



The many futures of gender
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Ecofeminism is about opening your eyes in a time when they have been shut

A conversation with Vandana Shiva

Patricia Purtschert and Anukriti Dixit

About the many futures of gender

The aim of the project is to tell and reflect the different histories of feminist theory. To this end, conversations are held with protagonists who had and have a formative influence on feminist theories. In engaging with these scholars, we wish to delve deeper not only into the ideas and concepts that form the key basis of these theories but also to explore the historical contexts, collective thinking, political practices, and historical controversies that enabled them at the time. The conversations bring forth exigent questions around power, inequality, and violence, intersectionality, the relation of sex, gender, and sexuality, or the critique of binary thinking. We discuss the contributions of feminism to analyzing and challenging significant differences other than gender, such as race, class, nationality, religion, and caste. The project is rooted in oral history and philosophical exchange. It has value for those of us interested in the history of feminist theory and in feminism as a resourceful way of challenging dominant knowledges and creating different ones.

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Ecofeminism is about opening your eyes in a time when they have been shut: A conversation with Vandana Shiva

Patricia Purtschert and Anukriti Dixit

I had been teaching a class on ecofeminism and was, once again, struck by Vandana Shiva's groundbreaking contributions to this field and the persistent actuality of her insights. When I shared this with Anukriti, she told me about a similar experience. She had attended a talk by Vandana Shiva at Ahmedabad some years ago and had been deeply impressed by the lucidity of her analysis. We instantly agreed on wanting to include a conversation with her to this growing archive of feminist theory. Anukriti approached Vandana Shiva through the Navdanya movement, and much to our delight, we received a positive answer. A few weeks later, the three of us met online.

Patricia Purtschert (PP): Thanks so much for taking the time to talk to us. I would like to start with a question that takes us back to the early days of your life: Can you remember when you had your first encounter with feminism?

Vandana Shiva: You know, I was very blessed to have grown up with parents who were both feminists, and therefore we never knew inequality. My sister and I were merrily using the masculine gender to refer to ourselves. We were never made to feel a difference. I think the first time I really felt discrimination was when I went to university, where one was surrounded by sexism and patriarchy.

Then, of course, I learned of discrimination through life—since every structure we live in is a patriarchal structure, from the economy to our personal lives. Because I went through all the patriarchal violence that the structures create, I absolutely refused to allow my child to be subjugated to the Anglo-Saxon law that said it does not matter whether a husband is absent, alcoholic, or insane, but he will be the natural guardian and control mother and child. I personally fought that law and we managed to strike it down. Because anyone who cares for a child can be a guardian: a grandmother, aunt, uncle, mother. So life brought me face to face with patriarchy of a very severe kind and feminism of multiple kinds.

Furthermore, I got involved early with the Chipko movement, a movement of women protecting trees. I had grown up in the forest so I felt the loss of trees, and I became a volunteer to this movement. My articulation, therefore, of feminism was not just about an individual. It was about us as part of the earth—and that is why my feminism is ecofeminism.

PP: Your recollection of your childhood shows that you grew up in a world where gender norms were not very strong or repressive. It seems like your parents managed to live a kind a feminist life . . .

Very much so—my mother was the ultimate feminist and my father was the ultimate feminist, and they never themselves lived gender-divided roles. My dad would pull out his sewing machine and stitch clothes for us. When people laughed at him, he would say, “Well, I have been trained in the military”—because he was part of the British army. He would say, “In the military, they teach us how to mend our clothes and stitch our clothes and if I know how to do it, I will do it.” He used to call people from the streets if they had torn clothes—“Your pants need repair, come, I will repair them for you.”

Our parents very consciously fought against caste, and they fought against patriarchy. They fought against inequalities of every kind and created a home where we did not realize there was all this casteism and economic inequality in society, because they shared everything. It was an open house—anyone would come in and eat—so we grew up with a sense of oneness. Our parents were very unusual. They were children of our freedom movement, the independence movement against colonial Britain, and our freedom movement was against caste. It was also led by women, it was against patriarchy, and it was definitely against the fights between religions. Our freedom movement was an integrated movement of freedom for all.

PP: How much of your encounter with feminism was always already intertwined with the decolonial and ecological movement? From what you have just told us, it seems like from your childhood on, decolonial and ecological questions were never separated from the feminist question.

