the last project I did before my final project. This new series of works circulated around similar notions of womanhood, motherhood, nature, and my own body. I explored these matters by taking photos of the abstract installation of flowers and plants, collaging with a thin layer of transparent paper on which I had drawn body hair, and recapturing the images with digital photography. These projects were all investigations about my embodiment: myself as a woman, as an Iranian, and as a daughter, a walk through my grief for my mother—a celebration of her art and femininity—an illustration of mortality and death. They consider the female body in my art as a primary subject of study and investigate how cultural tendencies, politics, nature and relationships affect a woman's mind and body.

Lady Iran

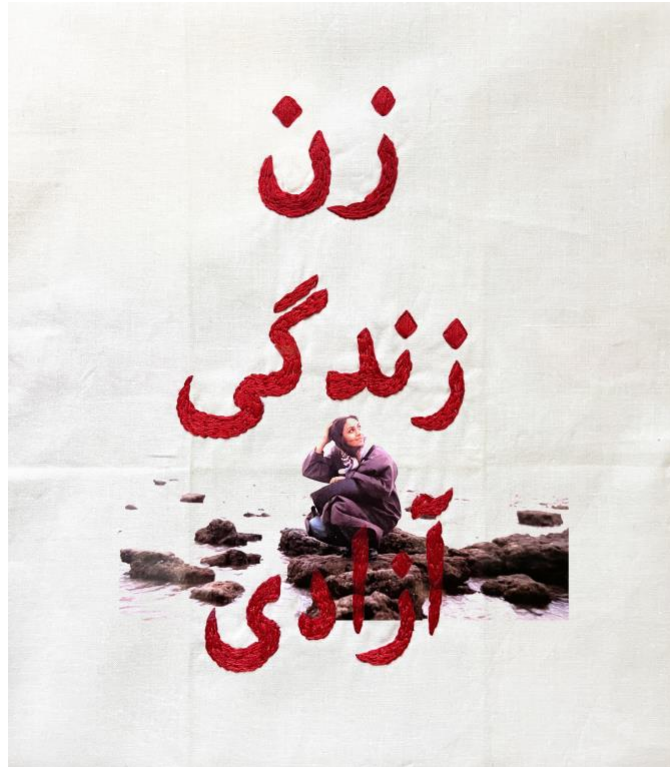


Figure 1. *Woman, Life, Freedom*, embroidery and collage, 2022, Vancouver, Canada.

Before discussing my final project, *Bedtime Stories*, I will speak to the current situation in Iran and how it relates to my artistic practice. As I write this statement, women of Iran are protesting compulsory Hijab. They are getting arrested, shot at, and killed on the streets. Iranian women have been under the pressure of patriarchy for many decades. However, since the revolution, patriarchy has been promoted and strengthened by reverting to old Islamic codes and enforced patriarchal practices, such as controlling female appearance and mobility.

In September 2022 a 22-year-old girl named Mahsa Jina Amini was brutally killed while in the custody of the so-called morality police in Tehran simply because she wasn't fully covering her hair. The people of Iran could not stand for this unjust and violent attack. They have been filled with anger for years, and now the streets of Iran are filled with shouts of "Woman, Life, Freedom." Iranians were a silenced volcano that could no longer be stopped from erupting. I am heartbroken for what is happening to all these young women my age and younger, fighting and leading protests on the streets of Iran.

Now more than ever, I'm experiencing a close connection to my land and its women. I'm far from them—I'm dealing with guilt and confusion—I'm shaking and in tears, and my roots to Iran are more vital than ever. Although I feel the most isolated and out of place that I have felt over these last two years of staying in Canada, I am also filled with hope and a sense of freedom for my country. This is an unprecedented revolution happening in Iran with women at the forefront.

The situation in Iran has me thinking more about my body. I find myself returning to the same place I had just gotten out of—my bed—for days reading and watching the news, feeling angry, feeling worried. Something in me is awake now, something that was always there but asleep and pushed back existing in ignorance. These twenty-five years of living in Iran and their effect on my body as a woman are shining through cracks I thought did not exist. The protests in Iran have made me more powerful and aware of my mind and body. This feeling has been with me through the last years: some sort of repressed trauma. Looking back at my art practice with this new perspective, I realize that these issues and feelings were always visible in my artworks. During my time making art in Iran, I always had to find indirect ways to refer to anything related to sexuality and womanhood. However, as a result I learned new ways of approaching art while still working on a subject I like. This indirect approach is clear in the works I have made; the use of layers is one of the outcomes. (figure 2)



Figure 2. My mother and her friend, mixed media, 2018, Tehran, Iran.

