

ENVIRONMENTALISM AND POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM: Examples of Third World Women's Resistance

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Western feminism generally has become increasingly interested in, what has often come to be called, postcolonial feminism. This emphasis in feminism works generally to extend the analysis of the intersection of sexism with ethnicity, class and heterosexism, to include the still existing negative effects of Western colonialism (Schutte 1998, 65). The “post,” in postcolonialism, does not indicate that colonialism is over but, rather, that colonial legacies continue to exist. More recent phenomena, the capitalist global economy, development projects in the Southern Hemisphere and events such as environmental racism in the United States, are viewed, in the postcolonial discourse, as neocolonial. They can be seen as "...a continuation of the European expansion begun in 1492" (Harding 1998,154; LaDuke 1993).

In the United States, academic concern with postcolonialism can be seen in the occurrence of several special issues of feminist journals featuring this emphasis (e.g., *Hypatia: Special Issue: A Border Crossing: Multicultural and Postcolonial Feminist Challenges to Philosophy (Part I and II)* , Spring 1998 and Summer 1998; *Signs: Special Issue: A Postcolonial, Emergent, and Indigenous Feminisms*, @ Summer 1995, *Signs: Special Issue: Globalization and Gender*, Summer 2001 and *Women's Studies Quarterly: Special Issue: A Earthwork: Women and Environments*. 2001). Further examples of postcolonial feminism can be seen in events such as the recent formation, by an international group of women = s studies journal editors, of a > Feminist Knowledge Network = to facilitate communication, including the printing of articles from one another = s journals (Hall 2003). Also, numerous feminist conferences in the U.S. have recently organized around some aspect of the theme: international feminism. A case in point is the 2005 National Women's Studies Conference titled “Women and the Environment: Globalizing and Mobilizing,” which featured the well-known ecofeminist and anti-globalism spokeswoman, Vandana Shiva as the keynote speaker.

On a global scale, postcolonial feminist issues have gained some visible political prominence. The United Nations Conference on Women held in Beijing in September 1995, for example, adopted a platform of action important to postcolonial feminism that was adopted by the 165 participating nations and the multitude of NGOs represented. One of the postcolonial actions was specific to environmental concerns. It reads “environmental justice: for women by promoting sustainable development and addressing the disproportionate impact of environmental problems on women and poor communities.”

Postcolonial feminism works across both geographical and intellectual borders. Intellectually, it unsettles familiar and often comfortable frameworks (Narayan and Harding 1998a,1). Paralleling the postmodern critique of universal knowledge claims, it criticizes the Western scientific paradigm for its assertions of universality, arguing that its knowledge claims are simply knowledges that have been developed by one group of people at one historical time (Harding 1998). The capitalist global economy and its impacts are of crucial importance to postcolonial feminists. These feminist alert us to the fact that in the so-called developing world, women and their children, in particular, are severely affected by insufficient food, the rising cost of living, declining services, and eroding economic and environmental conditions.

One specific reason, environmental degradation affects women disproportionately is because women's activities so often include the acquisition of water and fuel wood. As deforestation increases, women are forced to travel greater distances for wood. In South Africa, for example, women generally spend seven to nine hours per week on these chores, walking 12 to 38 miles per headload and. headloads as

heavy 147 pounds have been recorded. This, of course, means less time for childcare, education, paid work, or other activities (Goodland 1995). Postcolonial feminism regards the continuing ill effects of our colonial/neocolonial history, as expressed by third world women in their various locations around the world, an appropriate focus for contemporary feminism. From the vantage point of their particular locations, third world women who are resisting adverse neocolonial impacts understand the costs of development and how these costs are occurring. They can (and do) provide us with valuable empirical knowledge concerning the ill effects of development projects.

Women's grassroots efforts to mitigate colonial effects can be seen in first world and third world countries. The impacts of globalization, occurring in the so called "developed" world of the United States, most often affects people who are still suffering from earlier colonialism: Native Americans, African Americans and Hispanics. In the U. S., in the Environmental Justice Movement, a movement responding to the disproportionate location of environmentally polluting projects in people of color and/or poor neighborhoods, the preponderant number of activists are women. While, globalization, seen by many as updated colonialism, has been accompanied by a tremendous growth in women's activism against many development activities in the "South."

In the "developing" world, where adverse neocolonial impacts often spawn protests on the part of third world women (Rocheleau et al. 1996), some of the more familiar examples are in environmental and ecological movements. Two well known actions are the Chipko Movement in India and the Greenbelt movement in Kenya. The Chipko Movement, is described here by Vandana Shiva of India, who is simultaneously regarded by scholars as a leading anti-globalization activist (Mohanty 2003) and arguably the most prominent internationally known ecofeminist (Dryzek 1997).

