

# Economic Globalization, Ecological Feminism,

by Vandana Shiva

*L'auteure analyse la création d'un mouvement corporatif global, la réinvention qui s'en suit des notions de "nation" et "nature", ainsi que les réactions des écologistes féministes.*

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Globalization has a very positive ring to it. However, economic globalization as we are seeing it unfold is not a process of ever widening circles of inclusion. It is a process of ascending hierarchies that concentrate power and exclude people from participating in the political and economic life of their societies.

The "global" in the dominant discourse is the political space in which the dominant local seeks global control, and frees itself of local, national, and global control. The global in this sense does not represent the universal human interest; it represents a particular local and parochial interest which has been globalized through its reach and control. The G-7, the group of the seven most powerful countries, dictate global affairs, but they remain narrow, local, and parochial in terms of the interests of all the world's communities. The World Bank is not really a bank that serves the interest of all the world's communities. It is a bank where decisions are based on voting weighted by the economic and political power of donors, and in this decision-making the communities who pay the real price and are the real donors (such as the tribals of Narmada Valley) have no say. The "global" of today reflects a modern-day version of the global reach of the handful of British merchant adventurers who raided and looted large parts of the globe as the East India Company, and which then became the British Empire.

The "global" as construct does not symbolize planetary consciousness. In fact, it excludes the planet and peoples from the mind, and puts global institutions in their place. The concept of the planet is invoked by the most rapacious and greedy institutions to destroy and kill the cultures which use a planetary consciousness to guide their daily actions in the concrete. The ordinary Indian woman who worships the *tulsi* plant worships the cosmic as symbolized in the plant. The peasants who treat seeds as sacred see in

them a connection to the universe. Reflexive categories harmonize balance from planets to plants to people. In most sustainable traditional cultures, the large and the small have been linked so that limits, restraints, and responsibilities are always transparent and cannot be externalized. The large exists in the small, and hence every act has not just global but cosmic implications. Treading gently on the Earth becomes the natural way to be. Demands in a planetary consciousness are made on the self, not on others.

The moral and political framework of economic globalization is the opposite. There are no reflexive relationships, only coercively imposed structures such as General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs).

Economic globalization is exemplified by the trade liberalization imposed by SAPs, and by "free-trade" treaties like the Uruguay round of GATT and the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO). However, globalization is deeper and wider than SAPs or GATT—it is the ruling ideology that centres on the replacement of governmental and state planning by corporate strategic planning and the establishment of global corporate rule. Even though globalization is made to appear as natural, spontaneous, and inevitable, it is in fact a political process shaped by the dominant interests of society, especially the transnational corporations.

There are two shifts entailed by globalization. The first is the movement of political and economic control from the local and national space to the global space. The core of the "free-trade" or trade liberalization measures of SAPs and of the Uruguay round of GATT are changes in the location of decision-making power from the local and the national space to the global space. This political shift is aimed at expanding the scope of trade, both geographically in space as well as in content.

Thus trade is moving rapidly from taking place predominantly at the local and national level to taking place at the global level. Further, new areas are being brought into global trade such as intellectual property rights, services, investment.

In effect, all aspects of everyday life are being transformed into globally-traded commodities. Food, land, seeds, plants, and animals are now all commodities on international markets.

The impact of globalization is therefore to take resources and knowledge that have hitherto been under women's control, and the control of Third World communities to generate sustenance and survival, and put them at the service of corporations engaged in global trade and commerce to generate profits.

# and Sustainable Development

The imperialistic category of global is a disempowering one at the local level. Its coercive power comes from removing limits for the forces of domination and destruction and imposing restrictions on the forces of conservation.

The ecological category of global is an empowering one

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at the local level because it charges every act, every entity, with the largeness of the cosmic and planetary and adds meaning to it. It is also empowering because precisely by embodying the planetary in the local, it creates conditions for local autonomy and local control.

## **From an earth democracy to a share-holding democracy?**

There is a story that elders tell to their children in central India to illustrate that the life of the tribe is deeply and intimately linked to the life of the soil and the forest.

The forest was ablaze. Pushed by the wind, the flames began to close in on a beautiful tree on which sat a bird. An old man escaping the fire, himself, saw the bird and said to it, "Little bird, why don't you fly away? Have you forgotten you have wings?" And the bird answered, "Old man, do you see this empty nest above? This is where I was born. And this small nest from which you hear the chirping is where I am bringing up my small child. I feed him with nectar from the flowers of this tree and I live by eating its ripe fruit. And do you see the dropping below on the forest floor? Many seedlings will emerge from them and thus do I help to spread greenery, as my parents before me did, as my children after me will. My life is linked to this tree. If it dies I will surely die with it. No, I have not forgotten my wings." (Rane 15)

In total contrast to this story I recently read another one in the *Guardian* with the heading, "Children to Learn Finance." The most powerful financiers in London's financial centre had concluded that the world of work is precarious and that secondary school children should be

taught to take responsibility for their own financial affairs. As traditional full-time staff jobs disappear and state care is eroded, youngsters should turn to "financial security" in a share-owning democracy.