The fear and oppression of women's voices and bodies and the self-censorship were there hidden in my art and are now visible to my soul. Like muscle memories in my body waiting for a hint to grow back again I am again thinking about my mother; women of all ages are protesting in the streets. How did she feel about being a woman being forced to wear a hijab she didn't believe in; how did she feel when she was not allowed to leave the country unless my father would give written permission for her to travel? We never talked about these issues together. It never came up in the time I had with her.

Iran is a woman's name. People of Iran refer to their country as "Lady Iran" or "Mother Iran" and the "Motherland". Hearing these words being shouted in the streets makes me think about my mother, about all the mothers who they have lost their children protesting the regime, and all the mothers who are screaming in the streets asking for

justice and attacking police guards with their bare hands, and all the mothers who are taking off their scarves after years just to stand with the younger generation. However, identifying land or the natural world with women is a topic of discussion between feminists. Why does feminizing the land matter in the slogans and chants that people use when they are going through a revolution? Why do people tend to come up with these phrases to invite each other to unite and save our mother, Iran? Is it for men to feel more powerful and come save the "Lady Iran"? Or is it just a symbolic, poetic slogan in celebration of women that is harmless?

Women because of their bodily realities that ties them to pregnancy and motherhood or being a "provider", are historically associated with nature, and men carries the privilege of "culture."⁴ As Ann Cahill puts it "...Women were bodies so that men could be minds—so that men could be human."⁵ In contrast to this we are witnessing a revolution in Iran led by women who are aware of the dangers of being treated as second-hand citizens and inferiors to men; therefore, their only words are "Woman, Life, Freedom" and nothing more.

Bedtime Stories

This work is a collection of small and large soft sculptures coming out of the wall, starting from small to more extensive, and laid down on the floor, in variations of pink and a small amount of blue. Each piece has its own individual character and texture. The materials used in the piece are primarily fabrics that my mother bought years ago to make quilts, which she never got the chance to use. I collected them on my last trip to Iran and brought them back to Vancouver for this project. There are beads and hair carefully sewn on some of the pieces. None of the details are similar, although most are made up of round, oval, and penis-like shapes. For the filling, I mainly used second-hand polyester. A large TV screen is on the other wall next to the sculpture. Displaying a video of the sculpture located in the artist's bedroom. The sculpture is lying on the bed at night.

⁴ Among the slogans of "Woman, Life, Freedom" you would sometimes hear a slogan "Mard, Mihaan, Abadi," which means "Men, Homeland, Prosperity." This slogan, which is mostly chanted by fans of the Islamic Republic, is exactly what women are fighting against. When combined with the first slogan, it suggests that men are the makers of the country and culture, while women are life and giving birth.

⁵ Ann J. Cahill, *Rethinking Rape* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), 53.

There is no movement, it is only a still video of the sculpture in a real-life bedroom, where nothing is staged, and everything is documented as it is with the artist's voice narrating a few short stories about her life back home, and her mother. The bedroom is the sculpture's natural habitat, where it was first born and has grown. (figure 3)



Figure 3. *Bedtime Stories, Artist's bedroom, 2022, Vancouver, Canada.*

The Process of making and how it influenced the final work

First, I sketched my idea for the end result, then I began to collect the materials (fabrics, beads, threads). I carefully managed the colors and textures I needed to create and made some changes to the colors and patterns throughout the process. I start by making the small pieces first and trying to find a balance between looking like body parts and abstract shapes, a balance between toys and art, something disturbing yet funny and delicate. The first few shapes were mostly circles or small penis-like shapes. Still, as I continued making and consulting my supervisor, I came to the decision that I needed to prevent the work from looking like sexualized male anatomy as it was not my intention for the work to look only like penises. At this point I made more oversized shapes that did not take the realistic shapes of any body parts; they are not an exact reminder of any specific details of the human body. The first few weeks went smoothly, but as soon as I started making the bigger pieces, it got out of hand, it was difficult. I made the whole piece in my bedroom. I put the pieces on my bed every night before going to bed to

check and see how they look. How much more do I need to make? What shades and shapes are required? This process is exactly how I would paint a large canvas, but the difference was that the forms were three-dimensional, which made it more challenging for me in many ways.

