

DIVINING WOMAN

**RECLAIMING FEMALE SEXUAL SPIRIT,
CULTURE AND GENEALOGY**

Jane Flower



‘I recommend this book to students and lecturers in the social sciences. Research activity into the unjust hierarchical systems outlined in the study of Social Ecology and Women’s Studies has the potential for tremendous growth especially as the disenfranchised younger academics seek understanding of the world as it is today.’

– **Violetta Dima**, *Utrecht University of Applied Sciences student, Secondary Education Teacher*

‘*Divining Woman* is an invaluable contribution to the positive inclusion of women and the rebalancing our Earth’s future suitable for both academics and the general reader and those interested in theology because of its fascinating overview of Christian doctrine, Vajrayana Buddhism and Celtic Culture.’

– **Gabrielle Hollington**, *Library Manager (retired)*

‘I felt in a whirlwind of emotion as the bigger picture highlighted, again and again, how the gender-based imbalances, that we almost take for granted, became less and less tolerable. I can hardly wait to read Dr Flower’s conclusions as I find some time in my busy schedule to finish this engrossing read.’

– **Lydia Nielsen**, *Writer, Teacher and Business Woman*



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Divining Woman

Divining Woman is directed to both the academic for research praxis and general reader interested in female history. It takes the reader on a historical journey from the rise of patriarchy and its grand narratives that defined the place of women in western culture and which still resonate today. At the same time is the lesser, but extremely interesting history of a contemporary woman as she navigates the place of one woman in today's world and how the reader might evaluate their own place as a creative force in reclaiming her voice, culture and lineage today. The author takes a systemic approach in her research that introduces a different history of certain women throughout time, with their specific characteristics and skills, as well as their impactful actions. It is a reclamation of female culture and a newfound history of female genealogy within a framework that covers the female spiritual in Celtic, Christian, Buddhist and the secular arts. The in-depth research, historical and cultural interplay, literary quests and myths promote a compelling case of women's fight against subjugation and exclusion.

This is both academic research and feminist storytelling intertwined with historical events that provide the reader with a creative insight into the topic. On one hand, academic research and analysis style gives an overview of patriarchy and its effects, past and present, and on the other. The first-person narration, personal anecdotes and storytelling help bring *Divining Woman* to life. Content is thus enhanced and complemented by these two styles. This thesis places the reader in a prime position to launch the young academic on the road to finding solutions 'outside' the mainstream schools of thought – because it is honest, personable and thoroughly academically researched.

Jane Flower is a writer, activist, feminist and storyteller. Born in South London in 1948, she married and raised a family in Cornwall and Scotland before emigrating to Australia in 1981. There Jane began work as a teacher and journalist, writing newspaper features and acting in local theatre. In 1989, her marriage ended and she wondered, 'what next?' A journey through India inspired her and at the age of 46, she began her BappSci degree in Social Ecology at Western Sydney University graduating with distinction in 1996 followed by 1st Class Honors for her thesis *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* (1998). She was invited to study for a PhD, won a research scholarship and received her doctorate in 2001. Dr. Jane likes to say she won the Trifecta!



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Divining Woman

Reclaiming Female Sexual Spirit,
Culture and Genealogy

Jane Flower

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Preface

Twenty years ago, I had just completed *Divining Woman* ready for examination when something tragic happened, 9/11. Before it had even had an airing, the conclusions in my thesis went right out the window! I had been so bold as to believe I knew how to finally dismantle Patriarchy! Instead, everything became more entrenched as the hatred grew and the Iraq war began. I was so depressed for the world and myself. It affected my judgement of what I had written; suddenly, it seemed like a romanticised school project. I was awarded my doctorate but my purple bound A4 book was put on the shelf and decided I was not cut out for academia. Roll on time and another global event, Covid19. I was one of the lucky ones; I had a home in which to stay put and it was during this isolation that I opened the *Divining Woman* document on my laptop and began to read.

I found it interesting, well-researched and creative but mainly what surprised and appalled me was that in twenty years there has been so little change. Nothing of any significance has shifted. Patriarchy is still the dominant paradigm, still androcentric, with just a begrudging inclusion of women. There is still misogyny; in 2012, when Julia Gillard was Australia's first woman prime minister, hatred for her being the PM was fired up by the then opposition leader, Tony Abbott. Eventually, Julia replied to him in a fifteen-minute powerful speech in parliament. It went viral and was globally applauded. Women continue to speak bravely and articulately on so many issues that need urgent attention, but while the old guard remains in control, what women say is too often ridiculed or dismissed and nothing gets done.