Yes, absolutely. My involvement with Chipko in the 1970s and every environmental movement I have been part of, like the women fighting for justice against the big multinationals, who killed hundreds of thousands of people in the city of Bhopal, and who are still fighting for justice to this day, brought these perspectives together. When they started industrial agriculture along the coast, it was the women who rose, and I helped them. When Coca-Cola started to mine 1.5 million litres a day of groundwater, it was the women of Kerala who rose in 2002, led by a wonderful 65-year-old woman called Mayilamma. It was historic because it led to the closure of a Coca-Cola plant. These criminal corporations are so powerful, they think they will get away with anything. However, I have worked with women who are in defense of nature, the water, the seed. The day before yesterday was World Food Day, and we honored the women who have been the most important seed-keepers in the areas where crops are disappearing. They are, for instance, those who protect the seeds and crops for the ancient millets—the nutritionally dense food. We had a beautiful festival about who really feeds the world, it is women, and what really is food, it is biodiversity. My feminism is deeply intertwined with the rights of nature, and the rights of a living earth. For me, the earth is not dead—she has agency, she is Mother Earth, and the rights of women and their collective are important. My feminism is not an atomistic, fragmented, divided feminism—it is the feminism of life. This is indicated in the title of my first book, *Staying alive*.¹

1 Vandana Shiva, *Staying alive: Women, ecology, and survival in India* (1988).

PP: In 1982, you created your own Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Ecology in Dehradun. What made you change from doing research in physics and philosophy at existing institutions to create your own research institution?

I chose to study physics after I read a book by Albert Einstein and I felt: That is the kind of person I want to help me study nature. I went to schools that did not teach physics, but I followed my path and learned, and I would find college professors who supported me. I got a science talent scholarship to see my studies through, and then I went on to Canada to do a PhD. My parents were so committed to freedom, at no point did they say, “You are not going to a foreign country alone.” Nothing like that. Rather: “You want to go? Go.” They were always supportive for any choice by me.

When I went to do physics at Punjab University, we were only two women in the whole class. That is when I started to realize, “Oh, my gosh, science is supposed to be gendered and women are not supposed to study science!” I could live through all of that and I realized through my physics education that, particularly in India, the disciplines are very hierarchical. When I was growing up, physics was a very male subject.

However, I also had a very deep puzzle because the common narrative said: “The more science in a society, the less poverty—science and technology remove poverty.” Yet I was always witnessing poverty grow. As new technologies arrived, new trawlers took over fishing and the Green Revolution took over agriculture. I decided to come back to study the roots of poverty and their relation to technological instruments. I cowrote a paper at the time about technological polarization in which I argued that technology is used to appropriate nature and appropriate resources from the already economically weaker sections of the population.² I then joined the public management institute called Indian Institute of Management [IIM] in Bangalore—after spending one year in the Indian Institute of Science, where I was studying physics.

What made me realize I had to create my own institution in 1982 were actually two things that happened at the same time. One—the ministry of environment had commissioned me on a study to look at mining in my home valley, Dehradun. Second, around the same time a study on eucalyptus in the Indian Institute of Management had found that the reason eucalyptus was spreading on farms was because the World Bank was forcing it to. The World Bank was putting huge pressure on our institute at the time because of this critical work on eucalyptus monocultures. The director of IIM Bangalore called me and said, “They are putting pressure on us, they want to withdraw all our funding.” I said, “Dr. Ramaswamy, you know I am absolutely ready to launch on an independent path, so please, you do not have to apologize to the World Bank. Continue to do the work you want to do with them. Get the salaries for the faculty that they give you.” That is when I left and created the Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Ecology, for the sake of freedom.

PP: Were you doing this yourself or within a collective? And where did you get the strength and means to do that? Leaving a place that gives you a monthly salary and founding your own institution is a huge step.

² Vandana Shiva and Jayanta Bandyopadhyay, *Political economy of technological polarisations* (1982).

It was a big step. But around the same time when this study on eucalyptus monocultures was being done, my mother had said, “Any time you want to leave the institution, the cowshed is there if you ever want to break free.” My mother used to have cows. I left Bangalore and came back to Dehradun to open the office of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Ecology in my mother’s cowshed.

Later, the World Bank was writing all these articles in the *Time* magazine and *Newsweek* about my studies on the World Bank’s forestry plans. They wrote a whole piece on how I am a millionairess who has a “foundation,” because we called it the Research Foundation. But it is not a money foundation, it is just the basis of knowledge in participation with the earth and communities. I had also learned that we have such a horrible understanding of knowledge—where people believe that if you go to university, you have knowledge, and if you do not go to university, you have no knowledge. I felt the people who go out in the fields and out in the forest know much more than anyone with a university degree.

PP: I would love to talk about your book Staying alive for a moment, a book that inspired feminists around the world. What made you decide to write that book?

I first resisted writing that book. I had just left institutionalized life, created an institute in my mother’s cowshed, and was totally in the mood of service to society. As far as writing and publishing was concerned—I had given that up. Then I was invited to give a talk at the UN Women’s Conference in Nairobi in 1985, just after I had been involved in a decade of working with the Chipko movement. I talked about how the rights of women and the rights of nature are intertwined. I said that this is not about genetical difference—it is about our work and the division of labour, which has left the vital things of life to women, who then provide those needs from the farm, from nature, and from the forest. Women walk for water, they forage fodder and fuel from the forest. That is the world I was in when I gave this talk.