An immense amount of physical labor went into completing this work: almost two months of working with hand and sewing machine. I chose to make all the pieces myself with no help in the privacy of my room. As seen in the documentation, the sculpture is attached to the quilt made by my mother. However, you do not see the quilt in the gallery; this resulted from consultation with my supervisor and committee members. This decision was made because of the importance of the quilt: its connection to my mother, its domestic and sacred position in my bedroom, and it is part of the setting in the room. (figure 4)



Figure 4. My bedroom and the quilt, 2022, Vancouver, Canada.

“I attached the work to the gallery's wall” means I grabbed the pink creature attached to my bed and the quilt and installed it in the gallery as a lifeless creature. It

became just a symbol of what it had been when it was living in my bedroom. I have taken a lot of footage to choose from for the monitor display. I selected footage of my body sleeping in bed next to the sculpture, and footage of the sculpture alone. Finally, I included an image of the creature on the bed, and my voice narrating stories in the background.

How did this happen?

When I woke up this morning, I found I'd turned into my mother. There I was, in my mother's bed, with my feet reaching all the way to the bottom, and my father sleeping in the other bed I said to myself, and if I have my mother's hair, I probably have her face, too.⁶

The idea of this project came to me in the summer of 2022 when I went back home to visit my family and friends, after two years of being away from home for the first time in my life. Going back home brought all sorts of emotions back, things I was trying to ignore and push back in my mind. They all came back to life. They all returned to me, and I couldn't stop them anymore. I was in our "home" where I lived my whole life, where I couldn't escape reality and the things I went through, reliving the trauma of losing my mother in the same house, in her bedroom, on her bed. Her bed was a significant object in my life. A bed where she rested, where she read books, where she cried, experienced pain, experienced love, anger, and death. People with terminal cancer spend a lot of time on one chair, bed, or anything they feel comfortable with. They call it "the cancer chair." For my mother, her bed was the cancer chair. Seeing her slowly fade from my life on that bed was my first time facing with death and mortality.

I was seeing how her body was fighting against this killing sickness and looking at her body and how it was changing its shape and function every month, how it was getting weaker and more fragile, how she was losing her hair for the third time in the last four years, how her breast was deforming, how she was getting thinner every day. One of the signs of patients with terminal illnesses close to the end is sleeping much more than usual. They just spent a lot of time in bed, half asleep. In January 2020, my mother passed away at our house on her same old bed. I was shocked, standing at her doorstep witnessing, feeling numb, then I crawled back to my bed. I stayed there for

⁶ Mary Rodgers, *Freaky Friday* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 1.

months and months, grieving. I moved to Canada 6 months after her death. I got here when it was cold, and it was in the middle of the pandemic. I crawled back to my new bed here in Vancouver. I stayed there for months, filled with all sorts of old and new emotions. While it took me two years to process all of this and go through my grief, which I am still going through in different ways. I was back at square one this summer back home at the same house.

I remember her hair falling after a few chemotherapies. I remember collecting and vacuuming all the time because of her hair loss. She always hated seeing hair on the ground, even when she wasn't sick. She was always complaining about how we needed to vacuum our house every day because we are hairy and our hair falls a lot, and it is thick and black, and it looked gross on the white floor of our home. When I fell back into my bed for a few months in Vancouver, I was only thinking about my mother and a little bit about Iran. I was thinking about her body parts, about her fingernails, about her toes. Then I would compare my fingers and toes to see if I look like my mother or my father!

Mothers and daughters are connected in so many levels, the body, the physical experiences, the bond and the similarities and psychological projection. We are constantly checking to see how similar we are to our mothers. We compare how our bodies are developing as we get older to our mothers' bodies, and sometimes these changes become a secret between us. And as we get older, we are seeking separation and autonomy. This shows itself in different and sometimes unpleasant ways in the relationship we have with our mothers.

My mother had some hair on her toes, it wasn't even that noticeable, but I would look at it and wonder, why does it bother me? Then again, I would look at my feet to compare and to make sure I would shave those little hairs.⁷

There are many associations of female body and abjection: bodily fluids, the body hair, the menstruation. Women's body hair has become something unnatural and something that needs to be removed, something unaccepted and known as "dirty," by

⁷ Growing up in a culture where women's beauty is very much valued and encouraged and women spend so much time and money on their appearance, got me thinking of my mother and her own relationship with her body and its influence on me and the close and unspoken relationship between a mother and daughter through our bodies.

societies almost all around the world. As Kristeva explains in *Powers of Horror*, “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”⁸

What disturbs system and order: the female body in its natural state disturbs us, that little “unwanted” hair bothers us.

