



MARIA MIES' and VANDANA SHIVA'S

Ecofeminism

Reviewed by HELEN R. GRAHAM, M.M.

In *Ecofeminism* Maria Mies, a German social scientist and activist in the feminist movement, and Vandana Shiva, an Indian theoretical physicist from the ecology movement, issue a serious and urgent call for a new vision, which they term the subsistence or survival perspectives. For Mies and Shiva the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (UNCED, June 1992) simply confirmed their conviction that "solutions to the present worldwide ecological, economic and social problems cannot be expected from the ruling elite of the North or the South... [Rather] a new vision—a new life for present and future generations, and for our fellow creatures on earth—in which praxis and theory are respected and preserved can be found only in the survival struggles of grassroots movements."

Ecofeminism is a collection of papers and articles in which the two women of different cultural and academic backgrounds, and geographical origins, creatively transcend their differences to make available "shared common concerns that emerge from an invisible global politics in which women worldwide are enmeshed in their everyday life; and a convergence of thinking arising from [their] participation in the efforts of women to keep alive the processes that sustain us."

Mies and Shiva divide the work, contributing a section or two for each of their book's seven chapters. Shiva opens the book with a trenchant critique of modern science "projected as a universal, value-free system of knowledge, which...claims to arrive at objective conclusions about life, the universe and almost everything." She argues that this paradigm is reductionist or mechanical, a "Western, male-oriented and patriarchal projection which necessarily entailed the subjugation of both nature and women." Mies follows with a series of seven methodological guidelines of feminist research which recognize that "the postulate of value-free research" needs to be replaced by what she terms, "conscious partiality" which considers both research objects and the

researchers themselves as parts of a bigger social whole."

In the book's second part, Mies discusses the pernicious effect on nature, women, and other people of "the myth of catching-up development," a path which is and will remain an illusion for women. This is so because the great values of the French revolution (i.e. the promises of freedom, equality, and the self-determination of the individual), "are betrayed for many women because all these rights depend on the possession of property, and of women." Such rights cannot be extended to all women in the world, since the self-interest of the individual is always in competition with the self-interest of others. When applied to the ecological problem, the principle of self-interest leads to intensified ecological degradation and destruction.

Shiva asks where the development paradigm went wrong since, instead of well-being and affluence for all, "it has brought environmental degradation and poverty" especially to women and children. In answer to her question, Shiva contributes significantly to the understanding of the term 'poverty.' The conventional development paradigm, misunderstands poverty as the "absence of Western consumption patterns" which leads to the pursuit of the development process as a 'poverty-removal' project. As Shiva points out, however, "Development," as a culturally biased process destroys wholesome and sustainable lifestyles and instead creates real material poverty, or misery, by denying the means of survival through the diversion of resources to resource-intensive commodity production."

By the end of the UN Decade for Women (1976-1985) it was evident that development itself was the problem as the increasing underdevelopment of women was seen to be the result of "their enforced but asymmetric participation whereby they bore the costs but were excluded from the benefits" of 'development.' This time, however, "it was not the old colonial powers but the new national elite that

masterminded the exploitation on grounds of 'national interest' and growing GNPs." It is women and children, Shiva sharply observes, who are most significantly affected by the "poverty trap, created through the vicious cycle of 'development,' debt, environmental destruction and structural adjustment.

Mies adds to this critique of the conventional development model with a reference to the Chernobyl disaster and the urgent lessons to be drawn from it. The fact that the effects of such industrial catastrophes do not respect political borders, demonstrates that the notion of 'unlimited progress' is a dangerous myth. Humans must realize that they cannot continue to "rape and destroy nature" without themselves suffering the consequences.

In "The Search for Roots," the third part of *Ecofeminism*, Shiva describes the new religion of development as an uprooting of people from their roots in the soil which is their "sacred mother," by the new highpriests-the managers of 'development'-often with the cooperation of a police state which uses terror tactics to wrench people "from their homes and homelands, and consign them as ecological and cultural refugees in the wasteland of industrial society." In what she terms "the process of masculinization of the motherland," Shiva charges the state with having changed its role from that of protector of its people and resources, to that of virtual provider and protector of TNCs. Rather than serve as the TNCs' regulator, the state now acts as their protector.

Shiva then points out the many ways in which gender and diversity are linked. Diversity, which is the principle of women's work and knowledge is also a matrix out of which emerge 'productivity' and 'skills' which respect, and do not destroy, diversity. This productivity and these skills are not given positive values, however, by those for whom value is conferred only through economic exploitation for commercial gain. This criterion of commercial value reduces diversity to a problem, a deficiency. Therefore, Shiva asserts, the "destruction of diversity and the creation of monocultures becomes an imperative for capitalist patriarchy." Shiva's insights into the relationship of sacredness and conservation are worth quoting at length:

"In the indigenous setting, sacredness is a large part of conservation. Sacredness encompasses the intrinsic value of diversity; sacredness denotes a relationship of the part to the whole-a relationship that recognizes and preserves integrity. Profane seed violates the integrity of ecological cycles and linkages and fragments agricultural ecosystems and the relationships responsible for sustainable production."

In the context of biotechnology, Mies takes up the issue of, what she terms, the "sexist and racist implications" of the new reproductive technologies.

She points out that the development of this technology took place "in the ideological climate which makes a sharp distinction between man and nature, culture and nature," and which assigns women and non-white peoples to the side of nature, which must then be conquered by White Man. This technology, therefore, "cannot claim to be neutral; nor is it free from the sexist, racist and ultimately fascist biases in our societies." Both Mies and Shiva address the controversial issues of population and reproduction in "Subsistence: Freedom versus Liberalization," the sixth chapter of *Ecofeminism*. In a jointly authored article, they offer a new concept of ecology of reproduction, one that challenges those feminists "who put emphases only on women's individual reproductive rights, without demanding changes in the overall political and economic structures of the present world (dis)order." "Population growth," they emphasize, is not a cause of the environmental crisis but only one aspect of it, and "both are related to resource alienation and destruction of livelihoods, first by colonialism and then continued by Northern-imposed models of maldevelopment."

Towards the latter part of their book, Shiva and Mies take up the question freedom for trade or freedom for survival, and the issue of the pernicious effect of the General Agreement on Tariff and Trade (GATT) on agriculture and Third World women. Shiva maintains that 'free trade' in agriculture as interpreted by GATT gives transnational corporations (TNCs) freedom to invest, produce and trade without restriction, amount to "the denial of freedom to rural women to produce, process and consume food according to the local environmental, economic and cultural needs."

Finally, Mies concludes with a call to adopt an alternative to "the prevailing model of capitalist-patriarchal development. She offers the subsistence or survival perspective which can show people "the way out of the many impasses of [the] destructive system called industrial society, market economy or capitalist patriarchy." The main characteristics of the proposed subsistence perspective are summarized in nine assertions/paragraphs which are based on the firm conviction "that we live in a limited world, [and that sustainability is not compatible with the existing profit- and growth-oriented development paradigm."

Mies and Shiva are to be commended for a timely, well-researched, passionately argued and deeply challenging call for a profound metanoia.

Helen Graham is an American Maryknoll nun based in the Philippines, where she is active in the peace movement and the circle of feminist theologians. She wrote her review of Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva's book after turning in her PhD dissertation, and just before taking off for a long deserved break.