Ritu Menon of the publishing house Kali for Women, which is now Women Unlimited, walked up to me and said, “You have got to write about this! Write a book.” I said, “I have just chucked a job, I am not going to write any more, I am not going to be in the rat race for publishing it.” She smiled and said, “Vandana, writing can be a very subversive activity.” That is what persuaded me—if writing was for movement building, I would write. If writing was a “promotion activity,” I was not going to write.

PP: And before this, was writing not subversive for you? Were you able to develop a different approach to writing at that very moment?

I was allergic to writing in school, you know? I was so fond of math but when they asked me to write a little essay in English I would write an equation in math. Mother Superior would call me and say, “You are going to fail in life—you need to know English!” I said, “I know English but if I can say something in one equation, why should I write four pages of English?” So I really thought words in the English language were heavily overburdened and that I could get through life with math and equations! Of course, in academics, you have to write your PhD, but my PhD was in the foundations of quantum theory. I think my trigger for writing has

always been when I see something being out of place—like eucalyptus in the Deccan. For me, doing research is always trying to solve the puzzle. Why are there chemicals in India? Why are people dying in Bhopal? I did not start out wanting to write. I started out rejecting writing as a wasteful activity.

PP: And Ritu Menon still convinced you at the UN conference to write a book.

Yes, she convinced me because she said it can be very subversive and help the women's movement.

*PP: Which was true, this book did make a difference. In the introduction of *Staying alive* you discuss how the Scientific Revolution in Europe transformed nature from Terra Mater into a source of raw material. In this analysis, you combine feminist, anticolonial, and ecological perspectives. How did you develop this approach that allows one to think of the “interwovenness” of patriarchy, colonialism, and the exploitation of nature with the decisive role that science plays in this process?*

The science I studied was quantum theory. But then I was working with the women of Chipko. When they were protesting, the foresters were saying, “You stupid women, you cannot see that you are blocking growth, you are blocking the revenues.” I have grown up in the forest myself—my beloved dad was a forest conservator. He loved the forest and he introduced us to its diversity. However, the scientific discipline of forestry says that the forest is a timber mine and to maximize the output of the mine, you have to destroy the biodiversity and create monocultures of the commercial species. So I started to read at that time everything that was taught in forestry and in the discipline of agriculture. They taught that agriculture means using chemicals and synthetic fertilizer. In essence, *Staying alive* looks at the patriarchal ideology in the mechanistic reductionist science that creates a commercial forestry and produces destruction of forests, biodiversity, and the livelihoods of those who depend on forests. Further, the book asks how that mechanistic reductionism is used to instrumentalize violence. So it all synthesized into place.

My training has not been through academia. Life has been my university—life has no walls, no boundaries, no silos, and no disciplines. You know, my discipline is life.

PP: And who else is part of this discipline? In other words, who were your interlocutors when you wrote this book? Were they mainly the activists at Chipko, your parents, or other feminist researchers?

My mother was one of the interlocutors. She was a brilliant woman. When I was writing *Staying alive*, I was on the one hand deeply involved in the Chipko movement and in my participatory research. But by then I was also traveling the world, so Maria Mies became my coauthor. Zed Books said that *Staying alive* and Maria's book *Patriarchy and accumulation*

on a world scale³ were two big bestsellers. Then they asked us to write together. And so we wrote *Ecofeminism*.⁴

PP: In your work, you cite the works of Evelyn Fox Keller, Sandra Harding, Maria Mies, and Carolyn Merchant. What kind of exchange did you have with each other?

I came to know of their books because I met them personally in conferences. I would be invited to give a talk in Berkeley and met Carolyn Merchant or Susan Griffin. I met Carolyn Merchant, who had written *The death of nature*,⁵ Susan Griffin, who wrote *Woman and nature*,⁶ Evelyn Fox Keller—I met her at science and technology conferences. They became the circle. I would not have come across these books while sitting in India. However, we never organized ourselves during that time. Only later, in the 90s, in 1997, we did organize ourselves in what we called “diverse women for diversity.” It was in the context of the UN treaties and convention on biological diversity and climate change and the World Trade Organization.

PP: In Staying alive you write that “third world women, whose minds have not yet been dispossessed or colonized are in a privileged position to make visible the invisible oppositional categories that they are the custodians of—it is not only as victims but also as leaders in creating new intellectual ecological, paradigms—that women are central to arresting and overcoming ecological crisis” (p. 45). In this passage, you turn a common Western and patriarchal view of women in the Global South upside down, claiming that it is “third world women” who have the knowledges that can help us to see how to get out of the manifold crises we are in. How do you see the role of these women today, 30 years later?