Body hair, then, when it moves into an object status, can push people into having to experience the collapse of order and of self-other distinctions, resulting in a heightened emotional reaction to something seemingly small, trivial, and mundane.⁹

In this project, I wanted to think about unexplored or less explored ways of presenting a body, using abjection by focusing on body hair, defamiliarization and creating undesirable shapes and associations. to ornament the way I feel about my body or my mother’s body. To make the viewers ask themselves, “Why am I reacting to this the way I am?” and to challenge the viewers by the colorfulness of the piece and delicate decorations while noticing strange shapes and details. (figure 5)

⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University press, 1982), 4.

⁹ Breanne Fahs, *Unshaved: Resistance and Revolution in Women's Body Hair Politics*.(Seattle, Wash: University of Washington Press, 2022), 19.



Figure 5. Details, *Bedtime Stories*, 2022, Vancouver, Canada.

Somehow, I managed to get out of bed. I was holding my mother's little quilt, standing in my room, surrounded by images and memories. I decided to make a soft sculpture, a body that lies on my bed. Like me, like my mother, for hours without movement, it is alive but still. It is cute, pink, playful, erotic, disgusting, and unfamiliar, and has things to discover. It looks like a living organism growing and shining. It is coming out of the quilt that my mom made. It is growing inside of that and coming out on my bed, cuddling me until I'm asleep. Telling me little stories every night of my mother of her body and organs, of motherhood, giving birth, of having sex of sadness and loneliness. It is not an enemy or a monster, it is part of me. I tried to capture the sculpture in my room as it is living there with me, and it's there when I go to bed to hold me and sing a lullaby for me. (figure 6)



Figure 6. *Bedtime stories*, 2022, Artist's bed, Vancouver, Canada.

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Project Documentation

Images



Figure 7. **Bedtime Stories, 2022. Audain Gallery, SFU Goldcorp Center for the Art, Vancouver, Canada.**



Figure 8. Bedtime Stories, 2022. Audain Gallery, SFU Goldcorp center for the Arts, Vancouver, Canada.



Figure 9. **Bedtime Stories, 2022. video display, Audain Gallery, SFU Goldcorp center of the Arts, Vancouver, Canada.**



Figure 10. Bedtime Stories, 2022. Detail. Audain Gallery, SFU Goldcorp, Center for the Arts, Vancouver, Canada.



Figure 11. Bedtime Stories, 2022. Audain Gallery, SFU Goldcorp, Center for the Arts, Vancouver, Canada.



Figure 12 Bedtime Stories, 2022, work in progress, Artist's bedroom, Vancouver, Canada.

Appendix A. Mother Earth

I will greet the sun again
and the little river that once ran in me
and the clouds that were my ruminations
and the aching blooms of poplar trees,
my companions in those seasons of drought.

[...]

I will greet the earth again,
who in her lust to create me again,
fills her fiery belly with seeds of green (Farrokhzad).

Reading this beautiful poem, we enter a conversation between the writer and the readers. The writer speaks about a connection with nature, a return to where she belongs, the belly of nature or earth? As if she were born by nature. It is as if she were lost somewhere and nature was her safe place, her hope for future or her real home. She knows how to speak the language of nature, for her it is a way of surviving. But what is she running away from? Why does she need to take refuge in nature?

We come across this association of women and nature in literature and art very frequently. Why do we identify women with nature and feminize nature's elements? Are these associations harmful to women? Can we go back to the sacred and harmless relationship between humans and non-humans without gender sovereignty? This paper will explore the relationship between the female body and nature through the lens of literature, art, indigenous knowledge and ecofeminism.

In many of her poems, Frough Farrokhzad describes nature as a safe place for women to hide, sleep, and be far from the patriarchal society. In nature, you can be your true self. You do not have to censor yourself, hide under layers, or put on a mask to fit in society, and you can break free from all the big and little pressures placed on your body and mind as a woman. Being a woman writer or artist was very hard and is still challenging for artists in Iran. Farrokhzad—one of the most influential female writers of her time (1960) in Iran—touches on these challenges encountered in Iran's patriarchal society and tries to overcome the male gaze and impose her own perspective through words.

