

Published as Ariel Salleh 'From Center to Margin in Ecofeminist Theory', *Hypatia: a journal of feminist philosophy*, 1991, Vol. 6, No. 1, 206-14.

Review of Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. London: Zed. 1989.

Eco-feminism had its movement origins over two decades ago, with actions such as women's legal challenges to giant nuclear corporations in the U.S. and tree-hugging protests against loggers in North India. Both expressed a political stand grounded in working women's commonsense understanding of everyday life needs. Both intuited that somehow the struggle for 'a feminine voice' to be heard was connected with struggle for a nurturant, protective attitude towards our living environment. The term 'eco-feminism', spontaneously appearing across several continents during the 70s, reflects this double-edged political perspective. Further, at the same time as this international wave of movement initiatives was being carried forward by women, an eco-feminist literature began to emerge.

It is not easy to give adequate documentation to this new literature. Research papers written in Finland or articles circulating in Venezuelan or Australian magazines rarely make it across the threshold of a 'metropolitan' based international book marketing trade. For politico-economic reasons then, eco-feminists working from more visible niches in the dominant English-speaking culture have tended to get their views broadcast first -- even feminism is touched by its imperialist context. Thus, the classic eco-feminist statements came to be recognized as Rosemary Ruether's New Woman, New Earth (1975), Elizabeth Dodson-Gray's Green Paradise Lost (1979) and Carolyn Merchant's The Death of Nature (1981). The lonely appearance in Paris of Françoise d'Eaubonne's Le féminisme ou la mort (1974) is an exception whose lack of an English translation some fifteen years later, more or less proves the rule. Nevertheless, as the 80s unfolded, eco-feminist voices from 'the periphery' began to be noticed, and Zed Press have been a major catalyst in promoting them. They brought out an English version of German in vitro activist Maria Mies' Patriarchy and Accumulation (1986) and Indian physicist Vandana Shiva's Staying Alive (1989). This year has seen Zed's publication of Finnish U.N. worker Hilikka Pietila's account of women in development agencies, Making Women Matter (1990).

Applying the sociology of knowledge to eco-feminism, it is perhaps not surprising to find that the shift from 'center' to 'margin' brings with it a shift in substantive concerns. Symptomatically, given our imperialist context, it is a move from 'ideas' to 'material' questions. Earlier analyses of 'the woman-nature link' concentrated on abstract ideas, ideology, the superstructure of daily existence. Hence, the excellent exposes of the Judaeo-Christian tradition in Ruether or the rise of Baconian science in Merchant. It could be argued that this focus on the role of ideology was simply a manifestation of our movement's political immaturity at that time. However, I would see it rather as a direct corollary of the conditions of production of that writing within middle-class academia. In a society such as the U.S.,

where an entrenched class division between mental and manual labor exists, and where labor issues are either suppressed, or mystified by racism, experience, perception and theory are inevitably constrained in important ways. As Shiva puts it, liberation should 'begin from the colonized and end with the colonizer' (p.53).

The publication of two recent North American anthologies lends some support to this observation. Healing the Wounds (1989) and Reweaving the World (1990) are both, with the exception of one or two essays, largely preoccupied with ethics, life-style, self-realization, cultural ritual and art. This, while 456 million people starve today, and one more species will have died out by midnight. Again, consistent with a prevailing climate of bourgeois pluralism, the books come across as a 'supermarket' of eco-feminist standpoints. What is missing is an explicit and concerted challenge to the multi-national structure of economic oppression: a global economy which has a so-called 'advanced' world utterly dependent for its daily survival on the labors and resources of an 'un-developed' Two Thirds World. Thankfully, this is what Vandana Shiva's Staying Alive brings to eco-feminism. -- Meanwhile, as far as anthologies go, the U.K.-published collection by Leonie Caldecott and Stephanie Leland, Reclaim the Earth (1983), remains the best. It is politically grounded and internationally balanced.

.

Like Mies' book before it, Shiva's Staying Alive arrives as an urgent complement to the export dominant 'culturalist' tendency in eco-feminist literature. Director of the New Delhi based Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Natural Resource Policy, Shiva is herself a member of a privileged grouping. Even so, she has an intimate practical knowledge of the many dimensions of her subject. Her text weaves its way comfortably through geology, plant physiology, economics, mythology, epistemology. The book's basic thesis is that while Western 'development' was supposed to be a 'post-colonial' project, it has merely carried colonization forward into a new phase. Its apparent 'progress without subjugation' takes the form of a pact between Western and elite local men, leading to the exclusion of women from participation as partners in shaping social life. More than that, she finds indigenous women pick up the costs of 'development' without seeing any benefits. Further again, the more burdens they carry, the more women are 'victimized' and characterized as 'burdens' on society -- something which applies equally in a 'developed West', as the feminization of poverty intensifies.

