

PRAKRITI AND SHAKTI: AN ECOFEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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This article draws on the ecofeminist ideology to understand the vagaries of Green Revolution in India and its impact on women. It draws parallels between patriarchy and capitalism and suggests that the various lenses such as dualism, marxism and the reductionist view of science are limited to understand the violence inflicted upon women and nature by men and the capitalist class. It takes a critical view of the popular scientific paradigm that favours expertise over generalist knowledge and the propagation of monocultures as more scientifically sound than diversified farming. Using various analogies, the paper illustrates the ideology of treating women and nature as mere surrogates in society and the repercussions of shifting towards intensive agriculture from a subsistence-based approach.

INTRODUCTION

Ecofeminism can be defined as a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. It emerged in the mid-1970s alongside second wave feminism and the green movement. Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and the green movements, while at the same time offering a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism, the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women (Mellor Mary 1997). The term was for the first time coined by Francoise D' Eaubonne in 1980 and gained popularity in protests and actions against continued ecological disasters.

Most forms of ecofeminism rely on historical analysis of ideology, according to which the oppression of nature and women emerged with a western ideology known by the name – patriarchy. This western idea of patriarchy is built on the worldview of 'dualism' which categorizes the world into opposing pairs of concepts; one concept is deemed superior to the other in the pair and the other in this category is demonized and

always discriminated against. Ecofeminism demands a radical critique of the categories of nature and culture together with an affirmation of the degraded partner in all the patriarchal dualities. Feminine qualities such as co-operation, nurturing, being supportive, nonviolence and sensuality are especially appropriate for creating an environmentally aware society. Because of women's greater bodily involvement with the natural functions surrounding reproduction, she is seen as more a part of nature than men. Yet, in part because of her consciousness and participation in human social dialogue, she is recognized as a participant in culture. Thus, she appears as something intermediate between culture and nature, lower on the scale of transcendence than men (Sherry 1972)

Therefore by virtue of this spiritual feminism, the larger onus of protecting the environment and preserving the rich biodiversity lies on women's shoulders due to them being more sensitive and aware of the atrocities felt by Mother Earth. Amidst the hue and cry for ecofeminism lie a series of revolutions by the mankind to tame nature. One of the most important results of these ecological revolutions initiated by the capitalists took a social character and affected the lives of the women involved considerably. The "Corn Mother" traditions of Indian agriculture had accorded women a place of prominence, even some power as producers of food. But as Merchant notes, "Puritan Fathers" also brought with them ideas that legitimated the subjugation of wilderness and the subjugation of women (Merchant 1993). To these colonists, civilizing a particular race meant converting their female-dominated subsistence farming into male-dominated settled and intensive agriculture. The dualism analogy which Merchant draws in her book in the situational context of New England on how this transformation took place can be applied in the Indian context as well. Therefore, the dichotomies of hoe versus plough, fire versus saw, arrow versus guns, shifting versus settled agriculture, hunting versus animal husbandry, female versus males in the field, equilibrium versus growth, tribal territories versus private property can be seen in case of the Indian ecological revolution.

In this context of understanding eco-feminism, spirituality becomes highly significant, as this spiritual dimension of life is actually the realization that everything in the world is connected and interdependent. Spirituality is largely seen identical to women's sexual energy which is their most precious life force and links them to each other and to other life forms. It is the love without which no life can blossom; it is this magic which is contained in everything. Thus, spirituality in the

ecofeminist context endeavours to heal Mother Earth and to re-enchant the world.

Apart from this pairing, a kind of hierarchy of value is created around common prejudices of sexism and specie-ism. Within the patriarchal conceptual framework, all the attributes related to masculinity are given higher status or prestige than those associated with femininity, re-enforcing the idea of hierarchical dualism (Warren 1987). All the ecofeminists confirm to the opinion that this logic of domination along with value-hierarchical thinking and value dualisms is responsible for sustaining and justifying the twin domination of women and nature (Warren 1990). For eco-feminists therefore, the domination of women and nature is basically rooted in ideology.