In her article *Nature of Identity*, Jessica Dailey explains Farrokhzad's poem *The Wall*:

In addition to this theme of escape into nature, Farrokhzad incorporates ideas of the parallel destruction of women and nature through common violence. Patriarchal violence leaves its mark forever on nature and is also the force that systematically works to disenfranchise women (27).

As Dailey mentions in her article, Farrokhzad is using nature not just as a place of escape but as a "female utopia" (24). But is nature women's utopia? Are women inherently more rooted and connected to nature than men? When we think about humans and the origins of the human species, humans have always had a very close relationship with nature; men and women lived in a natural environment with the bare minimum of tools and equipment to make their lives easier. Yet they lived in peace with other creatures and plants and trees; they were all a part of the bigger whole—Earth.

Vanessa Watts, in her article, "Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency Amongst Humans and Non Humans," describes the indigenous concept of the world (the feminine and the land) and, through indigenous stories, the relationship between "humans and humans, humans and non-humans, and non-humans and non-humans" (4).

However, all humans are a part of nature. Women are more associated with nature than men because of their procreative abilities and reproductive system, which discharge blood and life itself, giving life to other humans. They nurse and feed a baby the same way nature gifts things to humans without any conditions, they are both providers in the eyes of patriarchy.

As Watts states in her article: "The land is understood to be female: First Woman designates the beginning of the animal world, the plant world, and human beings. It is the femininity of earth itself that institutes all beings as literal embodiments of localized meanings" (8).

Indigenous literature shows that women's relationship with nature is far from the negative and oppressive one perceived in Western culture. This relationship is sacred and beautiful and in no way indicates the submissiveness of women or shows that women are inferior to men.

Benedict of Akwesasne's Cornwall Island is a Mohawk writer. She wrote a poem illustrating the beautiful and peaceful relationship between women and the land. Here is the first part of the poem, *Sweetgrass Is Around Her* from the book *Sinister Wisdom*:

A woman was sitting on a rock.
I could see her clearly,
even though she was far away.
She was Teiohontasen, my mother's aunt.
She was a basket maker.
When I was young, my mother told me
that her name meant
"Sweetgrass is all around her."
I thought that it was a good name
for a basket maker.
She was in her eighties then.
She was short like me,
and a bit stout.
She knew the land well;
and the plants,
and the medicines,
and the seasons.
She knew how to talk
to the Creator too;
and the thunderous,
and the rainmakers.
She had a big bundle of sweetgrass at her side.
It was long, and green, and shiny (173).

As Robin Wall Kimmerer explains in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, the power of storytelling can heal our broken relationship with the land. Kimmerer mentions that Wiingaashk, or sweetgrass, was the first to grow on the earth, and its fragrance is a sweet memory of Skywoman's hand (5).

Wiingaashk waves in strands, long and shining like a woman's freshly washed hair. So we say it is the flowing hair of Mother Earth. When we braid sweetgrass, we are braiding the hair of Mother Earth, showing her our loving attention and care for her beauty and well-being, in gratitude for all she has given us (5).

As we read through these stories and become more familiar with indigenous knowledge, we see the purity and value in the relationship between women and nature, that it is something valuable and worth talking and caring about. Women were respected in the community; they were in charge of decision-making and trusted with many big roles. While Indigenous women were at peace with their sacred relationship with nature, colonialization began, and colonizers started to commodify nature like everything else in life. They introduced patriarchy and toxic hierarchies to Indigenous communities and the whole world. When commodification of the female body began, women became only child bearers in the eyes of colonizers: "Women were bodies so that men could be minds__ so that men could be human" (Cahill 53).

The sacred relationship between women and nature was endangered. The relationship between men and nature became violent. The land was modified to help humans improve in industrialization. Humans started to take from the land instead of learning and living with it. Simultaneously, women were pushed to believe they were inherently inferior to men. With the rise of capitalism came the idea of "using" nature and equally "use" of women.

Motherhood and childbearing became something "natural", so it became less valuable as men were busy with "culture". As Watts says in her article "Indigenous Place-thought":

Over time and through processes of colonization, the corporeal and theoretical borders of the epistemological-ontological divide contribute to colonial interpretations of nature/creation that center the human and peripheries nature into an exclusionary relationship (7).