The problem is that there is no security for most in a world led by the global financial system. And the share-owning democracy is not a democracy, it is a casino.

In recent years it has become increasingly evident that the financial system is not a source of security but risk. In December 1994, California's Orange County lost \$1.5 billion of its investment fund of \$7.4 billion in public monies from 187 school districts and transportation authorities. As a result of its betting on derivative markets, Orange County faced a severe cutback in public services, including its schools.

In February 1995, a 28-year-old trader in the Singapore office of Barings Bank, had bet \$29 billion of the firm's money and lost \$1.3 billion. The loss wiped out the 223-year-old Bank's \$900 million in capital and forced it into bankruptcy.

In December 1994, the Mexican stock market lost more than 30 per cent of its money value in peso terms as speculators pulled out their money. Austerity measures imposed as a result were expected to put 750,000 Mexicans out of work during the first four months of 1992, and interest rates of 90 per cent or more on mortgages, credit cards, and car loans would push many families into bankruptcy. The expected U.S. job loss was 500,000. The global casino is hardly the place for our children to be looking for security when the dominant economic system is not able to provide job security, social security, or ecological security. As David Korten states in his recent book, *When Corporations Rule the World*:

Financial institutions that were once dedicated to mobilizing funds for productive investment have transmogrified into a predatory, risk-creating, speculation-driven global financial system engaged in the unproductive extraction of wealth from tax payers and the productive economy.

This extractive economy takes away the wealth from nature and society. Even the shareholders are not in charge. It is a myth that shareholders control the corporation and have full power over it. Only a small portion of funds used by corporations comes directly from stockholder investment. As John Kenneth Galbraith has said plainly, "the stock holder ... has no power and hence no role in the running of the firm."

The corporation is controlled by its management, who reward themselves at higher levels. In 1980, the average

compensation of corporate CEOs in the U.S. was 42 times that of the average worker, 39 times the average pay of teachers. In 1992, CEOs averaged 157 times as much as the average worker and 113 times as much as teachers. These are the people who control the corporations, and through economic globalization they control our lives. As Ralph Estes has stated,

Thus we have a small group, not elected by the populace but chosen by themselves, from *among* themselves, a managerial elite whose members hold great power, and whose personal morality is kept on

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hold while acting in their corporate roles (which for some is practically twenty-four hours a day). To a substantial extent they collectively decide where and how we will work, how safe our job will be, when we will lose our jobs (possibly for the rest of our lives), what we will eat, what we will wear, how we will clean it, how we will get around, how we will communicate, how much we will make in wages and as a return on our investments, what we will do for entertainment, and yes, through control of the media with its influence over our culture, even what we will think.

This sounds rather like pre-*perestroika* Russia. There the government controlled the quality, price, purity, safety, and choice of food, and of all other consumer products. It ordained the quality, safety, and wage rate of the job. The government was not one of checks and balances, not seriously constrained by a constitution, and not elected by or accountable to the mass of citizens. It was chosen and perpetuated largely by itself.

Strangely, in a society that opposed the Russian communist system throughout its existence, we appear to have come to accept a very similar arrangement in the United States (as have other capitalistic countries). Our system is marked by a relatively small number of individuals, with no accountability, controlling great power for the benefit of narrow interests, while the broad public interest is carried along as a captive passenger, a hostage.

We would not long tolerate a government without accountability, a dictatorship answerable to no one. But we allow unaccountable corporations to control more of our lives than government has ever attempted. (76-77)

## Reclaiming an earth democracy

As transnational corporation (TNC) totalitarianism destroys the ecological and economic security of citizens throughout the world, how should the feminist movements respond? While feminism has always been pluralistic, there are currently two major trends with respect to economic globalization. Ecological feminism sees in the current trend the ultimate concentration of capitalist patriarchy and its violence against nature and women.

A feminism based on reductionist constructivism is unwittingly becoming a partner of TNC totalitarianism by supporting the political and technological paradigm of economic globalization. Reductionist constructivism is the philosophy that nature or the nation are *nothing but* a social construction of patriarchy. Some feminists have thus supported the erosion of national sovereignty and any form of people's protection instead of reclaiming the nation as an extension of feminist ideology's inclusion of all members of a society. The patriarchy has defined nationhood in terms of a territory and narrow nationalism. However, there are other perceptions.