DEVELOPMENT, GENDER AND SCIENCE

The ecofeminist theory has brought into attention the links between development and gender by highlighting the fact that violence against women and nature are both built into the process of development. This kind of understanding of ecofeminism resonates especially well in the works of Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies which seeks to highlight the relevance of an alternative to capitalist patriarchy which has worsened the conditions for women as well as nature in the wake of globalization. They are explicitly anti-war and anti-capitalist because both war and capitalism are seen as patriarchal structures.

They also view the devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors as feminist concerns. It is the same masculine mentality which would deny us the right to our own bodies and our own sexuality and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its way (Shiva, Mies and Salleh 2014). Here, patriarchy and capitalism are similar in effect in that they colonise reproduction by way of establishing control over women's body and in a similar manner, control and domination over nature by the capitalists. Whether it is nature's productive function of producing any natural resource or women's reproductive function of giving birth to offspring, the dominance of the capitalist enterprise prevails. For Shiva, there is a connection between the escalation of war, "musclemen" culture, rape and other violence against women. It is no coincidence that the gruesome game of war in which the greater part of the male sex seems to delight passes through the same stages as the traditional sexual relationship: aggression, conquest, possession and control. Of a woman or a land, it makes little difference (Shiva, Mies and Salleh 2014).

The foundational construct which lies at the root of scientific revolutions is the reductionist view of science and technology. This reductionist science is a source of violence both against women and nature as it subjugates and dispossesses them of their full productivity, power and potential. The epistemological and ontological assumptions of reductionism permit uniformity that knowledge of parts of the system can be understood as the knowledge of the whole. Divisibility permits context-free abstraction of knowledge and creates criteria of validity based on alienation and non-participation, which is then projected as 'objectivity'. 'experts' and 'specialists' are thus projected as the only legitimate seekers after and producers of knowledge. (Shiva, Mies and Salleh 2014)

Science itself being a product of social forces has a social agenda attached to it which is determined by those who can mobilize scientific production. But, in contemporary times the scientific activity has been assigned a privileged epistemological position of being socially and politically neutral thus bringing in a dual character. Although it offers technological fixes for the social and political problems, science delinks itself from the new social and political problems that it creates. Reflecting the priorities and perceptions of a particular class, gender or cultural interests, scientific thought organizes and transforms the natural and social order. However, since both nature and society have their own organization, the superimposition of a new order does not necessarily take place perfectly and smoothly. There is often resistance from people and nature, a resistance which is externalized as 'unanticipated side effects'. Science stays immune from social assessment and insulated from its own impacts. Through this split identity the 'sacredness' of science is created.

"Neither God nor tradition is privileged with the same credibility as scientific rationality in modern cultures... The project that science's sacredness makes taboo is the examination of science in just the ways any other institution or set of social practices can be examined."

— Harding, Sandra (1986)

Reductionist science is at the root of the growing ecological crises because it entails a transformation of nature which in turn destroys its organic processes, rhythms and regenerative capacities (Shiva & Mies 2014). In this sense, the wombs of women and seeds (nature) as the source of regenerative power become the last colonies to be captured by the capitalist patriarchy. Herein the reproductive creativities of

women and nature are transformed into a resource and into a non-value attribute to which value is provided by the technological expert. The sources of renewal and regeneration of life are transformed into inert and fragmented matter, mere raw materials to be processed into raw materials. The degradation of the value of the actual owners and creators who are turned into passive sites by the act of development and improvement gives a way to separation or alienation, which in turn helps in establishing better control and ownership over the newly discovered resources and the cycle deepens.

CAPITALISM, TECHNOLOGY AND EXPLOITATION

These shifts of value into non-value, labour into non-labour, creativity into passivity, destruction into production are exemplified in the takeover of biological reproduction by capital and technology. It can be understood using the Marxian lens in a manner that the peasant becomes poorer as he produces more wealth and his production increases in power and size through the use of technology. According to Marx, the devaluation of the world of men is in direct proportion to the increasing value of the world of things. So, the farmer becomes an ever-cheaper commodity as he creates more commodities and this act of development thus creates a vicious circle of poverty and objectification. The farmer in this particular case of subsistence-based farming is, unfortunately, a woman most of the times.