Shiva offers a paradigmatic analysis of the plight of Third World women everywhere. The erosion of traditional land-use rights by the introduction of cash-cropping, strips them of economic and personal autonomy as controllers of their means of production. For centuries, women have engaged hands-on with their habitat while laboring to provide daily sustenance and shelter. But 'development' ruptures the 'productive' woman-nature nexus, leaving starvation and ecological destruction in its place. Shiva writes:

... it is in managing the integrity of ecological cycles in forestry and agriculture that women's productivity has been most developed and evolved. Women transfer fertility [...] they transfer animal waste as fertilizer for crops and crop by-products to animals as fodder. They work with the forest to bring water to their fields and families. This partnership between women's and nature's work ensures the sustainability

of sustenance [...] (p.45).

In its arrogance, the patriarchal `reason' of Western science and economics imposes a linear, reductionist, managerial logic against the cyclic flows of ecology.

The forest is separated from the river, the field is separated from the forest, the animals are separated from the crops. Each is then separately developed and the delicate balance which ensures sustainability and equity is destroyed. The visibility of dramatic breaks and ruptures is posited as `progress'. Marginalized women are either dispensed with or colonized. Needs go unfulfilled, nature is crippled. (p.45)

The patriarchal response to this crisis is yet a further assault on life -- and on women's being -- the call for `population control'. Just as earlier eco-feminists have pointed out that science is not `neutral', so Shiva argues that there exists a sort of `elective affinity' between science with its commercialized technologies, on the one hand, and masculine self-aggrandizement, on the other. This is the real meaning of `development'.

I recall once sharing a taxi to the airport in Nairobi with a Dutch engineer who had been giving workshops on irrigation to the locals. Mindful of the fact that African women cultivate 80% of the continent's food, I asked him: "And how many women in your workshops?" "Only men," came the reply. Apparently, Kenyan authorities are fraternally anxious to be seen playing by white brother's rules. This was their masculine ego-investment. But Dutch aid programmers are not without their own status needs. So the knowledge was lost: though given what Shiva has to tell us about the effects of India's Green Revolution, this particular wastage was probably a blessing in disguise.

Eco-feminists see ecological sustainability and social justice as clearly interlinked. The dismissal of women's expertise `developed' over thousands of years is the key contributor to both ecological breakdown and rural impoverishment. Making her case in terms the colonizer can understand, or more significantly will accept as valid, Shiva tables an array of indicators on the nutritional status of male versus female children; soil loss with monoculture; fertilizer application by sex; corporate funding of biotech research; salinity following irrigation; male versus female shares of agricultural work. She notes that

The dispossession of the poorer sections of rural society through the green revolution strategy and their reduced access to food resources is, in part, responsible for the appearance of surpluses at the macro-level. The surplus [...] is created by lack of purchasing power. [...] If one also includes the costs to the farm ecosystem in terms of soil degradation, waterlogging, salinity and desertification, the green revolution has actually reduced productivity [...] (p.129)

Shiva goes on to address the epidemic of violence on women which has ensued from the frustration of men's failure in the green revolution districts.

Like all good eco-feminist accounts, Staying Alive ties together the analysis of race, class, gender and speciesism. The author reminds us that modern chemical pesticides are an

adaptation of war technologies such as nerve gas, and she contrasts their use with women's uniquely non-violent skill in pest control by nurturing resistance within plants rather than attacking pest species from the outside. She describes the sell-out of academic scientists to the corporate sector as a privatization of our 'intellectual commons'. It is made necessary because patriarchal science has become dependent on expensive hi-tech methods. But this new laboratory-based research, which shuffles 'mythical constructs' around on computers, has lost all hold of the founding canon of empiricism as hands-on knowledge. Consequently, we have a situation where

there is no scientific work done yet on the water relations of indigenous tree species but women's wisdom in rural India has a categorization of species in terms of their water conserving properties: root systems, crown morphology, and physiology [...] (p.206)

Rather than acknowledge women's humble work, either by including it in labor statistics or according it the status of scientific observation, governing male elites in South America, Africa, India, publish annual trajectories of 'man-power' needs - engineers, accountants, sanitary chemists, biologists, electricians... In the drive for 'masculinization', they forget or 'deny' that

the 'Dust Bowl' technology for the manufacture of deserts from fertile soils was first mastered in the colonization of native Indian lands in North America [...] western patriarchy's highly energy-intensive, chemical-intensive, water-intensive and capital-intensive agricultural techniques for creating deserts out of fertile soils in less than one or two decades has spread rapidly across the Third World [...] financed by international development and aid agencies. (pp.152-3.)