Well, you know, I have learned. I came with all these assumptions, “What do rural women know?” Then I learned everything from them. I always say I went to Western Ontario for quantum theory, but my teachers in ecology and biodiversity are the women of Chipko, who have never been to school. In these fields, my connections have continued and are stronger than ever. This is despite the fact that between the 1970s, when Chipko started, and the 1990s, when globalization started, the erosion of knowledge, an erosion of local economies and of the planet’s life-supporting systems, are so much more severe. The relevance of the knowledge of women who have not been colonized, and who continue to grow life rather than destroying it, is even more important today than it was when I wrote *Staying alive*.

PP: May I ask you a question that I face in my own work and that bothers me a lot as a feminist researcher—how do you deal with the power issues that cut across such networks? How to learn from people who are put in precarious places by the very structures that enable, among many other things, academic work?

3 Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and accumulation on a world scale: Women in the international division of labour* (1988).

4 Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (1993).

5 Carolyn Merchant, *The death of nature: Women, ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1980).

6 Susan Griffin, *Woman and nature: The roaring inside her* (1978).

You know, I was born in a home where everything was taken care of. I have been fortunate that even though I left a job, my life has been taken care of. However, for me that then becomes an added reason and an added responsibility for service. What I see as important in my role is learning, to have humility and say, “Having a PhD is not enough—there are things you do not know.” You do not know that specific herb and what it can do for healing. You do not know how this particular plant helps in soil and water conservation.

PP: In Staying alive, you give an account of the Chipko movement as a feminist movement and you remind us of all the women who played a crucial role in environmental activities focused on saving trees and the forest. You remind us, for example, of Amrita Devi, who led the movement in Rajasthan 300 years ago. Would you say that one of our tasks as feminist researchers is to narrate these stories again and narrate them differently?

Around the time when I wrote the book, some people were trying to create an engineered, totally artificial war between two key male supporters of the Chipko movement. They were not the real leaders, because they were not active on the ground, but they were the spokespeople who could come to Delhi and talk to politicians. The media in Delhi was basically forgetting the women and asking, “Who is the real leader between these two men?” It was then that I realized that the story of Chipko had to be told in terms of the women.

I was again fortunate because of my background. Gandhi’s disciples, Sarala Ben and Meera Ben, used to come and stay in our home when we were little children. That is why their literature was all over in our home. When I started to do more research, I realized that they had such an important role in creating the activists and the movement consciousness that then led to the Chipko movement. I connected all of that, my personal story, my personal connections, the story of Chipko, and my personal involvement. But primarily I realized that real movements take place when hundreds and thousands of ordinary people realize that something is wrong and decide they are going to do the right thing. Women were the ones, women were the force then. In ecology movements, look around you on the ground and forget the big names in journals and newspapers, the big names and big billion-dollar NGOs. On the ground, if you ask who is taking care and who is leading the movement, it is women.

PP: The book you wrote with Maria Mies, Ecofeminism, is read and discussed to this day by feminists around the world. Did you know her before you started to work on this book together?

I knew Maria before, because she is of course an exceptional thinker and intellectual. In 1982, I remember visiting her because I had gone to teach at Lund University for a summer school, and on the way back we stopped in Cologne, where Maria used to live. As mentioned, the publisher of our books, Zed Books, persuaded both of us to write a book together. They told us that both our books have been bestsellers over the last decade and that it would be wonderful if we could join hands to write a book on ecofeminism, because we are both ecofeminists. Both of us agreed. I was very happy to work with Maria, because I love that she is such a clear thinker. A lot of academics suffer from an inferiority complex and have to burden what they are saying with unnecessary words and jargon, such that only a small clique can understand

them. Maria never went into that. Maria and I write not for some master sitting above our heads, we write to address the issues of our times and to speak the truth about the issues from our perspective, the feminist perspective.

When we were asked to do the book together, initially we thought we would take time to write together. In those days, I had been invited to set up the women's studies unit of the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in Kathmandu. I organized a conference and invited her to give the keynote. We thought she would extend her stay and we would take a few months to write the book. But both of us were busy so we decided to do something very unusual. We said, "Why don't we just write what we are writing and then share notes every few months?"

From then on, every three months we would exchange chapters. She would be writing about the new anti-immigrant feelings growing in Germany because of globalization, and I would be writing about the new religious polarizations growing in India. Even though the context in its specificity was different, the patterns were just unfolding in our independent writings. And because we wrote according to how things were happening, the book got written in a way as a documentary of our times. The chapters then emerged in terms of the fact that we were resonating with what was going on and we were both resonating with each other. Then we sat together at some point and collected the chapters from the writings we were doing. So this is, in fact, how life really is, autonomy and self-organization with interconnectedness: Each of us was doing our bit, and yet the total interconnectedness was there because it was not being forced on us. It was evolving in an evolving reality.

PP: That is a beautiful way of collaborating. By the way, at the time, you had to send physical letters back and forth, right?