Vandana Shiva in one of her books illustrates the point that ecological and ethnic fragmentation and breakdown are intimately connected and are an intrinsic part of a policy of planned destruction of diversity in nature and culture to create the uniformity demanded by centralized management systems (Shiva 2010). This is indeed true if we consider the creation and propagation of a particular kind of expert knowledge as more scientific than the less specific one, in order to construct the discourse of the time and provide legitimacy to it. The facilitator of this seemingly legitimate shift is the knowledge-power nexus (Foucault 1980) and then the powerful capitalists through their political connections use this knowledge for propagating scientific tampering in the name of development. Development then becomes a strategy to combat scarcity and dominate nature to generate material abundance. Under the pretext of fulfilling the same motive, Green Revolution was prescribed as a techno-politic strategy that would create abundance in agricultural societies and also reduce the threat of communist insurgency and agrarian conflict. In this knowledge-power construct,

science and politics were strategically wedded together in the very inception of Green Revolution.

The Green Revolution is often touted as being one of the independent India's most outstanding achievements. But, behind the widely broadcast images of full granaries and an exportable grain surplus lie a grim tale of environmental and social carnage. The introduction of capitalism, through this revolution, has altered the way land was seen by the peasants. What was a livelihood and food provider for the family has now become a source of capital accumulation. This commodification of land has brought about a drastic change in the relationship the farmer shares with herself, her land and her community.

This revolution had its impact on the women of the nation as well as the ecology of the motherland which is also treated as a feminist entity. Traditionally, women have been active farm managers in India and also have been playing a major role in managing other natural resources. While men view the nature as a mere resource to be commercialized and be profited upon, women are more concerned with fulfilling their domestic needs through minimum harm to the environment. The societies had to not only bear the brunt of such resource destruction but it also led to the destruction of their ecologically sound traditional technologies. Nature's economy and women's survival economy were replaced by the market economy which marginalized the women groups involved in subsistence agriculture towards impoverishment.

Women have also been prime innovators in the domain of subsistence agriculture. Additionally, grandmother's treasure troves have been a repository of the indigenous wisdom collected over the years. Through the technological innovations and capitalist conquest over nature, this indigenous knowledge also gets destroyed and nature is plundered of its regenerative value. This violence of capitalism was seen through the introduction of hybrid varieties of seeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides and use of advanced equipment and was facilitated through the capture of seed in its organic form. Indian women have been more concerned about a survival subsistence perspective relative to men who are of the general opinion that science, technology and the market mechanisms can take care of the economic and ecological well-being.

Shiva (1997) in her book on bio-piracy comes up with the argument as to how the green revolution paradigm of agriculture substituted the regenerative nutrient cycle with linear flows of purchased inputs of chemical fertilizers from factories and marketed outputs of agricultural commodities. The soil was robbed of its inherent property of restoring

its fertility by the chemicals; the earth was in a way viewed as an empty vessel with the connotation of passivity attached with her, while activity lay in the miracle seeds which transcended nature's fertility cycles. By treating organic inputs as waste, the Green Revolution strategy unwittingly ensured that productive and fertile soils laid waste; land-augmenting technology also proved to be land-degrading and land-destroying one. The excessive use of nitrogen-based chemical fertilizers polluted the soil, water and the air alike and has thus led to the erosion of food security (Shiva 2010).

MONOCULTURE, ACCUMULATION & ALIENATION

This shift has come coupled with another kind of transition among humankind, species being getting alienated from nature. According to Marx, the worker can create nothing without nature, without the sensuous external world. It is the material on which his labour is realized, in which it is active, from which, and by means of which it produces. As we are moving from subsistence to more mechanized farming without taking into consideration the plight of nature i.e. Marx's worker is by his labor appropriating the external world, the more he is depriving himself of means of life in two respects: first in the sense that the sensuous external world more and more ceases to be an object belonging to his labor- to be his labor's means of life; and secondly, in that it more and more ceases to be means of life in the immediate sense, means for the physical subsistence of the worker (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844).