As Shri Aurobindo has said,

What is a nation? What is our mother-country? It is not a piece of earth, nor a figure of speech, nor a fiction of the mind. It is a mighty Shakti, composed of the Shaktis of all the millions of units that make up the nation ... assembled in one mass of force and welded into unity. The Shakti we call India, Bhawani Bharati, is the living unity of the Shaktis of 300 million people (now 900 million). (Shiva and Bhar)

## The reinvention of "nation"

Globalization has rendered the relationship between the community, the state, and the corporation totally fluid or, to use Marc Nerfin's more colourful categories, the relationship between the citizen, the prince, and the merchant.

The appeal of globalization is usually based on the idea that it implies less red tape, less centralization, and less bureaucratic control. It is celebrated because it implies the erosion of the power of the state.

Globalization does mean "less government" for regulation of business and commerce. But less government for commerce and corporations can go hand-in-hand with more government in the lives of people. As globalization allows increasing transfer of the resources from the public domain—either under the control of communities, or that of the state—discontent and dissent necessarily increase, leading to law and order problems. In such a situation, even a minimalist state restricted only to policing and law and order will become enormously large and all-pervasive, devouring much of the wealth of society and intruding into every aspect of citizens' lives.

Most of the ideological projection of globalization has

focussed on the new relationship of the prince and the merchant, the state and the corporation, the government and the market. The state has been stepping back more and more from the regulation of commerce and capital. Reflecting this ideology of deregulation, our Finance Minister Manmohan Singh had recently stated that, "power should move to the Board room" i.e., from the state to the corporations (*The Hindu*). However, the shift from the rule of the nation-state to that of the corporations does not imply more power to the people. If anything, it implies less power in the hands of people both because corporations, especially transnational corporations, are more powerful

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than governments and also because they are less accountable than governments to democratic control.

The erosion of the power of the nation-state from outside and above leads to a concentration of power in the hands of corporations. It does not devolve power to the people. It does not move power downwards into the hands of communities. In fact, it takes power away from the local level, and transforms institutions of the state from being protectors of the health and rights of people to protectors of the property and profits of corporations. This creates an inverted state, a state more committed to the protection of foreign investment and less to the protection of the citizens of the country. The inversion of the state is well exemplified in a recently announced proposal that foreign security experts would train Indian police to protect the "life and property of foreign investors" (*Indian Express*).

Narrow nationalism in fact feeds on economic globalization which robs people of all security and positive identity and leaves them with negatively defined identities.

The homogenization processes of globalization do not fully wipe out differences. Differences persist not in an integrating context of plurality, but in the fragmenting context of homogenization. Positive pluralities give way to negative dualities, each in competition with every other, contesting for the scarce resources that define economic and political power. Diversity is mutated into duality, into the experience of exclusion. The intolerance of diversity becomes a new social disease, leaving communities vulnerable to breakdown and violence, decay and destruction.

The intolerance of diversity and the persistence of cultural differences sets up our community against another in a context created by a corporate rule creating monocultures. Difference, instead of leading to richness of diversity, becomes the base for diversion and an ideol-

ogy of separatism and terrorism. Thus narrow nationalism and economic globalization go hand in hand.

A political response to both requires creating an inclusive nationhood. The reinvention of the state has to be based on the reinvention of sovereignty. Sovereignty cannot reside only in centralized state structures nor does it disappear when the protective functions of the state with respect to its people start to wither away. The new partnership for national sovereignty needs empowered communities which assign functions to the state for their protection. Communities defending themselves demand such duties and obligations from state structures. On the other hand, TNCs and international agencies promote the separation of community interests from state interests and the fragmentation and divisiveness of communities.

### **The reinvention of "nature"**

The rise of industrialism led to a patriarchal construction of nature as passive, inert, and valueless and gendered these constructed qualities. Reductionist constructivism perceives nature as mere construction.

In the absence of an ecological framework, feminist theorizing, especially the stream characterized by reductionist constructivism (the view that nature and its diversity is nothing but a social construction) has an unintended convergence with the dominant reductionist philosophy of genetic engineering. Ironically, while beginning as a critique of dominant science, it ends up speaking the same language. Thus both genetic engineering and feminist theories of biotechnology contribute to the invisibility of the organism, and to the disappearance of ordered biodiversity which is the basis of ecological stability (Braidotti). In a reductionist approach to biotechnology, issues of social justice also vanish along with concern for ecology.

If the post-modernist tradition of feminism is to avoid supporting the uncritical acceptance of the new biotechnologies, it must open a fresh dialogue with those working on equity, ethics, and ecological aspects of genetic engineering. It must become more ecological and this implies rethinking some of the categories whose origins lay in challenging the status quo, but which now support it. Two of these categories are "essentialism" and "crossing boundaries."