Yes, it was not "click a button" time.

PP: So you got letters from Maria every few months and replied to her?

I would usually travel to Europe once in three months and then we would sit together.

PP: How did you decide on ecofeminism as a topic and a term that you would use?

That was actually what the publisher wanted us to write on. He said Maria has come from the perspective of patriarchy in the world of capital accumulation and I have come from the world of ecology, asking how extractivism, which is capitalism, affects nature and women. Hence, ecofeminism was their choice. Neither of us used the term in our books. However, we were both embedded in what eventually has been identified as the terrains of an ecofeminist philosophy. Maria came up with the word "subsistence" with her colleagues Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and Claudia von Werlhof.⁷ I used to always use the words "sustenance economy," and I think because of the fact that they were in Europe, they talked about "using the least," the economics

⁷ Maria Mies, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, and Claudia von Werlhof, *Women: The last colony* (1988).

of “enoughness.” For them, “subsistence” worked fine. For me it would not have worked because we were always being told we need to move from subsistence to growth. Subsistence was already being put down so badly in the Third World. Therefore I used to use “sustenance economies”: economies that sustain the earth, the ecosystems, and people’s livelihoods. The terms mean the same but the cultural context makes certain words possible, allowable, and others not.

PP: You have just described the need to use different terms in the Global South and the Global North. This reminds me of another crucial aspect of your book, namely the way you address and explain your collaboration on the first pages of the book. How is it possible that two women so differently positioned can work together? you ask yourselves. Despite your differences, you enter a dialogue that is based on feminist thinking, common concerns, and a politics of solidarity that does not deny the differences between you either. Would this approach still work today? Could you still write such a book with Maria Mies?

I am sure we could have done another book together. But unfortunately, Maria is not well enough. What is the difference, you ask, between the world in which we wrote *Ecofeminism* and today’s world? I think, on the one hand, people are more fragmented in their thinking. The constructions and illusions have become more dominant. We are much more mediated through the constructions than through the reality of living and our real relationships. On the other hand, the difference between Maria being in Germany and me being in India was that we had poverty, and Germany did not. But now Germany has poverty. The cost-of-living crisis is just a heavy way to say that people are being deprived of their basic needs and livelihoods. Even though the constructions are dividing people more, the reality is creating an objective condition of a new solidarity among the 99 percent with all their diversities. A new feminism of this moment would be very fertile.

I will give you a simple example for this development: In 1995, we had the Women’s Summit in Beijing. By then, the Third World had been locked into debt, we were all being pushed into structural adjustment. I remember that we from the South, whether it was the Indian delegation or the African delegation or the Latin American one, we were talking of the World Bank, IMF [International Monetary Fund] dictatorship, and structural adjustment. That was our feminist issue: the structural issues of power. And nobody in the Global North could even understand what that meant. Because their comfort was so much, there was an insulation from the Global South. But I think that this insulation is breaking down because the corporate elites and the super-rich have become much more callous. They do not even think they need to have a decent living for their own people in the lands from which they come. They think, just like people can be brutalized in the Third World, people can now be brutalized in Europe and North America. That creates a new possibility that we imagine across borders, another world that we can participate in and shape.

PP: What you are saying is that the experiences of the majority are getting more similar in the Global South and North. I am thinking about the way in which, for example, neoliberal systems undermine healthcare in the Global North. You suggest that such neoliberal transformations can be the basis for a new kind of feminist movement. Do you see this movement emerging?

I do not think any movement just happened. I think every movement was very carefully nurtured. Not engineered—that is a very patriarchal idea that you can engineer society—but you can create the context. Creating the context is based on feeling the pain, listening to people, and becoming a common voice, not through domination, but through solidarity.

PP: Let me ask a last question regarding your book on ecofeminism: Can you tell us something about its effects—how was it taken up? What kind of a life did the book itself have, what happened to it once it was released?

One of the things that happened at the time was that feminism was becoming very fragmented. *Ecofeminism* in a way created a new unity, a new solidarity. But I also remember that both for *Staying alive* as well as for *Ecofeminism*, all kinds of fictitious PhD theses were written, claiming that Maria Mies and I sit under the trees and we pray to the trees and that we are totally blind and indifferent to reality and the world around us. Here, I am laughing and saying: Ecofeminism is about a reality that is being denied and we are made blind to, the reality of the creativity of the earth, the biodiversity, the creativity of women, their work, their knowledge. That is what my work is about, it is about not to continue the erasure. Ecofeminism is about opening your eyes in a time when they have been shut.

PP: Here you are talking about the people who called you essentialist.

Yes, exactly. Essentialist, romantic, etc.

PP: Feminist critiques also questioned your approach to technology, saying that you were technophobic and not able to integrate technology affirmatively into your analysis. Have you changed your perspective in this regard?