The Chipko Movement began when village women of Himalayan India organized in the early 1970s to protect their forests from contractors' axes. Chipko, which means "embrace", was a form of non-violent resistance. The activists hugged the trees, thus placing their bodies in the path of contractors' axes. The Chipko movement, which is an extension of traditional Gandhian nonviolent resistance, has led to ongoing campaigns of this kind of civil disobedience by local Indian women to call attention to 'development' practices that destroy their forests, watersheds and soils—their livelihoods, and their cultures (Shiva 1988).

The Green Belt Movement was established by the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK) on Earth Day 1977 to combat desertification, the process in which productive land, through misuse, becomes a desert (World Watch 2003: 201). The Green Belt Movement has subsequently created a nationwide network in Kenya of 6,000 village nurseries that have worked to avert desertification by encouraging tree planting and soil and water conservation in rural communities.

In 1999, it was estimated that Green Belt's 50,000 women members had planted more than 20 million trees and that while some had been harvested, millions more were still standing. The Green Belt Movement encourages zero-grazing (keeping livestock penned to control manure) and organic farming as a means of improving soil fertility and food production. It also encourages farmers to plant native crop varieties that are adapted to local conditions and can weather drought and other shocks that threaten food supplies. Members of the group sell seedlings from their nurseries gaining not only a source of firewood, but also a source of independent income.

The Green Belt organization also works to build women's self-confidence and create the conditions for greater gender equality in households and the public sphere. "Implicit in the action of planting trees," says Wangari Maathai, founder of the Green Belt Movement and subsequent Nobel Peace Prize winner, "is a civic education, a strategy to empower people and to give them a sense of taking their destiny into their own hands, removing their fear...[so women] can control the direction of their own lives (Worldwatch 2003, 51).

While the Chipko Movement in India and the Green Belt Movement in Kenya are fairly well known movements, third world women have engaged in a multitude of these kinds of actions to protest adverse neocolonial impacts, that are not so well known. Illustrative here is the Union of Salvadoran Workers (UNTS), an NGO (Non governmental Organization) that trains women in rural El Salvador and Honduras on how to use alternative and natural medicinal plants and foods found locally. The return to natural medicines is a woman-controlled movement. It is peasant women who know the healing qualities of local plants, and they pass this knowledge on to their daughters....It is also a clear protest against Salvadoran health services as well as against a model of economic development which adopts mechanistic western medicine. The movement is thus perceived, correctly, as a women-controlled initiative struggling against government interests, thus radical. (Steel in Warren 2000:26). An unknown number of movements, like the ones noted in this paper, most likely are never recorded and transmitted to Western readers.

Vandana Shiva, after conducting an extensive empirical study of the effects of Western agricultural development strategies in India, argues that Western development is really "mal-development: a development "bereft of . . ." a conservation or ecological principle. Shiva argues mal-development rests on several false assumptions, such as: nature is unproductive, organic agriculture based on nature's cycles of renewability spells poverty, women, tribal and peasant societies embedded in nature are similarly unproductive. The asserted "lack of production" is not based on demonstrations, that people working in cooperation produce less goods and services for needs. Rather it is assumed that production can only take place when mediated by technology for commodity production, even when such technology destroys life.

Shiva presents the example of a stable and clean river not being viewed as a productive resource. The river needs to be developed with dams to become productive. Women sharing the river as a commons to satisfy water needs of families and society are not seen as involved in productive labor. Only when engineers and various other water management experts get involved does the water use become productive. Likewise, natural forests remain unproductive till developed into mono-culture plantations of commercial species. Mal-development in Shiva's paradigm is seeing all work that does not produce profits and/or capital as non or unproductive work. Nature's work in renewing herself and women's work in producing sustenance in the ongoing project of daily reproducing the species by assuring basic vital needs, is neglected in the paradigm of mal-development fostered by industrial capitalism.

Studies of the Environmental Justice Movement in the United States, a movement responding to environmental racism, show that women, especially low-income women and women of color, make up the preponderant number of active participants in this movement. (Di Chiro 1993, 109). Grass-roots movements against toxic-waste often involve women taking actions to close down toxic-waste dump sites, prevent the siting of hazardous-waste incinerators, and influence chemical companies' production processes and waste disposal practices. The women's politics, in these kinds of protests, tends to begin with their everyday world of experience (Hamilton 1990). Many examples of this kind of activism in the United States can be seen in both feminist and environmentalist literature (De Chiro 1993).

