

# Vandana Shiva's "Who Really Feeds the World": An Eco-Feminist Perspective

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## Abstract

Eco-feminism is a branch of feminism that deals with the relationship between women and their environment. Mother Nature is essentially feminine since it gives life and nurtures it, just like a mother. This term was coined by French author and feminist, Françoise d'Eaubonne. Eco-feminists draw parallels between the oppression of women by men, and the oppression of Mother Nature by masculine forces in the name of corporations which dominate the Anthropocene era. Dr. Vandana Shiva is an eco-feminist, prolific writer and a fearless advocate of anti-globalization and biodiversity. In Chapter 8 of her book, titled "Women Feed the World, Not Corporations", she effectively puts the message across that women are much better than men in taking care of Mother Nature and her family. She writes about the issues of livelihood for women, the advantages of women-centric food systems, the reasons feminine skills are looked down upon, and the evils of patriarchal economics in a candid manner together with facts and figures to support her arguments. This paper seeks to ferret out the main constituents of Eco-feminism as espoused by Vandana Shiva in her book. The text's tenets are bolstered by the viewpoints of other prominent eco-feminists in their research work. However, this paper is limited to eco-feminism in the realm of agriculture, and the other aspects of eco-feminism have been covered in only a pithy manner.

**Keywords:** Eco-Feminism, Agro-Ecology, Agro-Feminism, Monocultures.

Women have been known to "mother" Earth since centuries. They took care of its resplendent flora and fauna, and resisted opposition to ravish it of its divine wealth. But a woman's contribution to the ecology remained abstract and intangible. "Occasionally, one-dimensional thinkers unaware of the depth and complexity of women's eco-political renaissance, judged it to be little more than a public extension of the housewife role. Articles from liberal feminists used patronising and demeaning titles like 'Still Fooling with Mother Nature' and 'Calling Eco-feminism Back to Politics'. But a glance at the now extensive literature of eco-feminism shows its reach from epistemology to economics" (Salleh, 2014, para 23). In November 1991, Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) organized the World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet in Miami, Florida. More than 1500 women participated in this Congress from 83 countries. They saw this as an opportunity to prepare a Women's Action Agenda for the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro. Women's role in planetary protection was thus clearly articulated (Gaard, 2015, p.4).

In her book *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*, Warren

proclaims that "woman" and "nature" should be looked at not as fixed, a historical concepts (contrary to the early essentialist ecofeminist writings), but as socially constructed by an andocentric, anthropocentric culture. Understanding nature's domination will help enlighten the oppression of women, just as comprehending gender oppression will shed light on the ways in which nature has been exploited. To put it in a nutshell, it is essential that all feminists become concerned about the environment, and all environmentalists delve into feminist issues (Warren, 2000, p.22).

In "Who Really Feeds the World", Dr. Vandana Shiva enlightens the reader that industrial agriculture and genetic modification does not solve the current hunger crisis, as believed by many, but rather creates more and more hunger issues. This book appeals for agricultural justice and genuine sustainability. She implores people to look to agroecology instead of relying on genetic modification and large-scale Monocultures to solve the world's food crisis. "The UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development)'s 2013 *Trade and Environment Review* shows that monoculture and industrial farming methods are not providing sufficient, affordable food where it is needed, while also causing mounting and unsustainable environmental damage" (Shiva, 2016, p. 74). She writes about biodiversity, the role of women and peasants in producing the world's food since ages, the importance of the seed in the food chain, and the movement toward localization.

Peasants, small scale farmers and women have a livelihood. Livelihood is more organic as it is based on co-creation and co-production. "What is grown on farms determines whose livelihoods are secured, what is eaten, how much is eaten, and by whom it is eaten" (Shiva, 2016, p. 118). The livelihood changes according to the requirement of their immediate surroundings (their families, friends and pets). The monetary benefit out of livelihood is flexible and not very steep. Somehow, the satisfaction derived out of a livelihood is much more than the joy of doing a job. A job is just a piece of work. It is not a creative endeavour, and it usually does not require thinking out of the box. It is a reduction of creativity to suit a purpose, to be repeated day after day, for years together, without an emotional connection, just for earning money.

"Women's work and livelihoods in subsistence agriculture, for example, are based on multiple use and

management of biomass for fodder, fertilizer, food and fuel. The collection of fodder from the forest is part of the process of transferring fertility for crop production and managing soil and water stability. The work of the women engaged in such activity tends to be discounted and made invisible for all sectors. When these allied activities which are ecologically and economically critical are taken into account, agriculture is revealed as the major occupation of 'working' women in rural India. The majority of women in India are not simply 'housewives', but farmers" (Mies and Shiva, 1993, p. 232).