Well, what were the technologies I was talking about then: chemicals and the Green Revolution? They are very mild compared to the violence of the tools of domination used today, the surveillance technologies. When I wrote *Staying alive* and Maria and I wrote *Ecofeminism*, genetic engineering was not a big force. It is today. So in fact, I would write even more on the role of technology not as a tool, which it should be, but as a new civilizing mission. I have written about it in one of my recent books, *Oneness vs. the 1%*,⁸ that I have made with my son—I think he is even more ecofeminist than I am! In this book, we have a chapter on digital technologies breaking the relationship with reality. When you ask, “How many bags of wheat can you buy with this much money?,” money is still real. It still relates back to materiality. But the whole digital world does not do this any longer. We have written about that. We have written about Mr. Microsoft wanting to make agriculture digital. The violent use of tools as instruments of patriarchal power is becoming all-pervasive. In fact, if religion was used for colonizing people in the first colonization, the current religion is technology without assessment, without bounds, and without accountability.

⁸ Vandana Shiva and Kartikey Shiva, *Oneness vs. the 1%: Shattering illusions, seeding freedom* (2018).

PP: So while your critics say that you are by default against the use of technology, you are saying that you are against technology as a tool for violently establishing and maintaining asymmetrical power relations.

Yes, and this without accountability. What is my foundation called: “The Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Ecology”—it is about science and technology! However, with every technology one needs to assess: Does it help nature? Does it help community? We had a whole discipline called technology assessment, which has disappeared. A tool without assessment means that you will have more and more technology-induced destruction. If you do not look at the tool in terms of the resources it uses, in terms of the impact it has on society and the impact it has on nature, you will constantly lie about its effects. The Green Revolution lie took up so much of my time to clarify. It did not produce more food and you could not grow bread from air—you needed a lot more light and a lot more water. It is the same with GMOs [genetically modified organisms]. You have to constantly re-embed technology in its ecological and its social context. However, when democracy is separated from technology, then you get technological dictatorship.

PP: I would like to ask you a question about gender and your use of this concept. In Staying alive you write that women’s ecology movements arise from a “non-gender based ideology of liberation” (p. xvi). Later on, you describe gender as a deeply polarized idea that is based on the subjugation of women by men and infused by Western models of science. Is gender a category that cannot be disentangled from Western ideas; is it always already intertwined with them?

All societies and all cultures have constructed what women are, what men are, and that construction is what gender is. It is not your being. I, as a human being, I am not gendered. So if it is a patriarchal society, then the constructions are gendered through patriarchy. If it is a society with equality, such as in Indigenous cultures—their gendering is totally different. They do not have the kind of exclusions and divisions of labour. For one, they do not have the institution of marriage as the creation of a nuclear family. Tribes in Malaysia, tribes throughout the center of India—they have these places where people live together and choose their partner. If the partner lasts for a long time, they continue, otherwise they change their partner. The kind of heaviness of the patriarchal gender construction is definitely something very different. I did not grow up using the word “gender,” it was not in the vocabulary. I am blessed that I have grown up in a culture where even today, the feminine principle is not erased.

Behind me you can see this amazing image of the goddess of food—Annapurna—important for seed, for water, for agriculture. If you get rid of the patriarchal layer of religion, then it is all about the feminine principle. The Shakti philosophy is the idea that the universal creative force is a feminine force. The feminine principle is not about gendering the feminine body. The feminine principle is the creative force that maintains, sustains, and renews creation. Patriarchal religion has just appropriated a lot of that power.

I never used to wear the Bindi because we always used to hear that it is about a sign of marriage. Then I was visiting the Aurobindo ashram in Pondicherry, and I pulled out a book in the library on the Sri Chakra. In Indian philosophy, you can represent everything in multiple

ways. There is no one way you can talk about it. The mantras are very important and they are ways you communicate, then the Yantras, which are the geometric designs, then the Mandalas, and then you have the icons. In the book I found in the ashram, I read that Sri Chakra is the feminine force in geometric form. It is just plain simple geometry, it is lines and triangles and circles. Every line is a moving dot, a circle is a moving dot, and therefore, all of the world can be represented by the moving dot. That is what the power of this little dot is. The very minute I could see it as disassociated from patriarchy and associated with the universal cosmic principle, I said: "Now I will wear my Bindi!"

PP: On the conceptual level, the way "gender" is used as a term in feminist debates, do you see it as a term that inherently describes hierarchical relations, which is how it is often framed in the Western context?

Not necessarily. Feminism restructures the gender relations, so its meaning is not fixed. It is just that the vocabulary came to us from the West. There is no being that is a being in itself. That is where the mechanistic idea collapses. There is nothing like essentialism in the world. We are inter-beings. We are constantly changing. I think 90 percent of us renew ourselves every few weeks, there is nothing like a fixed unchanging entity in the living world. Everything is changing all the time and we are not isolated. Given that we are that complex, the weakness of the gender debate is that it only looks at one relationship, between men and women, and largely within the house. Instead, it should be looking at patriarchal structures from the global economy. We need to look at the multifaceted relationships. So if I was to stretch my thinking a little, ecofeminism is really about restructuring gender relationships in the context of us being "earth beings" and human beings first, and then all the other diversity and differences come in.

