

Gendered and Environmental Oppression: A Study in Ecofeminism

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ABSTRACT

Women have been bracketed together with Nature from time immemorial. They bond together brilliantly well. It is as if women have been successful in fashioning for themselves a language and a disposition which makes them echo in words or in actions in the pulsating spirit inhabiting the heart of Mother Nature. Mother Nature is a common representation of nature that focuses on the life-giving and nurturing features of nature by embodying it in the form of the mother. Image of women representing Mother Earth, and Mother Nature are timeless. In pre-historic time, goddesses were worshipped for their association with fertility, prolificacy and agricultural bounty. Earth is a generous mother; she will provide, in plentiful abundance, food and shelter for all her children if they will but cultivate her soil in justice and in peace. Some feminists distinguish between the reasons why women relate to nature and why it's not because they're "feminine" or because they are women. Instead, it is a result of the same male-dominant force oppressing both of them in comparable ways. The animalized vocabulary used to describe women and the gendered language used to describe nature both demonstrate the marginalization of these groups. Certain discourses attribute women's historic social role as nurturers and caregivers to the environment. According to Vandana Shiva, women have a unique relationship with the environment that has been overlooked because of their everyday encounters with it. According to her, women in subsistence economies who produce "wealth in partnership with nature, have been experts in their own right of holistic and ecological knowledge of nature's processes."

Keywords: Ecological, Environmental, Gendered, Oppression, Ecofeminism, Monoculture, Biodiversity.

INTRODUCTION

Women have been bracketed together with Nature from time immemorial. They bond together brilliantly well. It is as if women have been successful in fashioning for themselves a language and a disposition which makes them echo in words or in actions in the pulsating spirit inhabiting the heart of Mother Nature. Mother Nature is a common representation of nature that focuses on the life-giving and nurturing features of nature by embodying it in the form of the mother. Image of women representing Mother Earth, and Mother Nature are timeless. In pre-historic time, goddesses were worshipped for their association with fertility, prolificacy and agricultural bounty. Earth is a generous mother; she will provide, in plentiful abundance, food and shelter for all her children if they will but cultivate her soil in justice and in peace. Ecofeminism describes movements and philosophies that link feminism with ecology. This movement seeks to eradicate all forms of social injustice, not just injustice against women and the environment. The term is believed to have been coined by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974). Relying on the arguments that there are certain and significant connections between

women and nature, ecofeminism relates the oppression and domination of all subordinate groups (women, people of color, children, the poor) to the oppression and domination of nature (animals, land, water, air, etc.). All of these subordinate groups have been subject to oppression, domination, exploitation, and colonization from the Western patriarchal society that emphasizes and values men. Ecofeminists believe that these connections are illustrated through traditionally "feminine" values such as reciprocity, nurturing and cooperation, which are present both among women and in nature.

Ecofeminism was coined as a term in the 1970s. Women participated in the environmental movements, specifically preservation and conservation, much earlier than this. Beginning in the late 20th century, women made efforts to protect wildlife, food, air and water. These efforts depended largely on new developments in the environmental movement from influential writers, such as Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, John Muir, and Rachel Carson. Fundamental examples of women's efforts are the books *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson and *Refuge* by Terry Tempest Williams. These works truly opened American's eyes to the environmental harm they were perpetuating, and created a platform for change.

In northern India in 1973, women took part in the Chipko Movement to protect forests from deforestation. They hugged the trees in an action of peaceful demonstration so that lumberjacks could not cut them down. These women demonstrated the importance of the environment to them. They were leaders as well as activists.

In Hindi, 'chipko' means, "to embrace." The Chipko Movement in India became one of the most successful environmental activist struggles in the world. Vandana Shiva was one of the women involved in this movement which resisted industrial forestry and logging in rural India. Local women physically put their bodies between the machinery and the forest that provided their livelihood—literally hugging the trees (Callicott, 218). The largest success of the Chipko movement was convincing Indira Gandhi, India's prime minister in 1981, to declare a fifteen-year moratorium of logging in the Himalayan forests in Uttar Pradesh (Callicott, 218).

Some feminists distinguish between the reasons why women relate to nature and why it's not because they're "feminine" or because they are women. Instead, it is a result of the same male-dominant force oppressing both of them in comparable ways. The animalized vocabulary used to describe women and the gendered language used to describe nature both demonstrate the marginalization of these groups. Certain discourses attribute women's historic social role as nurturers and caregivers to the environment.

According to Vandana Shiva, women have a unique relationship with the environment that has been overlooked because of their everyday encounters with it. According to her, women in subsistence economies who produce "wealth in partnership with nature, have been experts in their own right of holistic and ecological knowledge of nature's processes." Nonetheless, she makes the argument that "these alternative modes of knowing, which are oriented to the social benefits and sustenance needs are not recognized by the capitalist reductionist paradigm, because it fails to perceive the interconnectedness of nature, or the connection of women's lives, work and knowledge with the creation of wealth." (Shiva, *Staying Alive*). Shiva attributes this failure to the patriarchy in the West and its definition of development.

Shiva claims that in order to keep the economy from growing, nature, women, and other groups have been branded as "unproductive" by the patriarchy.