One example of this phenomena can be observed in the late 1980s when women in South Los Angeles, who, with no previous political experience and little formal education, organized successfully to prevent the city of Los Angeles' imminent plan to build LANCER (a 13-acre incinerator that would burn 2,000 tons a day of municipal waste) from being located in their poor Black and Hispanic residential community. Cynthia Hamilton (1990, 220-221) who studied this event observes that:

For these women, the political issues were personal and in that sense they become feminist issues. These women, in the end, were fighting for what they felt was "right" rather than what men argued might be reasonable. The coincidence of the principles of feminism and ecology ... found expression and developed in the consciousness of these women: the concern for Earth as a home, the recognition

that all parts of a system have equal value, [and] ... that capitalist growth has social costs. ... They developed their critique of patriarchy in practice. In confronting the need for equality, these women forced the men to a new level of recognition—that working class women’s concerns cannot be simply dismissed.

One anti-LANCER activist, Robin Cannon, explained that, in addition to the city planners, “[m]y husband didn’t take me seriously at first either. He just saw a whole lot of women meeting and assumed we wouldn’t get anything done. ...After about 6 months, everyone finally took... [us] seriously. My husband had to learn to allocate more time for babysitting.... Another activist, Charlotte Bullock, stated “People’s jobs were threatened...but I said, ‘I’m not going to be intimidated. My child’s health comes first...that’s more important than my job.’”(Quoted in Hamilton 1990, 217 and 220)

Environmental racism is practiced most extensively on Indian Reservation, in the U.S. . In addition to the adverse effects of this kind of racism suffered by African, Hispanic, and Asian Americans in our country, over half of all U. S. Indians live in communities with one or more uncontrolled toxic waste sites (Warren 1997,3). Native lands are the site of considerable environmental destruction that takes place in this country. Native American women, who are among the leaders in these movements for environmental justice, in particular, face immediate health risks, (e.g., breast milk contamination) from the presence of polluting activities, such as uranium mining for nuclear energy on or near reservation (Warren 1997, 10). According to Winona LaDuke (1993, 98) (Ojibway), co-chair of the Indigenous Women = s Network, a grass-roots network of Native and Pacific Island women, director of the White Earth Land Recovery Project and U.S. Green Party vice-presidential candidate,

Both worldwide and in North America, Native people are at the center of the present environmental and economic crisis.... Indigenous peoples remain on front lines of the North American struggle to protect our environment. We understand clearly that our lives and those of our future generations are totally dependent on our ability to continue resisting colonialism and industrialization in our lands.

Native women are a positive and hopeful force in this resistance. Women, from many different tribes, in addition to their work in the Environmental Justice Movement, have been reasserting their place in the community = s life, reversing some colonial effects that caused their status to seriously decline over the centuries of white dominance. In the past few decades, Native American women's sense of themselves as a group, both on the reservations and within the intertribal urban Indian communities, has grown (Allen 1986) (Laguna Pueblo/Sioux). Women now function as council members and tribal chairs for at least one fourth of the federally recognized tribes. In the urban, extra-tribal communities, there has been widespread election of tribal women to urban Indian centers' governing bodies. Additionally, Native women are very active in areas such as alcohol treatment, restoring cultural values, and organizing against both the environmental degradation of tribal lands and forced sterilization. This is work that is absolutely essential to Native Americans as they and their cultures have been in danger of extinction since the coming of the white man.

The popular college classroom video, “To Protect Mother Earth” is an account of the continuing battle between Native Americans and the U S government. In this case, the Western Shoshones are working to prevent nuclear testing on their lands. Maintaining that the land was legally retained in the 1863 Treaty of Ruby Valley, the Shoshones must stake their claim in the U. S. Supreme court At state are 24 million acres and the survival of an ancient people. The film bears witness to the determination and strength of the Shoshone people by focusing on the Dann sisters, Carrie and Mary, who are leading the fight to keep the government from seizing their ancestral land to conducting underground nuclear tests. The sisters display the deep convictions the Western Shoshone people have rooted in their history and oral tradition. While the film is a legal account, it is really more of a personal portrait of the traditional Shoshone people as they demonstrate their ties to the land in a confrontation with U.S. government troops at the Nevada nuclear test site. The sisters and the Shoshone people in general are driven by their

traditional Shoshone belief that land is life, spiritually and economically.