The machine metaphor for organisms is one arising from patriarchal rationality, which, when applied to organisms, denies their self-organizing, self-healing properties. Technologies based on the perception of living organisms as living systems and not machines are ecological, not engineering technologies.

Unfortunately, post-modern feminists have adopted this limited view of technology as mechanization. They therefore see an increased degree of freedom not as the freedom of an organism to adapt, to grow, to shape itself from within but as the mechanistic addition of "metal" to "flesh" and the "machine" to the "body." The inevitable

consequence is to see the one without the other as incomplete. Haraway's cyborg imaginary was supposed to suggest a way out of the maze of the dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves.

The post-modern discourse was supposed to question the privilege of the white male individual and to enable recognition of other forms of historical experience. Much western academic feminist thinking, however, is converging closely with the perspectives of the global patriarchal elite. It is reinstating the world view of powerful white males as a norm in an era where concern for preserving diverse forms of life, both biological and cultural, is emerging as a major challenge.

Reductionist constructivism in feminist theorizing and genetic reductionism underlying the genetic engineering industry converge in a move to genetic essentialism, which treats genes as more basic and essential than organisms as self-organizing systems, and species as separate and identifiable entities. However, a shift to genetic essentialism does not make essentialism disappear, but merely relocates it.

All paradigms treat something as basic and essential. Reductionism shifts the basis of life from organisms and their interactions to the gene. As Fox Keller has pointed out, genetic reductionism leads to the:



Anita Mitra, "Wounded Feminine," Live Art Space, Oxford Mills, Ontario 1996. Photo: Tim Mitra

relocation of the essence (or basis) of life. The locus of vital activity was now to be sought neither in the physical-chemical interactions and structures of the organism-niche complex, of the organism itself, nor even of the cell, but rather, in the physical-chemical structure of one particular component of the cell; namely, in the genetic material, or more exactly, in the gene. (Keller 96)

It is not that molecular reductionism eliminates essentialism; it merely relocates it in the gene. Post-reductionist biology needs to relocate the basic unit in the internal and external relationships of organisms.

### Rethinking boundaries

Boundaries have been an important construct for ecological restraint. "Removing boundaries" has been an important metaphor for removing restraints on human actions, and allowing limitless exploitation of natural resources. Boyle referred to the "removal of boundaries" that native Americans had constructed to respect and conserve nature:

that the veneration, wherewith men are imbued for what they call nature, has been a discouraging impediment to the empire of man over the inferior creatures of God: for many have not only looked upon it as an impossible thing to compass, but as something impious to attempt, the removing of those boundaries, which nature seems to have put and settled among her productions; and whilst they look upon her as such a venerable thing, some make a kind of scruple of conscience to endeavour so to emulate any of her works, as to excel them. (qtd. in Keller 96)

Two centuries later, Muller, the father of molecular biology, said:

We cannot leave forever inviolate in their recondite recesses those invisibly small yet fundamental particles, the genes, for from these genes ... there radiate continually those forces, far-reaching, orderly, but elusive, that make and unmake our living worlds. (Muller qtd. in Keller 96)

In the reductionist paradigm, it is species boundaries that are crossed, and the boundaries created are those that separate the gene from the whole organism, and the patent holder from the rest of society. Crucial to the creation of transgenic organisms is the breaking down of species barriers, and the construction of the fictitious Weismann barrier that made the gene the casual determinant of the organism's evolution.

"Nature," "limits and boundaries," "organisms," and "species" have emerged as central to the discourse and politics of ecology. Biodiversity conservation in particular

includes the recognition of the intrinsic worth of species and of ecological barriers that make diversity and distinctiveness flourish. Post-modern feminists and the genetic engineering establishment have, however, treated nature and boundaries as mere constructions, which can and should be dispensed with.

The Mad Cow Disease and the equally mad sacrifice of millions of cattle to restore consumer confidence is an example of the risks of crossing ecological boundaries. When cattle were fed carcasses of infected cows and sheep, converted from being herbivores to cannibals, new risks were created for the transfer of infections across species. The links of new cases of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD) on humans with bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), the Mad Cow Disease, should create a humility in us that species boundaries are not mere fictions—they are an ecological reality and they need to be respected.

This species integrity is in fact the ethics of an earth democracy, the democracy of all life. To treat a species merely as a momentary organization of a chunk of information opens the flood gates of unlimited manipulation and unlimited hazards. Whether it is in the context of new technologies or in the context of political and economic restructuring, the reintroduction of limits in human affairs is becoming an ecological and political imperative to tame the excesses and ravages and predation of economic globalization.

*Excerpted from a speech presented at the Sixth International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women, held in Adelaide, Australia, from April 21–26, 1996. Vandana Shiva, writer and science policy advocate, is director of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Natural Resource Policy, in New Delhi, India. Her current research centres on biodiversity and sustainable agriculture.*

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