The Covid pandemic, amidst all the horror of illness and death, seemed to offer a silver lining. It opened the window onto a different world: Cities, countryside, rivers, canals, mountains clear of the pollution of fossil-fuelled air, showed just how good it can be without it, clear skies, fresh air and happy wildlife. Communities under stress cooperated, recognising the vital and important contribution of nurses, doctors, all health care and social workers, teachers, farmers and those who run the services, clear the rubbish and deliver us food. They were hailed as heroes, but in a post-Covid world, they have been forgotten by governments who promised them rewards but nothing came, leaving no alternative but to strike for better wages and conditions.

Life with Covid made wars, weapons of war, arms dealers, offshore banking and the superrich an irrelevance. We could stop coal mining, logging and land clearances. We could listen and learn from the wisdom of the indigenous peoples on every continent recognising them as equal participants in the storying of our world. *Divining Woman* is still relevant and Woman is still waiting after two thousand years to be included as an equal participant. She does a lot more than 'hold up half the sky' she gets stuck in, is intelligent and inventive, hardworking and caring, earthy and elemental. Her powers are still to be unleashed and it has to happen because male-controlled patriarchal domination has seriously passed its sell-by date!

Jane Flower

Acknowledgements

Divining Woman began as a seed, but once in flower, it lay dormant for a long time. I would talk about its contents with friends and once gave a public talk, it always garnered positive responses but I never thought of sending it to a publisher until one day I took the plunge. Much to my surprise, I received an email from Lucie Bartok, the Senior Editor in Humanities, Media Arts of Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group who said that she thought it was an interesting area of research and there was a possibility for it to be published. The next step was to find reviewers and I am incredibly grateful to Lydia Nielsen and Violetta Dima for the time they took to read the thesis with such enthusiasm for its potential and extremely useful advice on how to proceed.

I also want to go back in time and thank everyone I studied with in the School of Social Ecology, Hawkesbury Campus, University of Western Sydney (1994–2001). Among them are Alex Sini, Judy Pinn and Fiona Winning who opened up a world of academic thought and female creativity. But it is with special gratitude that I thank my Honours and PhD supervisor, Professor Debbie Horsfall, for guiding me through the process of completing and receiving my doctorate.

Finally, like they do in the Oscars, I sincerely thank my family, especially my daughters, Bethany, who took on the challenge to find my mother and succeeded, and Danielle, for being with me when I made my first visit to see her after forty years of not knowing where she was or if she was even alive. It was a moment that brought so much of this work into being.



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Introduction

The Waters of Oblivion

It was reading *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Luce Irigaray, 1991) that first ignited my passion to expose the historical narratives that have defined Woman. Her poetic reply to the male philosopher cut right into my psyche as she expressed powerfully the experiences of a woman, like myself, held captive and conditioned by a patriarchal and phallogentric paradigm. It was written with such political force and deep emotion that I responded with a profound feeling of strength in my own ability to unravel the mystery that has for centuries bound women to an alien world in which the dominant discourses have heralded men's achievements and rendered most women invisible. The idea that I was part of a history of women, that by my ignorance, historical positioning or patriarchal design had been obscured, began to take shape. I was intrigued by the notion of a male conspiracy that had obliterated or undermined the relevance of women in historical narratives and considered Woman inferior with a voice silenced or misinterpreted. The philosophical and theological narratives that have underpinned western culture that for so long created a 'Truth' that Woman is merely *a misbegotten male*, defined by Aristotle, and *the cause of original sin*, defined in Christianity by the early Church Fathers.

This thesis attempts to deconstruct these patriarchal and misogynistic narratives in order to reveal a different Woman than the one patriarchy 'created'. The narratives become merely a constructed mythology written by men to reinforce their power over women and it follows all those who are not male and predominantly white as being inferior beings to be abused, degraded or dismissed. Moving beyond this powerful paradigm that appropriates, subjugates and denies women access in so many domains, I explore those aspects of Woman that from a personal and public perspective have been cruelly appropriated and nearly destroyed by those grand narratives: Woman's spirit and sex. In deconstructing traditional history, the lies and misinformation that created patriarchal woman are exposed and beyond that male gaze is a female spiritual and sexual specificity not appropriated or defined by Man.

Patriarchal stereotyping of Woman in the religious and secular influenced my belief system and reasoning because female thought was not so obviously

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present as male philosophies. I now recoil at the idea that at one time I believed men were more evolved than women. I have this picture of myself being picked up by my feet at the baptismal font, the vicar cleansing me of my Woman sin as he dipped me headlong into the chocolate of patriarchy. When I first began to seriously challenge male concepts and theories at university, I wondered why I felt so scared. It seemed to me that my belief in male hierarchy was so entrenched that when I spoke my mind to a male lecturer, I was challenging all the way up to God.