Economic development, that often impairs women's ability to provide basic needs for their children and themselves, raises important questions about how Western first world feminists should understand and engage with the continuing effects of colonial history and with the persistence of neocolonial economic and political relationships (Narayan and Harding 1998, 1). In their attempt to understand the location/situation of many third world women, postcolonial feminists make use of differing analysis. Augmenting a Marxist-feminist analysis, some of these scholars demonstrate the relationship between the process of capital accumulation and the sexual division of labor, arguing that the economic and social empowerment of women is necessary for 'real' economic development to take place in the Third World (Sen and Gowan 1987, 84 cited in Barker 1998, 84). Another body of literature, often ecofeminist, demonstrates the relationship between women and sustainable development (see Braidotti et al. 1994; Shiva 1989), especially the effectiveness of women's centuries-old farming practices. This literature deconstructs the notion that development means progress and criticizes the accompanying belief that industrial capitalism is a natural process in which environmental destruction is often a necessary spillover effect.

Both of these approaches tend to work with empirical data. Some of these studies, for example, use material data to point to various health and risk factors borne disproportionately by these human subordinate groups by presence of low-level radiation, pesticides, toxins and other pollutants. Some studies provide data showing how first world development policies too often result in policies and practices that directly contribute to inability of women to provide adequately for themselves and their families.

Feminist methodologies generally benefit from analysis that begins from the embodied perspectives of the involved, communities of poor women of all colors in both affluent and neocolonial nations. The approach of beginning with effected women's voices provides the most inclusive paradigm for thinking about a more concrete and expansive vision of social justice (Monhanty 2003). It allows for the possibility of sustainable development, because the women involved are most often the ones whose centuries old practices have allowed the earth to replenish itself while providing local substance for humans.

A further examination of some examples of work on women's activism shows that often women take these kinds of nonelectoral grassroots political action because their varied concerns and political resources do not fit into the traditional structures of politics (Cohen et al. 1997). Women frequently have concerns that are ignored by politicians. Relatedly, many women lack the money and specific knowledge necessary to partake in the more formal political realm that includes activities such as lobbying, raising money for candidates or getting out the vote. On the other hand, at the grassroots level of political activism, women often are leaders and/or the majority of the membership. There "[w]omen often play a primary part in community action because it is about things they know best . . ." (Hamilton 1990, 217). Women spend more time in the home and local community than men do, and are usually the first to notice the ill effects of toxic waste or air and water pollution on humans and nonhuman nature. It is then women who, very often on behalf of their children and communities, work to reverse those effects (Gottlieb 1993; Seagar 1993).

Postcolonial feminism is an especially relevant strain of feminist thought, particularly in this time of rapidly globalizing economies and the accompanying environmental havoc being wreaked on the lands of third world people. This feminism implicitly works to dissolve the nature/culture dichotomy through the embodied voices of its third world practitioners, women who act to mitigate, in particular, the cultural effects of both colonialism and neocolonialism which have caused untold environmental damage to their natural resources.

As stated above, these third world practitioners are often very adept at taking action to mitigate the environmental devastation neocolonialism/globalization causes. Hence, it is not surprising that many of the concerns of postcolonial feminism are closely interwoven with those of ecofeminism. Many projects conducted by third world women to resist the ill effects of development have also been viewed as ecofeminist. Ecofeminist anthologies contain work by and about women resisting ill-conceived development projects (see Caldecott and Leland 1983; Warren 1997). Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein (1990, xi) explain that “[i]n many ways, women’s struggles in the . . . third world are, of necessity, also ecological struggles. Because so many women’s lives are intimately involved in trying to sustain and conserve water, land, and forests, they understand in an immediate way the costs of . . . pillag[ing] the Earth’s natural riches.” Vandana Shiva (1988, 47) advises that third world women engaged in survival struggles view their struggles simultaneously as struggles for the protection of women and nature. This is because so called “development” projects have “destroyed women’s productivity both by removing land, water, and forests from their management and control, as well as by the ecological destruction of soil, water, and vegetation systems so that nature’s productivity and renewability have been impaired.

We, in the U.S., cannot change our colonial past, but we can work to prevent its continuance. We can live more simply. We can increase our environmental awareness and that of others. by understanding “how mal-development” takes place and with what repercussions. The latter action is one way, particularly for academics, to begin. We might look to feminist theorists, who argue that paying more attention to women’s practices and analyzing from women’s embodied perspectives will produce more inclusive theories/explanations/understandings of so-called development—ones that analyze women’s actual situations, particularly ones created by the environmental costs of “mal-development” projects.

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