*PP: What you have just said about the multifacetedness of gender reminds me that in *Staying alive* you write about transgender: "There is, however, a third concept and process of liberation that is trans-gender" (p. 50). You add that "transgender" is a term that allows us to see that the female principle is not only embodied in women. I was wondering how you relate what is happening these days in trans movements and trans theory to what you wrote on transgender at the time, and especially about its role in the process of liberation?*

I still see this relation, as long as it is about the larger relationships. However, there is an element of the new thinking about gender, which is really an extension of the big medical military complex. "We can fix you!": That kind of thinking is not about you evolving your consciousness to a higher level that is not limited by society's depictions of who you are through the gendered lens of domination. So I think they are both trends right now.

I also think that societies were reduced to nuclear families, which were reduced to men-women relations and they were reduced purely to their sexual being, even though we are beings at every level. My sister is a medical doctor who gives a lot of talks and she says, "How come you get stuck with the reproductive organs and never think of the alimentary canal? That too is part of the reproduction of you as a biological being." So there is a shrinkage of consideration

of what makes a being a being. And the minute it shrinks and becomes reduced—that is when we start to think we are getting liberated but we are getting locked into new dominations.

Anukriti Dixit (AD): In the book Stolen harvest⁹ you mention so many ways in which citizens have come up with means to establish solidarity against big corporations and their extractivism. I want to ask you in the context of this book—where do you envision the role of scientists in this process?

Well, you know, because our world is very plural and science is a social product—you have different scientists. You have totally sold-out scientists that are linked to corporate funding and corporate agendas, but you also have independent scientists who work on the subject like Barbara McClintock—an amazing biologist who talked about the love for the organism. She said: “I can study more deeply, because I have love for the organism.” That is the thinking that creates a different knowledge, the kind of knowledge that Rachel Carson could generate—about the harm being done to the living world.

When I think about simple things like logging and forestry, it was easy for me to do research. But when I saw that agriculture is going so wrong, I had to realize that I was not a hydrologist. That is why I went to the top scientists who worked on irrigation systems in Punjab, or to the top scientists who worked on issues of increasing pests. I turned to a lot of these scientists, particularly when, in 1998, the corporations started to deploy strategies to sell GMOs. They put these full-page ads in all European papers about how the world would starve without GMOs. I turned to some of my very dear friends who were biologists, and they did not know this was happening because they were not working on commercial systems. They did not know there is genetic engineering in the world; they were looking at how organisms work. So I said: “Now, here is what they are doing to the world. I want you to start framing the potential impacts as scientists.” And I remember pulling together a meeting called “Beyond reductionist biology” where we built a new collaboration between scientists independent of money and profits, and activists who were questioning GMOs but did not have the science. We put them together. That is what stalled that whole juggernaut of GMOs unfolding in all of Europe. Since you are in Switzerland, I can tell you that I worked very closely with a dear friend, Florianne Koechlin. Yes, and then in 2005 a popular vote took place and the GMOs have been stopped in Switzerland, where Syngenta is located.

Just like women are not one little box, scientists are not one little box. It so happens that the dominant names and faces you see are actually not even scientific in their practice, they do not really investigate, they are not looking. They are the marketing end, through science, of the corporate enterprise. In a way, all agrichemicals are ecological narcotics, and chemical industrial agriculture is drug-pushing.

AD: Let me ask you another question about Reclaiming the commons.¹⁰ In this book, you lay stress on a set of laws that could potentially establish self-governance of common-pool resources

⁹ Vandana Shiva, *Stolen harvest: The hijacking of the global food supply* (2000).

¹⁰ Vandana Shiva, *Reclaiming the commons: Biodiversity, traditional knowledge and the rights of Mother Earth* (2020).

by their own communities, and you write that the state should allow for this kind of governance and have specific laws for it. The sense that I got between Stolen harvest and Reclaiming the commons was that you deliberate on what governance would look like when common-pool resources are managed by their own communities. So what would you say is your current thinking on this subject, given the rise of right-wing populism, on how to rope in governments with this specific form of resource management by citizen communities?

In the 1970s, when the Chipko movement happened, we could create new laws. When the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit happened in 1992 we could implement environmental laws, when globalization and the WTO [World Trade Organization] used to bully us to enclose our commons, I could work with our government. Our parliamentarians understood—that is the big difference. You could talk to them about patenting of seed and genetic engineering. I remember an agriculture minister dropped into my office one day and said, “I have just read what you have written. You have talked about the seed and if the seed is patented, the farmer cannot save it, but would they apply this to animals too?” I said, “Yes! They are applying it to animals too.” So he said, “If I have a cow and it’s patented, the calf will not belong to my household?” I said, “No, it will not.” He said, “I will not let this happen.”