The Green Belt Movement was started in Kenya in 1977 by political and environmental activist Professor Wangari Maathai, and it is still going strong today. Maathai devised this program, which involves women planting trees in rural areas, to help stop the area from becoming a desert. Participants in the initiative have the authority to govern their communities and a 'green belt' of at least 1,000 trees surrounded villages. Later on, the Green Belt Movement pushed for public empowerment and information through civic and environmental education seminars. It also supported making national leaders responsible for their acts and giving citizens a sense of agency.

Some criticisms of ecofeminism come from the claim that the division between nature and culture, as well as between men and women, leads to an overly rigid and narrow view of what makes men and women different. The non-essentialist view holds that both women and nature have masculine and feminine qualities, but that just as feminine qualities are frequently viewed as less worthy, so too is nature seen to have less value than culture or the qualities associated with these concepts. This is because ecofeminism overly strongly draws a parallel between the societal status of women and that of the nature.

The work of Dr. Vandana Shiva is centered on embracing both ecological and feminist values. As an ecofeminist, she really sees a connection between these two movements and holds that the same mindset that leads to environmental injustice and degradation also produces a culture in which males dominate and exploit women. To set her feminist theory apart from the more spiritually oriented ecofeminism that is popular in Western nations, Vandana Shiva calls her theory "political," or "subsistence" ecofeminism (though, since the WTO protests of 1999 and the events of September 11, 2001, Western ecofeminism has become equally politically oriented). Her ideas and action have both emphasized their tangible impression globally. Her research has focused on 'third world' women, who are badly impacted by the rigid dynamisms of commercial globalization and colonization.

Shiva is a dedicated writer, lecturer, and activist who has authored more than 13 books that accurately depict the effects of globalization on the lives of men and women in poor nations. The Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Ecology, Navdanya, and Bija Vidyapeeth, an organic farm and center for holistic living, are just a few of the institutions she founded.

She started her training as a nuclear physicist in 1952. Vandana was surprised to learn of the effects of nuclear radiation on living things from Shiva's sister, a doctor. Her science background had not prepared her for the dangers and atrocities associated with their line of work. Shiva's criticism of science and the ideology underlying science began at this crucial juncture. Her "subsistence" ecofeminist beliefs and her unrelenting effort to defend women and the environment were both influenced by this criticism.

Shiva and Maria Mies explain, "We see the devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors, as feminist concerns. It is the same masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies and our own sexuality, and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its way" (14).

From Shiva's perspective, "women's liberation cannot be achieved without a simultaneous struggle for the preservation and liberation of all life on this planet from the dominant patriarchal/capitalist worldview." (Mies and Shiva, 16). Ecofeminism distinguishes itself from other theories of feminism, which maintain the hierarchical worldview of the Western world. "Rather than attempting to overcome this hierarchical dichotomy many women have simply up-ended it, and thus women are seen as superior to men, nature to culture, and so on" (Mies and Shiva, 5).

The Green Revolution and the massive globalization that occurred in the middle to late 20th century provided the historical backdrop that radicalized Vandana Shiva and many others. Shiva calls this economic development paradigm "maldevelopment." She writes, "Maldevelopment militates against equality in diversity, and superimposes the ideologically constructed category of western technological man as the uniform measure of the worth of classes, cultures and genders" (Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 5).

The term "Green Revolution" is a misnomer employed by biotechnology, industrial agriculture, and seed companies in the United States (Monsanto, Cargill, Dekalb, ADM, and so on) to aggressively encourage farmers in the "third world" to utilize their goods. In a 2003 talk titled "An Hour with Vandana Shiva," Shiva outlines how these companies persuaded Indian farmers to abandon subsistence farming, (where a family grows food primarily to meet their own food needs, and trades a small amount of their crop for other local goods and services) and to grow a monoculture (growing a single plant species over a large area) of a cash crop bound for the global food market (for example, growing potatoes in India that end up as French fries at a McDonald's in Detroit, Michigan).

This technique of farming, belligerently forced on Indian farmers by the WTO (World Trade Organization) and the IMF (International Monetary Fund) in the 1980s and 1990s, proved to be catastrophic for the farmers of India. Cash crop industrial agronomy caused farmers to become indebted to the multinational seed and chemical corporations, and when their crops crashed, the result was over 20,000 farmers committing suicide by drinking the chemical manures and insecticides vended to them by the corporations that held their overwhelming debt.

Vandana Shiva owes to Article 27.53b of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which permits business establishments to hold copyrights on forms of life, for forcing her to become an ecofeminist activist. As per this article, it is unlawful to save seeds and plant them the subsequent year if a company holds a copyright on that plant. For a farmer, this implied that he or she cannot be autonomous, but must now pay the firm every year to plant that seed. The company, it means, can take over any life form (such as basmati rice, which had been developed over thousands of years in India through traditional breeding and selection techniques), file an application for a patent, and is thereby permitted comprehensively lawful and biological domination over that species, all over the world. As a response to these vicious influences of globalization, Vandana Shiva founded Navdanya in 1991, an association in India that protects seeds, fosters biodiversity, gives power to women and children, and guards indigenous knowledge.