Linda Hogan is an Indigenous woman from the Chickasaw Nation. She was born in 1947. She is a writer, poet, activist, and environmentalist. She discusses the relationship between women and animals, considering the damaging effect that colonization and patriarchy have had on them. In her poem, *Hunger*, she uses the sea and sea animals as a symbol of women (Dailey 39), and she uses this metaphor and symbolic form in a pronounced way. In the first and second stanzas of the poem *Hunger* from the article *The Nature of Identity*:

Hunger crosses oceans.
It loses its milk teeth.
It sits on the ship and cries.
Thin, afraid, it fashioned hooks to catch
the passing songs of whales so large
the men grew small
as distant, shrinking lands.
They sat on the ship and cried.

We realize that hunger is a man, and the concept of hunger can be associated with colonization, industrialization, and consumerism. Again, it is a very clear symbolism, but as Dailey mentions in her book: "This may be seen as making things too obvious but given the importance and the urgency of the subject matter, sexual violence against indigenous women, the moral may prove to be more important than the mode of conveyance "(38).

As the colonizers began commodifying the natural environment and the beauty and generosity of it to make a profit, in opposition to the way Indigenous people think about animals and nature, so started the commodification and objectification of women. Women became objects for men's pleasure; people started forcing Western beauty standards on the female body and taking away their basic rights, such as voting or driving. Nature and femininity both became oppressed in patriarchal societies.

Carolyn Merchant, in her article *Earth Care*, talks about how some feminists, such as Mary Daly, Sherry Ortner, and Susan Griffin, believed that the recent cultures are all fundamentally patriarchal and denigrate women in significant ways by identifying

them with nature. Merchant also elaborates on how language and symbols have been used to devalue women by identifying them with nature in science and philosophy and says that these terms should change (8).

People use many phrases to describe women's appearances and behavior by comparing them to nature, such as: "she is soft like a flower", "she is sacred like a river or a virgin land". The list goes on. These phrases should not be something to devalue women with. Comparing a female body to a "virgin" land implies permission to take the "virginity" away as a form of attack to the enemy's land, as colonizers raped the lands of people and took away their resources and beauty, as well as their women. Why in the times of conflict and war, attacks are phrased as sexual attacks towards women? As we witness this in countries like Iran, in times of war men use the world Namoos (ناموس), which means one's wife or daughter as honor and dignity "I will not let anyone get near my honor". As I will protect my honor (women's of my life) as I'm protecting my land. We hear phrases such as "Motherland" in situations of national crisis, when people are protesting for their own country. They tend to feminize the land to show their (the men's) need to protect the land because it is the Motherland or the Namoos. At the same time, while this might feel respectful to the women of the country, it has become a means of oppression by putting women and nature in one group and men and culture in another group, giving men the higher power to take control over the land without letting women participate in the decision-making. Inherently there is nothing wrong with Motherland or phrases like this, but when it gets in the contexts of politics and men and women hierarchy, it becomes dangerous for women.

Susan Griffin has beautifully expressed the power of the symbolic fusion of women with the earth in her book *Women and Nature*:

I know I am made from this earth, as my mother's hands were made from this earth, as her dreams came from this earth, and all that I know speaks to me through this earth, and I long to tell you, you are earth too, and listen as we speak to each other of what we know: the light is in us (8).

Colonizers saw nature as a passive and life-giving source, like how they saw women. Therefore, many Western eco-feminists started to fight the history of associating women with nature to get their freedom back so they wouldn't be passive domestic creatures in society. As Cahill states :

Feminist theories has demonstrated that exclusion, far from being accidental or happenstance, was, in fact, crucial not only to the political and social domination of men over women but also to the accepted superiority and authority of reason and, subsequently, to the various binaries that have dominated Western philosophical thought (53).

Indigenous writers and stories present the woman-nature connection as sacred and safe, without hierarchies of gender or devaluing the connection or seeing it as passive. All this violence and destruction of nature and oppression of women and nature result from colonization and capitalism:

Our understandings of the world are often viewed as mythic by 'modern' society, while our stories are an alternative mode of understanding and interpretation rather than 'real' events. Colonization is not solely an attack on peoples and lands; rather, this attack is accomplished in part through purposeful and ignorant misrepresentations of Indigenous cosmologies (Watts 3).