That was a different time. Neoliberalism and globalization have done three things about which I have written in *Earth democracy*.¹¹ First, they have enclosed more commons to extract more because you cannot extract from the commons—you can only extract once it has been enclosed and privatized. The second is that they have eroded the normal democratic functions of society at multiple levels from the village, the panchayat, to regions. What did globalization do? It took away the regional powers of our governments to write agriculture policies according to where they were. Policies in Punjab could be different from Bihar, different from Kerala, different from Tamil Nadu, different from Uttarakhand. Each place has its own unique agriculture. Just signing the WTO agreement meant agriculture became, without any discussion, an agenda that the center could force upon the regions. That is how the lobbyists started to enter, and that is how they destroy democracy, but that is not all. Third, big money, big finance, has totally destroyed democracy. It is running the world economy, but it has also got big money available for new divisions. There is a new divide-and-rule policy and it creates divided cultures. In such a context you have to work at whatever level is available. There is no one “magic level” in the time of collapse. In the time of collapse, we have to create cracks in the system. In 1999 I brought the whole community around me together because everyone knows their reality deeply, but they do not know the new invasion, and my role has been to say, they want to patent seed now, or they want to make fake food. So I sit with the women and talk about all this. Then they evolve their strategies on how they can defend their commons. There is no way that strength can be brought from outside. It has to come from within the community. The commons can only be protected and reclaimed by a community that has integrity.

11 Vandana Shiva, *Earth democracy: Justice, sustainability, and peace* (2005).

PP: Following up on this discussion and on very practical matters: When you say that you sat with the women and talked to them, how do you bring these women together or what are the spaces where these kinds of exchanges can take place?

Part of what we do is the movement Navdanya. Originally, it used to be just me going to villages, but then there was a limit here of one body and two legs—a limit to how much you can walk. Hence I started to build an institution in movement. And what we do is we go to the communities. I never go to a community that does not want us. I only go where we are invited—either because they have seen someone who had an exchange with us or they have heard about us and therefore they have invited us. So they are open and we share—they share their knowledge, I share my knowledge and there are knowledges of the two colliding worlds. And the women are amazing. One day they decide it is a song of resistance they are going to write, and another day they say, “We are going to document our knowledge.” Another day they say, “We will walk to the village panchayat and tell that guy he cannot bring pesticides into our village.” So that is why I am so allergic to monocultures of the mind and monocultures of organizing. And I think the fact that we have made a difference is because I have never gone with a recipe and never gone with a prescription. I have gone with knowledge of the new threats that are coming.

I will give you a little example—in 1991, the Dunkel draft was leaked. Arthur Dunkel was the director general of the GATT [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade] at that time. I had the opportunity to interact with Mr. Dunkel. I remember we were in the elevator—we were talking of globalization etcetera and he said, “As a Swiss I will not accept globalization but as a director general of GATT, I have to do it.” I said, “How can you split yourself into two people? As a Swiss person you do not want more traffic coming through your highways and you force the trucks to go onto trains, and as a director general of another institution you want more trucks and more liberalization everywhere?” So I was traveling the country with this Dunkel draft text and the patenting clauses, and I went to the heart of India. This area is very vibrant, they defeated the British, they never allowed British rule—it is the area now called Chhattisgarh. I am talking about the seeds and this woman gets up and she says, “So first, they came and took our forests, now they want the seeds of the plants in the forest. I get it—we will not let it happen.” So true communication is communication in all directions. One-way preaching is what the missionaries did.

PP: Let me ask you a final question: We are doing an oral history of feminist theories. In this, we are interested in hearing what you think the future of feminist research is. Given what we have discussed in this interview, what according to you is the future of feminism?

When I left the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore, came back to my hometown, and started the Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Ecology, I learned by then that research separated from reality, that studying reality with all the biases loaded in the research, will never understand reality. I think the way feminist research in university systems can be a big part of the transformation that is needed, is by telling the stories of real women and men. Someone struggling to make one meal a day will not have the time to understand

the structures of domination. That is our duty. Our duty is to deconstruct and then create the openings for people. The entire idea of research as separate from people, that is the big block. Research needs to be for the people, by the people. When we do that, then the feminist movement will bring the change. As I often say, either we will have a future with women leading the way or we will not have a future. We can watch how the human species could go extinct. But one way out of extinction is a feminism which is deeply ecological and deeply just. And in that, researchers have a big role.

PP: That is so true and encouraging. Thanks for sharing your knowledge and insights.

You are very welcome.

The conversation took place online on October 18 and 21, 2022, online.

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