That we still live in a patriarchal culture is a mystery. There have been strong women throughout history, and feminist theory and praxis are powerful but have made only a dent in this intractable paradigm. Gerda Lerner, in *The Creation of Patriarchy*, writes of the possibilities of leaving patriarchal thought behind by addressing the traditional values towards women and for a shift in consciousness that recognises throughout history the marginalisation, coercion and repression of women (1986:228).

Luce Irigaray (1993:17) writes of the censoring of women's culture, her speech and loss of female spiritual genealogy. Once male authority was put in place, it became the only 'Truth', bringing 'modifications in affecting law, justice and rhetoric. A new logical order was established, censoring women's speech and gradually making it inaudible'. The establishment of religion with its powerful male God figure gave power to a dominant masculine discourse that superseded Goddess wisdom and nature worship and meant women were spiritually silenced along with the demise of her spiritual genealogy. The loss of women's status was put firmly in place by stating that Woman was the cause of Man's downfall as the perpetrator of original sin and therefore unable to gain spiritual transcendence. The Christian Church effectively destroyed women's identification with female power yet early Christians accepted Celtic beliefs and the Goddess as spiritual paths but as Christianity grew more powerful, it wanted to destroy old faiths, but in order to appease their followers, the goddess became the Virgin Mary.

The prehistory of matriarchal cultures is not covered in any depth in this inquiry but goddess worship and early Christianity combined with Celtic practices can be found in texts by Mary Daly (1984, 1985), Rosemary Radforth Ruether (1983), Karen Armstrong (1987) and Riane Eisler (1992).

How to return to a world that no longer denigrates or at its best pays token homage to women but instead recognises women as a powerful source of wisdom and knowledge sharing equally in the storying of our world? This is a question I hope to answer. Luce Irigaray considers that if we are to change history, women must first define a culture of the female and recreate female genealogy, because women still live in a between-men culture as fabricated beings. As she so eloquently says as the marine lover: *You fashioned me into a mirror but I have dipped that mirror in the waters of oblivion – that you call life* (Luce Irigaray, 1993:4).

The Title – Divining Woman

In my research, I wanted to go deep beneath the hard crust of patriarchy feeling sure that after deconstruction of the grand narratives that defined patriarchal Woman, I would find another source uncontaminated by Patriarchy's definition. The image of a divining rod used to find/divine a water source came to mind and was further enhanced by thinking of Woman's sexual and spiritual beingness outside the patriarchal prism as once more divine.

My inquiry focuses on the spiritual and sexual aspects of Woman in a spiritual and secular world because I believe they have been the most damaged by patriarchal defining. I considered the relevance within the context of my own life being born Christian, with a possible Celtic heritage, an interest in Buddhism and in the secular world of the arts and activism. In this research, spirituality in women is not about 'religious conversion but a political and textual strategy for the positive re-inscription of woman' (Elizabeth Grosz, 1986:18).

It is a feminist historical and autobiographical project that crosses the disciplinary boundaries of feminist spirituality and feminist history with a weaving together of the personal, facts, fiction and imaginings to create space for non-patriarchal Woman to emerge. As a social ecologist, I take a first-person approach in my writing that not only includes women's stories but my journey towards self-awareness. This awareness is considered vital to holistic research from a social ecological perspective. From my personal story to the women who emerge from the hidden depths, having either been left out of or misrepresented in traditional history. It becomes a living tapestry of women, in many roles, with many stories. One only has to look for them. My political approach is to create a work of celebration of a female culture filling the pages with the sounds of women's voices, telling their stories, hearing what they say in conversations and texts, linking a female past with the present in order to shape a different female centred history that becomes visible.

For, as the public record of men's deeds, history rested on – in fact required – the invisibility of women. That women were leading theorists and practitioners of citizenship – seemed to be of no consequence to the men who documented, and still document, our political history.

Reclaiming Female Culture and Genealogy

Reclaiming female culture becomes a powerful tool to not only re-inscribe women's place in the world but to help heal the world itself by integrating into our lives the wisdom of women past and present. The thesis is the appropriation of myths, symbols and beliefs in order to highlight how we have become so embedded in the psyche of a male culture that we accept created patriarchal woman as Woman. He diminished her to such an extent that she became as Germaine Greer called the *Female Eunuch* (1970).