Across the world, there are many women farmers. Vandana Shiva provides statistics as to the extent of women's contribution in agriculture and states that as much as 80% of all decisions are taken by the women in the fields as they have a much better grasp of seed quality, planting cycles and the like. Women have a holistic understanding of agriculture. "80 percent of the work in local food production in Africa is done by women, in Asia [it is] 50 to 60 percent and in Latin America [the number is] 30 to 40 percent" (Shiva, 2016, p. 130). Women do not think it as a mere activity to be performed. But rather as their overall responsibility in nurturing nature as well as all the families in their ecosystem, with a long term view of sustainability of all flora and fauna around them.

The woman-centred food systems are based on sharing, caring, conservation, and well-being. Most women have livelihoods, not jobs. Their occupation with the household which they run is organic and intuitive. It is not circumscribed by details from mores and dictums prescribed by the corporations and governments. Women are brilliant decision makers at combining, budgeting, and rationalising food. Globally, women are responsible for cooking and serving food to their men, generally the most nutritious foods, leaving children to eat afterwards, and women to eat last. When there is insufficient food, women deny themselves food so that children can eat.

Notwithstanding, the perils of gender imposed upon her, a woman is also an expert at inventory management, ensuring limited to zero food spoilage in her pantry. Now if this expertise is extrapolated to a village, city, or country, the results would be bounteous and propitious. Women are biodiversity experts, nutrition experts, and financial experts. But corporations which produce food as a "commodity" do not believe in the diversity, rationalization and nutrition value of the commodity. All they care for is profits. Corporations do not want to recognize the contribution of women which is actually the mainstay of the entire agro-economy. "There is a conceptual inability of statisticians and researchers to define women's work both inside and outside the home, and farming is usually part of both. This lack of recognition of what is and is not labour is exacerbated both by the great volume of work that women do and the fact that they do many chores at the same time. It is also related to the fact

that although women work to sustain their families and communities, most of their work is not measured in wages. Like all farmers, women do not have "jobs"; they have livelihoods" (Shiva, 2016, p. 122). Sustainable agriculture is not reckoned as an economic activity unless it makes profit. This is the inorganic point of view of the Corporation and one, which Vandana Shiva vehemently argues against.

The woes of Mother Nature, like desertification which is mostly a result of the Corporations for meeting their selfish needs are mostly bore by women. "As rural areas experience desertification, decreased food production, and other economic and ecological hardships, these factors prompt increased male out-migration to urban centres with the promise of economic gain and wages returned to the family; these promises are not always fulfilled. In the short-term, and possibly long-term as well, male out-migration means more women are left behind with additional agricultural and household duties, such as care-giving. These women have even fewer resources to cope with seasonal and episodic weather and natural disasters" (Gaard, 2007, p.10). Wangari Maathai, the Nobel Prize winning eco-feminist, had started the 'Save the Land Harambee' project to save Kenya from desertification, and make the Kenyan women self-sustainable. She decided to train the rural women to plant trees, and for this reason foresters had been employed to train them. Since most of the women had very little formal education, they failed to comprehend the technical language of the foresters. Soon the women did away with the technicalities, and instead applied their rich and intuitive knowledge of crop-growing. Most of them had a lot of experience in planting crops. They used their "women-sense", applied simple and innovative techniques, and the results were astounding. "Twenty years down the road, the women have gained many skills and techniques that they continue to share among themselves. They have become self-reliant in tree planting and the foresters are now the first to acknowledge and applaud their accomplishments. Many women have indeed become foresters without diplomas" (Maathai, 1985, p. 28). This reiterates the fact that women can work wonders, can cross the barriers of gender, illiteracy and poverty, and have the power to transform a desert to a lush green haven for the benefit of all. They do not need the expensive farm machineries of the Corporations.

Corporations are patriarchal in nature whereas a woman's knowledge of farming is holistic, sophisticated, non-mechanized, and follows the principles of agro-ecology. Women are far more skilled than the so-called agro-experts of the corporations. They can provide nutrition through biodiversity rather than genetic engineering and GM [genetically modified] foods. Profits may be minimal, but livelihood for all is ensured. Money does not get concentrated in the hands of a few. Corporations do not like this as they consider everything as resources to be harnessed. Their point of view is rather like a predator

seeking to extract profit out of any activity. This leads to another burning issue, that of sex-selective abortion in India. Women growers are slowly replaced by corporations and their machines. Women can then be considered a disposable sex. The patriarchal economic systems wants to do away with women at large, and so the abortions. Some eco-feminists like Carolyn Merchant do not want to depict nature as female, as the very comparison leads to a bias in the eyes of the male gender, and results in oppression of it and the fauna it begets. "The dialectical relationships between production and reproduction became for me the basis for a socialist eco-feminism grounded in material change. I also addressed the related problem of the depiction of nature as female, and its conflation with women, by advocating the removal of gendered terminology from the description of nature and the substitution of the gender-neutral term 'partner.' This led me to articulate an ethic of partnership with nature in which nature was no longer symbolized as mother, virgin, or witch but instead as an active partner with humanity" (Merchant, 2006, p. 515).