Identifying the modern environment movement as fellow-travellers with developmentalists -- and we might add, many environmental ethicists too -- Shiva points to the underlying Cartesian paradigm they all share. 'Deep' ecologists do make an attempt to escape this instrumentalism, albeit with mixed results, though Shiva appears not to be aware of this ideological grouping among Greens. Using a vocabulary of alienation, commodification, homogenization, to describe the impact of industrial practices, her perception, again unselfconsciously, converges with the bio-regionalist sensibility.

Culturally perceived poverty need not be real material poverty: subsistence economies which satisfy basic needs through self-provisioning are not poor in the sense of being deprived. [...] [M]illetts are nutritionally far superior to processed foods, houses built with local materials are [...] better adapted to the local climate [...] (p.10)

Unlike some Western decentralists however, Shiva's valorization of 'place' never loses sight of the wider multi-national economic order and its insidious impacts -- technology, for one. Shiva's re-naming of 'poverty' throws down a material challenge which many Green activists and feminists are yet to hear. Ultimately, if we are to arrive at global justice and sustainability, the West will have to review its thirst for hi-tech consumption in favor of the

gentler, egalitarian alternative by which the Two Thirds World provisions itself.

As Shanti George says: 'The trouble is when dairy planners look at the cow, they just see her udder' (p.168). The same engineering mindset has now brought women into a world where they are being manipulated as reproductive resources. Our bodies have become an urban dust bowl. Our voices parched echoes in concrete valleys. Recovery of the feminine breath in social life -- politics and science, economics and agriculture -- is urgent at this time. But what is meant by 'the feminine'? -- It was at this level of inquiry that I anticipated Shiva might get into difficulty. Trained as a physicist rather than philosopher, I expected her to be awkward in her formulation of cultural processes. Even Rajni Kothari's foreword suggested that readers might find a certain literalism in Shiva's text. But this is misleading. The author of Staying Alive is no naive essentialist, as feminists like to call theorists who would use commonsense understandings of sexual difference; though I think it would be fair to say that Shiva is unacquainted with the prodigious debate over essentialism in the West.

Drawing on Indian mythology, Shiva introduces the notion of 'Prakriti' - as feminine principle or life force. This is distinct from Western gendered concepts of 'the feminine', which work in a politically oppressive way by equating the feminine with passivity, then attaching women's work roles and personas to this false objectification. Prakriti, she claims, is transgendered, an active creative force. Men too can live through Prakriti, but when men's energy is 'gendered', the principle of activity is conflated with dominating, even destructive behavior, such that creativity is again lost. Prakriti is proposed by Shiva as an alternative 'universal' basis for gender liberation. It will serve as a corrective to the deformed, socially homogenizing and fragmenting 'universal' principles of the Western bourgeois-liberal order.

A convergence of this analysis with the 'culturalist' tendency in eco-feminism is thus quite clear. The modernist 'catching-up' orientation of Liberal and Marxist feminisms based on 'masculine' universals is obsolete. A re-visioning of the earth goddess, Gaia, is called for. The pitfall in all this is that while Prakriti may in principle be transgendered, the efforts of living men and women to realize it are hampered by a language and social institutions that are gendered. Hence the ready re-absorption of cultural feminist ritual by a commercially oriented status quo. And the ready adoption of Gaia imagery by environmentalist men, including deep ecologists, who have their commonsense assumptions about sexual difference massaged by such a notion. Shiva laments that, like Gaia, Prakriti has been reduced, mineralized, turned from Mater to matter or resource. In fact, the rape of the mother is a deep structural image that can gratify men in a patriarchal era: at an ego level, it affirms their given role as protector, and at a libidinal level, it satisfies pornographically.

Nevertheless, the use of Prakriti as an oppositional term in a process of ideological deconstruction is better than nothing at all. More importantly, focused as she is on the materiality of daily life, Shiva's approach does not stop at this point. There is not the simple assumption so often found among U.S. radicals, from Greens to poststructuralists, that to change our discourse or how we think is equivalent to making political change. In Shiva's India, the link between women and nature is not only symbolic, but has at least three sites where it is active and creative. The first is in reproduction or birthing; the second is in production or farming; and the third is in the provision of nurture or caring. In each labor form, women 'mediate nature and humanity' -- to inject a dualism which is not characteristic of her own writing, but meaningful to Western readers. Through a complex of labors then, women are 'organically' implicated in life-affirming processes and women's knowledge is

empirically grounded in this organic relation.