For the westerners, the patenting of pips or the deforestation of the Himalaya may appear to be entirely distinct from feminism. For women in the worldwide Southern parts, nevertheless, the "environment" is

the abode where they live, and it comprises everything that modifies their lives (Shiva, Close to Home, 2). According to Shiva and Maria Mies, “urban, middle-class women find it difficult to perceive commonality both between their own liberation and the liberation of nature, and between themselves and ‘different’ women in the world” (Mies and Shiva,5). This divide is due to the underlying two-fold disposition of the western worldview, where the temperament of actuality is divided into contrasting parts, and hierarchically organized. Thus, humans are perceived as distinct from nature, technology is viewed as higher than indigenous knowledge, men are better than women, and humans are nonpareil and distinct from animals, etc.

As Vandana Shiva contends that “the marginalization of women and the destruction of biodiversity go hand in hand”, she is depicting the commonality of gendered and ecological oppression, as well the precise position of women as susceptible to monoculture capitalism, but also their specific role in conserving biodiversity (Mies and Shiva,164). Shiva trusts that women have a unique connection with biodiversity, and they are the best guardians of earth-health via their awareness of the heterogeneousness of life. Shiva views diversity as fundamental to “women’s work and knowledge,” as the procreative/ household job of life is reliant on varied skills that belie expert knowledge (Mies and Shiva,165). Women are usually the people most right away engaged with sustenance work, and are the preservers of natural resources required to keep up the family and society.

Shiva reasons that “women’s work and knowledge is central to biodiversity conservation and utilization both because they work between ‘sectors’ and because they perform multiple tasks” (Mies and Shiva ,166). This work “found in spaces ‘in between’ the interstices of ‘sectors’” is what consents the procreant cycles of the earth to continue life (Mies and Shiva,167). When the ecosystem, explicitly farming, is disjointed by the fecund aspirations of capitalism, it is women who intermediate to combine the codependent systems that have been misleadingly and perilously secluded from each other. In this way, Shiva states, “ecological stability, sustainability, and productivity under resource-scarce conditions are maintained” (Mies and Shiva, 167).

While women are placed to be guardians of consecrated diversity, this is precisely what makes them so susceptible to a monoculture economy. Shiva further illustrates the array of approaches in which women, principally those in the agricultural south worldwide, are relegated by the application of monoculture policies. Using GMO seed to the annihilation of native biodiversity eventually aids to disintegrate the “closed cycle of production and consumption” intrinsic to sustenance agrobusiness (Mies and Shiva, 170). Once the self-sustaining sequence is fragmented, imperialist nations of the north across the world, can extricate product value in the shape of the monoculture yield on the global market. This method literally snatches food from the mouths of aboriginal communities, and women and girls are generally the foremost ones to endure. Shiva writes that “seed diversity and nutritional balance go hand in hand” (Mies and Shiva ,169). The new, monoculture crop is less able to support bodily health, and simultaneously destroys environmental health by destroying the fertility of the soil (Mies and Shiva ,169).

In addition to the adverse health effects of monoculture, women are particularly sidelined by their estrangement from the seeds. Shiva argues that “purchased seeds displace women from decision making and custodianship of seeds and transform them into unskilled labor” (Mies and Shiva, 169). GMO

agriculture is reducing women farmers to homogenous hands at the plow, much as how textile workers in 19th-century Britain lost their identities as craftsmen and became replaceable pieces of the industrial machine.

Shiva concludes by demonstrating how biotechnology companies, acting in the interest of monoculture, are copying and perverting the reproductive, cyclical character of women's work. Shiva writes that “women produce through biodiversity, whereas corporate scientists produce through uniformity” (Mies and Shiva, 172). Despite their oppositional modes and goals, corporations now claim patents on seeds, as if they were the true creatures and reproducers of life. Shiva argues that “the claim of ‘creation’ of life by corporate scientists is totally unjustified, it is in fact an interruption in the life flow of creation” (Mies and Shiva, 172). Consequently, capitalist claims of God-like science push aside women as creators of life, distancing them from their role as guardians of natural life in their communities and contributing to the destruction of biodiversity.

Shiva argues that as long as the Western world sees the environmental movement and the women’s movement as separate and unrelated, the environmental movement will be co-opted by the forces of ‘maldevelopment’ and used as a “new patriarchal project of technological fixes and political oppression” (Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 48). She argues that because the Western worldview devalues what she refers to as the feminine principle, oppression will persist in it. Although this idea is sometimes mistaken for the advancement of gendered femininity, Shiva views the feminine norm as the world's greater creative energy. “The new insight provided by rural women in the Third World is that women and nature are associated not in passivity but in creativity and in the maintenance of life” (Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 47).

We will need to change our perspective as the natural resources on our restricted planet grow scarcer. The way we can attain sustainability on planet Earth and discover our position as a species is in the joint movement that Vandana Shiva envisions to end the subjugation of both women and nature. It is essential that we safeguard the delicate network of living, not as controllers—men over women, humans over nature—but rather as partners with all other living forms on the earth because we must understand that we are a part of the broader web of life that sustains us.

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