Patriarchal economics doesn't believe in creativity. The box is created. One must not slip out. The feministic style is always creative, out of the box, and dynamic and closely aligned to the variability in Nature. The Corporations create the production boundary which tells you that if you consume what you produce, you are not a producer. Self-sustenance is not a corporation's cup of tea, as it does not make profits for them. The patriarchal system encourages Monocultures of the Mind and Monocultures of the Land. That is the exact antithesis of the immense biodiversity in Nature. Fathers of modern science deny the interconnectedness of nature. Masculine aim of science is to captivate nature and make her serve our purpose. This predatory outlook was present since the seventeenth century, and the landlords have always been after poor peasants since then. The corporations are just another avatar of the landlords.

Feminist knowledge of agriculture is 5000 years old, and the rise in food corporations is not even a hundred year old. This goes on to prove that the old model is a tried and tested one; something which has fed millions for over so many years without human beings getting affected with cancers, obesity, and more than a score of pesticide, insecticide, herbicide, and weedicide related diseases. According to an FAO report, women use more biodiversity than any scientist knows about. Women produce diversities, whereas corporations produce Monocultures. Since women provide for households, not companies, they perform diverse tasks involving diverse skills. They are not paid wages, and they have livelihoods not jobs. So statisticians and researchers find it difficult to quantify women's work. As feminist economist Marilyn Waring observed in her classic work, *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics*, that the United Nations System of National Accounts (UNNSA) has no system of accounting for nature's own production or destruction. It can only do so

when these products enter a nation's economy. This system also vastly ignores the majority of work done by women. "The methods used by national accounts to estimate the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) may discriminate by sex either in the sense that certain informal activities usually performed by women are more likely to be omitted than the informal activities usually performed by men" (Waring, 1988, p. 340). Corporations can seek to appropriate women's knowledge of seed and nutrition through intellectual property rights. It can also appropriate the food into the commercialized category called commodity.

Corporate food giants and seed giants have created global food insecurity. According to Vandana Shiva, more than a billion people in the world do not have food. Out of this, women and girls suffer the most as half of the world's growers are hungry women. On the other hand, more than two billion people have obesity and obesity-linked diseases. "Contrary to popular belief, obesity isn't about rich people eating too much: it's often the poor in developing countries who bear the harshest brunt of diet-related diseases" (Shiva, 2016, p. 11). This amply demonstrates the need for Eco-feminism to be extolled and Nature to be retrieved back from the clutches of commercialization of the Corporations.

A seed is the first unit of a food chain. "Seeds are not things. They are the embodiment of centuries of evolutionary intelligence, and they hold within them the potential of thousands of years of creative evolution. Living seeds are the basis of an ecological agriculture based on biodiversity, not monocultures" (Shiva, 2016, p. 139). Green Revolution in India privatised and commercialized the seed, and tampered with the food chain as a result. The Green Revolution increased food production for food corporations, not for the poor farmers and women. The profits for fertiliser companies soared, the pesticide industry boomed, and so also the "healthcare" industry, as more and more people fell ill and needed medical attention due to the toxic chemicals used. So the seed of disease was planted with the Green Revolution.

"The day has come for us to realize that no human individual or group has the right to dominate and exploit the other; similarly, the day has also come for us to realize that no human individual or group has the right to dominate and exploit nonhuman life. Such oppression of one group over another is immoral and self-destructive. In the case of the exploitation of nature, it is leading to our own human and planetary demise" (Hutner, 2011, p.46). Vandana Shiva gives a clarion call towards restoring sanity in the most fundamental of all requirements in our world: food. Nature provides us food, women work with Nature to ensure that everyone is taken care of. Women have the holistic understanding that is irreplaceable. This is Agro-Feminism, which would not be required if the Corporations were to recognize the sustainability of women centric agriculture. The commercialization of food is the goal of the Corporations, and they do not care if, as a result, millions

go hungry. “Our food security is too vital an issue to be left in the hands of a few transnational corporations with their profit motives, or up to national governments that increasingly lose control over food security decisions, or to a few, mostly male national delegates at UN conferences, who take decisions affecting all our lives” (Shiva, 2016, p. 130). Eco-Feminism is the Soft Power that must be hailed and promoted for a sustainable present and future of our beautiful world with its plethora of flora and fauna. “A shift towards recognition of the importance of the intuition of women is pivotal as the world seeks for solutions to the environmental, political, and social problems that have been caused by the harshly analytical, compartmentalizing, capitalist system” (Weideman, 2012, p. 3).

In her book *The Chalice and the Blade*, Eisler describes the ancient times as a peaceful agrarian era, ruled by ‘the chalice, not the blade.’ The chalice symbolizes a peaceful, egalitarian, partnership society characterized by nurturing relationship among humans and with nonhuman nature; the blade symbolizes an aggressive, violent, war-prone, male-dominated society characterized by unequal power relationships and militaristic domination (Holcomb, 1989, 133). It’s time we bring the Chalice era back, and see to it that the Blade era is bid a farewell. Eco-Feminism is a deep obeisance to the immense bounteousness of Nature. We must do everything to work for our Universal Mother, Nature.

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