

The Seed and the Earth

Abridged from a paper by Dr. Vandana Shiva (*)

Dr. Vandana shiva⁽¹⁾ explores the sexuality of creation and procreation in a patriarchal age of technology. Her argument is written using unusual depth of social philosophy that seems hard to follow at first. But in essence, her ideas concentrate on the effects of biotechnology and technological development on the roles of men and women vis-a-vis creation of life. She explains that technological and patriarchal colonization of childbirth for women is similar to the colonization of plant regeneration. In other words, medicine and biotechnology are pretending, although implicitly, to replace woman, thus, reducing her to a passive carrier of life. Similarly in agricultural technology, the Green Revolution paradigm substituted the nutrient cycle of the soil with chemical fertilizers and controlled outputs for the market. In both cases natural cycles of reproduction and production are being invaded. Female roles are being modified and reduced to passivity by making them carriers and experimental grounds.

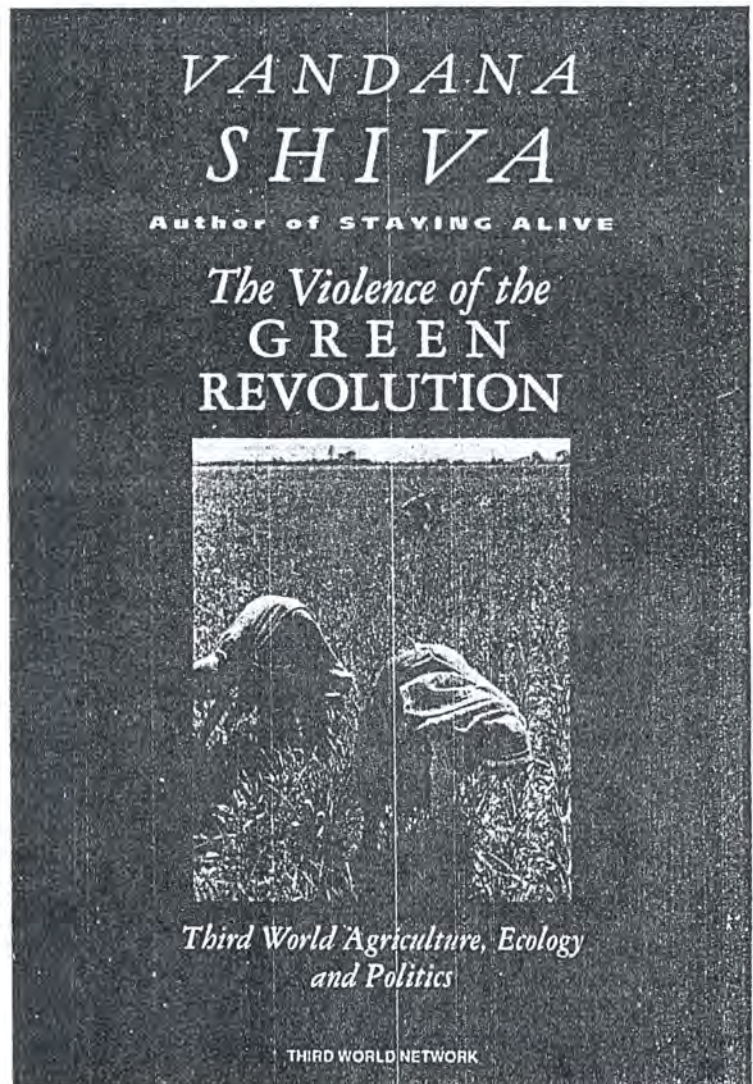
Patriarchal worldviews in all their variations, from the ancient to the modern, from east to west, share one common assumption: they are based on the removal of life from the earth, on the separation of the earth from the seed, and on the association of an inert and empty earth with the passivity of female. The seed and the earth symbolism, therefore, undergoes a metamorphosis when put into a patriarchal mould, and with it are reconstructed gender relations. This non-ecological view has formed the basis of patriarchal perceptions of gender ⁽²⁾.