Biodiversity conservation depends on the rights of local communities to enjoy the fruits of their efforts. Alienation of these rights rapidly leads to the erosion of biodiversity, and which in turn threatens ecological survival and economic well-being. Apart from disrupting the indigenous practices, Green Revolution was also intended to destroy the wide variety of plant species which are a trademark of the tropical regions by virtue of their favourable climatic conditions. It promoted the practice of monocultures which is a way of homogenizing and hence taking away the very essence of the rich biodiversity. It is especially true in the age of globalization because, in a quest for bringing in uniformity and integration in the global markets, monocultures become imperative for the capitalist class. There is a general misconception that diversity-based production systems are low-productivity systems. However, the high productivity of uniform and homogenous systems is a contextual and theoretically constructed category, based on taking

into account only one-dimensional yields and outputs. The alleged low-productivity of the one against the alleged high productivity of the other is, therefore, not a neutral, scientific measure but biased towards commercial interests for whom maximizing the one-dimensional output is an economic imperative (Shiva, Mies & Salleh 2014)

Monoculture can be seen as a war or a form of violence against nature's diverse species which pushes species towards extinction and thus helps in its own self-propagation. Green Revolution also unleashed violence against nature by destroying the diverse ecosystems of the planet and globalizing the culture and economy of an industrial agriculture. It is responsible for wiping out thousands of crop varieties and substituting them with monocultures of rice, wheat and maize across the Third World (Shiva 1997). The current condition of states like Punjab, Haryana and other states who were the direct benefactor of the Green Revolution speaks volumes about the two-sided tale of the not so green revolution. Soils have become toxic due to excessive use of the nitrogenous fertilizers; groundwater table has sunk below safe and replenish-able levels; the traditionally grown varieties have been lost in the past, little variety in the food grain choices has resulted in reduced nutrients in our daily diet. So not only has it led to ecological degradation but has also changed the societal structures based on mutual obligations within the cultivators and affected the whole political economy of the agricultural sector comprising of the villages, financial institutions, government and other state institutions.

CONCLUSION

The consequences of establishing domination over nature are far ranging and encompass not only the environmental aspects but cover the whole political, economic and social spectrum of a country. The neo-colonists in the form of big corporations and technologists are given leeway, under the pretext of development and food security to manipulate and tamper with the agrarian society which India has always been. It is high time that the ecofeminist concerns come to the fore and are addressed through proper policy action lest we lose connection with nature. This belongingness with the ecology is the very foundation of life and is the inherent characteristic of the life in its elemental form. In that light, therefore, it becomes imperative to free the nature from the clutches of the capitalist patriarchy more so in the countries of the east like India where nature, also called '*Prakriti*' is considered divine and is celebrated since ancient times. Time is ripe to restore the regenerative capacities

of nature and preserve the indigenous knowledge of the communities involved in the sustainable subsistence farming practices with mostly women being the representatives. Inspiration can be drawn from the Palestinian poem "The Seed Keepers" which echoes in my mind each time I think of ecofeminism and the vagaries of the so-called scientific revolutions.

*Burn our land
burn our dreams
pour acid onto our songs
cover with sawdust
the blood of our massacred people
muffle with your technology
the screams of all that is free,
wild and indigenous.
Destroy
Destroy
Our grass and soil
Raze to the ground
every farm and every village
our ancestors had built
every book, every law
and all the equity and harmony.
Flatten with your bombs
every valley; erase with your edits
our past,
our literature; our metaphor
Denude the forests
and the earth
till no insect,
no bird
no word
can find a place to hide.
Do that and more.
I do not fear your tyranny
I do not despair ever
for I guard one seed
a little live seed
that I shall safeguard
and plant again.*

— taken from the book *Biopiracy:
The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge*

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