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Revealing the myth of the patriarchal narratives that defined and controlled woman opens up the space to introduce women past and present, reclaim female culture and establish a genealogy or the word that holds deeper meaning for me: Lineage. Used in a Buddhist context, it relates to the oral tradition of passing on the teachings and wisdom from one generation to the next, creating lineage holders of the teachings. Much of female history has been passed down verbally from woman to woman, creating a woman-centred lineage that held stories of wisdom, heroism, compassion, bravery and action throughout time which now offer inspiration to work for positive change on a personal, local and global scale.

On an academic level, I am undertaking a doctoral research inquiry but personally, it is considered a Quest, an image that feminist researcher Shulamit Reinharz (1992:212) compares with the traditional (male) image of the Quest for Truth. For me, it became a kind of magical mystery tour to have different truths unfold when told by or about women while maintaining academic rigour. As an autobiographical project, I wondered how I would relate with the women in my family, a mother who I had been separated from for over forty years and a sister I had never met. The Quest is a symbol that can reveal the process of discovery and where initial discoveries energise the scholar to continue on her quest and for me the important aspect is abandoning the voice of disembodied objectivity, a vital tool as a social ecologist and feminist.

The Waterpouner's Lineage

It is said that we live in the Age of Aquarius, a time when kindness and compassion are added to the high mental principles and scientific objectivity (Kathleen Burt, 1997). It was a very popular topic in the nineteen sixties when I was young and as Aquarius is my sun sign with its symbol of the Waterpouner (seen as either male or female), it is an appropriate name for my lineage. A woman bends forward pouring liquid from a jug onto the ground. It contains the properties of healing and insightful wisdom to nourish the earth. The Waterpouner is like Pandora opening her jar and letting all things flow out. The water, which is being poured, is aqua nostra, the water of life or energy of the psyche that is needed to transfer consciousness from the sub-lunar world to the higher spheres.

In Celtic times water related to the female spirit that flowed freely and was honoured in springs, rivers, streams tumbling down mountains, waterfalls or deep oceanic water. In Greek and Wiccan cultures, the flow of water represents the metaphysical water-born journeying from one world to the next. It is what also divides the present from the past. In Buddhism, it is the water-born journey from one shore to the other, from samsara (suffering) to nirvana (liberation). In Greek Mythology, the journey from this life to the underworld is taken on the River Lethe. This river absorbs the recollections and detaches memories from the dead, whose deeds sometimes survive them in the world of the living.

All mythic waters feed a source located on the other side, and this source is connected to the Well of Remembrance protected by the goddess of memory, Mnemosyne, and her nine daughters, the Muses. At the bottom of the well, beneath the clear waters, lie the residues of lived-out lives; they float in the water like specks of fine sand and settle at the bottom of the bubbling spring, over which the well is constructed. It is said that a mortal, who is blessed by the Muses or Mnemosyne, can listen to the Muses sing in their several voices what is, what was and what is to be (Ivan Illich, 1986). Creatively, I draw from the sacred well to hear women's voices and their stories and draw from feminist insights to create another history and bring women into the Waterpurer's Lineage.

Female Language and Symbolic

Luce Irigaray (1993) argues that the important step for women's subjective liberation is to change the form of language and symbols of patriarchy by re-introducing or creating a female symbolic and language that includes new structures of knowledge, language and truths so that women overcome their restrictive containment in phallogentric, patriarchal representations.

Symbols and language have a powerful effect on our psyche, often deeper than rational thought, such as those used in religion, which can fulfil deep psychic needs, even for those who no longer consciously accept traditional religion such as a deep need to get married in church (Carol P. Christ, 1992). In *Women's Discourse and Men's Discourse* (1993), Luce Irigaray offers her analysis of the sexed nature of language. In French, for example, the masculine is always the dominant syntax; 'In French (along with other Roman languages) the feminine remains secondary syntactically, not even a norm, and norms marked by the feminine are not those considered to designate the greater value' (Luce Irigaray, 1993:32). Discourse is sexed because words are gendered or have references to male and female which affects language, society, the individual and collective psychology. At present, the means of communication that operates in society is still in the hands of men. While women maintain a relationship to the environment and experience concrete reality, the majority of women leave the matter of its structure to the masculine language.

Discourses that include supportive words like love, compassion, empathy, interconnectedness and relationship are considered feminine (which in the patriarchal definition of feminine is considered weak without force or power). The means of communication left completely in the hands of men may well prevent the emergence of or destroy this other means of communication that relate more closely to life and to its concrete properties (Luce Irigaray, 1993). To present a thesis that relates 'more closely to life and to its concrete properties', I use language other than the traditionally masculine in the academic process of the Doctorate. I have used 'she' where the generic is still (even in books written by women) given as 'he'. Women are the central