A majority of women in the world literally embody Prakriti, although those who regard them with gendered eyes will not see that active force at work. Such blindness is often found among emancipated urban professional women, whose technologically-mediated consumer life-style removes them from the reality of engagement with nature. Shiva acknowledges these socio-historical differences among women, her argument being not about some universally determined 'feminine essence', but about 'experiences' most commonly shared among working women. Along the same lines, Shiva borrows Mies' observation from Patriarchy and Accumulation about men's most common labor forms. Given the gendered deformation of the life force, men tend to feel themselves 'productive' only when they objectify external reality and control it. Hence, the massive appeal of the Western development project.

. . . .

But this discussion begs a question which Shiva's book raises and does not answer. If Prakriti precedes the gendered construction of society, then it must be Western colonialism that is responsible for men's violence on women. In fact, as the institution of suttee demonstrates, patriarchal oppression in India has its own history. Why does the author evade this problem? Is it a tactical desire not to offend Third World brothers in the struggle against neo-colonialism? If so, it is understandable, but it is a policy that neglects women's interests in the longer run. Shiva's treatment of Prakriti as transgendered is too elliptical to be helpful. For instance, creative fertility is traditionally ascribed to Indian temple goddesses in the form of a life-giving mother. Sexual reproduction may be pre-gendered -- in principle -- but, as we know, mothers who labor to give birth generally become mothers who labor to give care. Similarly, anthropological studies reveal how the Indian cultural identification of women with water prescribes their daily routine of water-carrying. Prakriti does not seem to be as gender pure as Shiva would have us believe.

Shiva's writing is cryptic in some other areas as well. She says: "Patriarchal categories which understand destruction as 'production' and regeneration of life as 'passivity' have created a crisis of survival" (p.3). This could allow an unsympathetic reader to charge that hers is an idealist argument, whereas we know that the body of her book involves a constant interplay between ideas, labor, nature, relationships. Another vulnerable piece of writing occurs with:

The economic system based on the patriarchal concept of productivity was created for the very specific historical and political phenomenon of colonialism. (p.11)

Idealism again: does she really believe that ideas alone shape institutions? No, I think not, as illustrated by her consistently dialectical methodology. But which patriarchal 'concept of productivity' does Shiva have in mind? Since she implies elsewhere that India has been free of this tendency prior to imperialism, it must be Western patriarchy. But this oversimplifies. As we have already noted, the Indian tradition has its own variety of patriarchalism - something substantiated by Shiva's thesis on the pact between local elite men and colonizers. When Shiva refers to the 'economic system', she presumably means the system of men's appropriation of nature and of women's labor, but plainly this was not only created for purposes of imperial conquest. The same pattern is manifest within the domestic economy of

the dominant Western system. Perhaps she regards men's treatment of women in the West as a form of colonization as well? Some feminists do argue this way. Rather, I believe, Shiva's 'skid talk' here ties in with her activist prioritization of the colonial moment. In any event, it does little justice to her analysis as a whole. More careful editorial scrutiny should have saved her from lapses of this kind.

Finally, I am uneasy with Shiva's superficial reading of Marcuse. She cites a sample of his work as gendered dualism. But this is to remove it from the context of a Frankfurt School theory, whose collective critique of instrumental rationality spanning several decades arrived at a sociological analysis very close to her own eco-feminism. To quote:

... technological man [becomes] a uniform measure of the worth of classes, cultures and genders. Dominant modes of perception based on reductionism, duality and linearity are unable to cope with equality in diversity... (p.5.)

Critical theory called for the voice of 'the other' to be heard long before Parisian postmoderns thought of it. Like Shiva's, though unlike the structuralists, the Frankfurt case for 'difference' was thoroughly embedded in a passion for social justice and practical renewal of human identity with nature. Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, each believed that in unravelling the contradictions inherent to women's gender 'mutilation', we would find a way back to what has been lost. This thesis prefigures the transitional voice known as eco-feminism.

Shiva, I feel, does not unravel these contradictions patiently enough. We especially need close attention to the interplay of Western and other patriarchal systems, particularly in the face of an emergent masculinist backlash -- from left and right -- which seeks to prove that the pervasiveness of men's domination across cultures is a figment of the Western feminist imagination. Hopefully, Shiva and her Third World sisters will take up this theme before too long. In the meantime, the strengths of Shiva's contribution are clearly apparent. Her factual synthesis of geology, plant physiology, economics, and so on, is magnificent. Shiva's sensitive exposition of Indian women's systematic approach to ecological labor is a gift to eco-feminism. Phrases such as 'women transfer fertility' or 'this partnership between women's work and nature's work' convey a dialectical epistemology; one that implicitly discredits the Cartesian split between human labor on the one hand, and nature, on the other. Empirical knowledge conceived in daily labor sustains the eco-feminist voice that Shiva translates for us in Staying Alive. That in itself is sufficient validation for our political perspective. In my view, Prakriti might just as well have been left to sleep in a footnote.