Hence, Dr. Shiva's paper proves that patriarchy has constructed the

male (the possessor of the seed) as the active principle and the female (the field, earth, i.e. carrier of the seed) as passive, and has used the seed/earth symbolism for creating the division between activity and passivity. She explains that the patriarchal creation boundary allows ecological destruction to be perceived as creation, and ecological regeneration to be perceived as non-creation. Whereas, to sustain life involves, above all, to regenerate life. But in the patriarchal view, to regenerate is not to create, it is merely

o "repeat". The patriarchal paradigm is continuously disassociating women from their bodies and its active role of generating and regenerating life by reserving creativity only to "God like" men.

While the earlier stages of patriarchal division of labor and the creation boundary has created a gender dualism between production and reproduction, creation and procreation, with reproduction and procreation being exclusively female activities; the new biotechnologies,



reproduction too, is moving out of women's control. Recent work on surrogacy and new reproductive technologies substitute women's regenerative capacities with doctors as "producers" and rich infertile couples as "consumers". The consumer's rights then take precedence over those of the woman whose body is being used as a machine. According to Dr. Shiva, the rise of the western medical profession was in essence the rise of male control over women's knowledge and women's bodies.

These new reproductive technologies allow for new levels of invasion into the processes of childbirth. Furthermore, it is the old metaphor of women as the passive field that is renewed with the new technologies. Dr. Shiva illustrates her point by citing a case from Janet Gallagher's report in "Fetus as Patient". Hence in 1981, a (U.S) court order, acting at the request of hospital doctors, ordered that a cesarian be performed on a non-consenting pregnant woman. They said there was a 99 percent chance that the baby could not be born alive vaginally. The court granted temporary custody of the child to a local social service agency. The mother, despite medical predictions and court order, gave vaginal birth to a healthy baby. Hence, according to Dr. Shiva, medical doctors, in this case and many similar ones all over the world, treat their knowledge as infallible and women's knowledge as wild hysteria.

Thus, when women are having children, they are viewed less as a source of human regeneration than as the "raw material" from which the product, the baby, is extracted. What seems significant is that the cesarian section, which requires the most "management" by the doctor and the least "labour" by the uterus and the women, is seen as providing the best product, not to mention that

profit-oriented medical practices perform cesarian section even when it may not be necessary. In the case of *In-vitro-fertilization* (IVF), i.e. test tube babies, an expert committee saw doctors not only as "enablers", but as "taking part in the formation of the embryo itself".

In short, creativity is reserved for God in a male-image. Procreativity is the lot of women.

Profit and power get ultimately linked to the invasion into all biological organisms (3). The Green Revolution, like the biotechnology of reproduction, presupposes that earth (female) is inert or passive. The Green Revolution is essentially based on the "miracle seed" (the active ingredient) which needs chemical fertilizers and which do not produce plants to be returned to the soil for the natural process of recycling nutrients. Hence, the "activity" lay in the "miracle seed" which transcends nature's fertility cycle. Again Dr. Shiva illustrates her point with a quotation from Claude Alvares stating that "For the first time the human race has produced seed that cannot cope on its own, but needs to be placed within an artificial environment for growth and output (4).

In summary, Dr. Shiva insists that the corporate demand to change a common heritage into a commodity and to treat profits generated through such transformations will lead to erosions of ethics and at the cultural level as well as the political and economic levels for the third world, be it in agriculture or in human reproductive roles.

We wonder whether technological development in reproduction science should be rejected because of its side effects on women who bear the scars,

and stigmas of being used in experimental labs and societies, or should these implications be revisited? Hence, should women be robbed of their innate gift to give and nurture life all in one? Aren't women and men partners in the creation of life with men for neither of them can operate on his/her own? Women's gift of biology and maternity goes beyond fertilization and beyond childbirth into the making of society. Therefore, how far can substituting technology for maternity and motherhood go? *



(*) Abridged from "The Seed and the Earth: Women, Ecology and Biotechnology" by Dr. Vandana Shiva at the Asian Women Institute (AWI) Triennial conference, "Women and the Environment in an Age of Technology", at Kobe College, Japan, September 1991

(1) Dr. Vandana Shiva is the author of the much-acclaimed *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (ISBN 0 86232 822 5, Zed Books) as well as *Ecology and the Politics of Violence* (ISBN 0-8039-9672-1, Sage Publications), and *The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics* (ISBN 0 86232 964 7, Zed Books).

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(2)(3)(4) Ibid.