White feminism or feminism that lacks intersectionality contrasted with indigenous culture and the meaning of womanhood, as it was mostly fighting against issues created by colonization and capitalism. White feminism was not helpful or relevant to indigenous women and women of colour, especially in third-world countries.

A response towards feminism by Dana Claxton in D'souza's article in the book *Art for a New Understanding*. Dana Claxton, the Hunkpapa Lakota filmmaker, photographer, and performance artist ;

Indian women didn't want to burn our bras—we wanted to bead them!

We want to maintain culture as our cultures

were criminalized, and we were placed into “zones

of indistinction” by the state, church, all institutions

including the academy and art history [...] (67).

Motherhood, fertility, selflessness, and nurturing are all adjectives that identify women with nature. Nature has been feminized throughout history regardless of its bad or good representation. This feminization of nature is rooted in our beliefs and the way we perceive nature. From the little stories we tell our children about nature to the way we interact with nature. But it doesn't have to be feeding into the negative oppressive side of the women-nature connection.

Now it's time to reclaim the positive out of this relationship and association of women with nature. We see many female artists in the 20th century knowingly or unknowingly searching for that safe place—the connection that has been taken away from us and turned into something ugly! We see artists giving life to that lost relationship through their art making methods. We are used to seeing many images of women in natural environments who look like beautiful flowers: passive, lifeless, and ornamental. They are dressed like roses and wear make-up as if they are always naturally blushing, and they have golden hair and red lips: It is art made by men, for men.

Looking at the figurative paintings of Seattle-based Aleah Chapin, who paints female figures in landscapes, one may notice that the women in her paintings look free, wild, and happy. They are middle-aged women, naked dancing and laughing freely in the meadow, they have wrinkles and hairs on their bodies, they are not hiding their natural bodily elements that comes with aging and it's not projecting unrealistic beauty for male gaze.

“I realized it was actually the relationship between our bodies and the landscape that fascinated me... I became interested in how the outer landscape mirrored and affected the inner one” (Chapin).

Artist Kiki Smith is known for her interdisciplinary works. She explores her relationship with her body and nature through history and myths and depicts women as wild and powerful—just like her sculpture *Born* (2002).

This graceful sculpture shows a deer giving birth to a woman. This work represents all those missing parts of the woman–nature relationship—parts that have gotten lost in the modern industrial world. At first it might appear shocking and unpleasant to the eyes of modern humans, but at the second it is almost soothing to look at.

Using photography as a more realistic medium to illustrate scenes of the human body, especially the female body, in natural environments. It is another way of recreating an image that has faded from our visual memory. Justine Kurland's art is a part of the staged photography movement that began in the late 1990s. In *Waterfall, Mama Babies*, she shows a group of women who seem to lead a nomadic lifestyle and who are bathing and playing with their children in a beautiful natural landscape. This is a beautiful and

powerful example of the pure connection with nature; it is an image that does not sexualize nor objectify women or uses nature to make the image more interesting. This image is raw and real in the sense that it makes you miss something that you didn't know you had forgotten.



JustinKurland, Waterfall, Mama Babies, 2009.
nmwa.org/art/collection/waterfall-mama-babies/

What we are witnessing in the art world now is a narrow light of hope, an opportunity to make things right again. Merchant mentions Merlin Stone, Dolores Lachapelle, and Adrienne Rich as a group of feminists that argued “when mother goddesses and the earth mother were widely worshipped, women seemed to have a higher status. Women today could perhaps recapture this earlier age of nature worship through ceremonies, rituals, poetry and new language and thereby reinstate the ancient ideal “(19).

Regaining the power by not using elements of nature as an insult or means of oppression to women in literature, but rather as a way to respect and gain that value and

grace of womanhood and femininity through the land. We do this by repeating the stories of the past to remind ourselves and the younger generation of what we used to have as humans, by reading through the Indigenous knowledge that they have given us generously and listening to nature's voice, by practicing as a woman to have a healthier relationship with our bodies and nature. By changing the way, we talk about land and the female body in the time of political crisis and war. By giving back what we take away from nature, by respecting nature we begin to respect ourselves and heal the relationship and this should be an everyday practice. Comparing women to nature should not be a tool for suppression anymore.

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Appendix B. Video Documentation

Created by: Homa Khosravi

Description: A video of the sculpture in the artist's bedroom with stories being narrated by the artist's voice.

File Name: Bedtime Stories narrative

BedtimeStories.mp4