

OVERPOPULATION AND ECOFEMINISM

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Abstract: Deep Ecologist, against comfortable opinion has been highlighting the ill effects of overpopulation on the environment. But to propose or implement any relief to such problems has always been problematic; as men has always chosen to act against his better judgement when it comes to restricting reproduction. Various socio-economic and political discourses are always entertained to smudge such issues. Moreover, some do not even acknowledge it as a problem. Amidst the various approaches to negate the problem of overpopulation, one charmingly deceptive comes from the perspective of human rights, i.e. restriction of any sort on reproduction is against human rights. Though interestingly, it is not the man but the woman who goes through the needed sacrifices of childbirth. And the only reason why man seems bothered about such restrictions might possibly because it limits the reach of his dominion over the female body and his chances of extending his bloodline (or patriarchy).

Desmond Morris noted that women due to their innate ability to care and nurture were given prominence in the hunter-gatherer community, while men were just expendable creatures designated to merely hunt. In a similar vein, Vandana Shiva writes that in femininity lies the potency of life, or in simpler words, femininity is the very nucleus of life. Therefore, acknowledgement of its sheer amount of power, Morris writes, that may be the most probably reason why the dominion of men extend from nature to women, as gods took over goddesses and the almighty became a man. The ghost of such evolutionary scare haunts us still today in the face of bareness and intentional childlessness. Our culture sees having children as a blessedness and vice-versa, which is a great moral failing as there is no rational explanation to say that having more children makes one merrier. Garrett Hardin also notes it as a problem of displaced morality, as the said cultural virtue only breeds misery as it amplifies environmental degradation.

Hence, this paper will be an attempt in appropriating the above-mentioned issues. It will also highlight the need for women to take back the rights of reproduction via women empowerment, and to extend the feminine virtue of care and nurture to breathe back life into nature.

Keywords: Overpopulation, Ecofeminism, Deep Ecology, Feminine Principle.

Introduction: Much of the present environmental degradation is said to be borne of man's domineering attitude towards it; of which, our presence (i.e. population) amplifies its actual effects. That being the reason, Deep Ecologist have been urging the reduction of human population to restore biodiversity[1] (and eventually, nature). There have been various studies done to analyse, criticize, and recommend an alternate approach to maintaining a non-or less domineering relationship with nature. One very eminent is Ecofeminism. It takes man's domination over nature on parallel with man's domination over woman[2].

Ecofeminism in-itself is a vast array of thoughts, so is Deep Ecology – and is sometimes seen as contradictory or complementary to one another. But these subjects in itself – or in its relation to one another is not the concern of this paper. What this paper aims to do is to address the way the female body has been used to compensate man's deep desire to stay immortal, and, also to extend his dominion over the natural world; which in-turn has borne us the problem of overpopulation and the degradation of biodiversity.

The Transformation of Gods From Goddesses: Desmond Morris notes that the evolutionary path that human beings took was of a *childlike-adult*[3]

pattern. Men grew childlike in their behaviour, women in their anatomy and vice versa. Exteriorly, men became robust while women fragile. Interiorly, men became juvenile and women, mature. This had great survival benefits. It required men to stay ignorant and stupid enough, in order to take risk and hunt, while women, subtle and wise, in order to care, nurture, and mediate the growth and development of their tribe. In simpler words, men were expendable. Women were valuable. Morris notes, *they were different but equal*[4]... *They complemented one another and the combination spelled success*[5].

Women as noted, enjoyed a prominent space in the community as it is reflected via various ancient animistic religions; where the object of worship were feminine, and deity, goddesses. But with the discovery of agriculture, and in the advent of science and industrialization, the old social pattern vanished. Goddesses became gods. Men became superior, women subjugated, and nature colonized. Morris writes, *In ancient times the great deity was always a woman, but then, as urbanization spread, She underwent a disastrous sex change and, in simple terms, the benign Mother Goddess became the authoritarian God the Father*[6].

The problem with this new religion, Heather Fisher Lindsay writes that it was

- 1) Earth-disdaining, unlike its predecessor which were earth-honoring[7].
- 2) Women-disdaining. Lindsay writes, *Women's body is described with violent disgust as the image of decay. Her physical presence drags down the souls of men to carnal lust and thus to eternal damnation*[8].

Lindsay further adds, *The male supremacy examined here is part of the environmental degradation we experience today because the power dynamics of male over female and human over nature are inextricably linked*[9].

Dominion Over The Female Body: Since Renaissance, the Enlightenment Era, Scientific and Industrial Revolution, nature became a soulless matter. Lindsay writes, *Over the last 300 years, "animistic, organic assumptions" gave way to the current regime in which nature is a "system of dead, inert particles moved by external, rather than internal forces*[10]"

Such thought opened the gateway to industrial exploitation. She further writes,

... perception of nonhuman life forms can be surmised from ... attitude that "[t]he discipline of scientific knowledge and the mechanical inventions it leads to, do not 'merely exert a gentle guidance over nature's course, they have the power to conquer and subdue her, to shake her to her foundations. Such an attitude has been argued to be at the root of the change of Earth's image "from a living, nurturing mother to inert, dead and manipulable matter" to serve the "exploitative imperative" of capitalism[11]... *Until science exacts the desired power from nature, nature is a woman to be subdued (arguably raped in the language above)*[12].

In a similar vein, Carolyn Merchant writes, *the mechanical framework created by the "fathers" of modern science legitimated the use of nature for human profit making*[13]. Socio-politically too, nature remained subjugated. Along with it, women were talked in the language of commodity/property[14].

In that course of time, Morris notes that the female body also went through various modifications and mutilations. He writes that every part of women's body (apart from the arm) went through some changes or the other to meet men's sensual satisfaction[15]. This dominion over the female body does not only have the connotations of man's domination over nature, but it also contributed to major ecological harm.

Trish Glazebrook explains,

... the phallic order is the source of double threat to human beings: overpopulation, and the depletion of resources. Exploitation of female reproductive power has caused an excess of births, and hence overpopulation; while an excess of production has exploited natural resources to the point of their

destruction. Though "feminism or death" was a battle cry, it was also a warning that human being cannot survive patriarchy's ecological consequences[16].

To understand better, the rationale behind the need to dominate the female body, it is essential to visit what Vandana Shiva calls, the *feminine principle*. In her book titled, *Staying Alive*, Shiva talks of *Shakti*, the primordial force of life, as expressed in nature in both animate and inanimate forms. She writes, it is - *the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos; in conjunction with the masculine principle (Purusha), Prakrti (the feminine principle) creates the world*[17].

The *feminine principle* is present in all natural objects. Shiva does not differentiate between men and women, and men and nature, she writes, such are false dichotomies[18]. The creation of life depends upon both the *masculine* and the *feminine principle*, but the essence of potency is best presented via the *feminine principle*. And in the human species, it is best presented to us in the female body. In short, the female body is the nucleus of life giving force. But such immense power had been invested limitedly only for meeting men's perversion of the cosmological order. As a result, nature suffered due to the lack of the *feminine principle* to balance the masculine counterpart for the creation and sustenance of life.

From the above observations, two assumptions can be made regarding man's domination over the female body:

- 1) Women and Children as properties: As mentioned before, women were perceived to be a man's property, and so were children. To meet one's satisfaction of wealth (and strength, indirectly), copulation was used as a multiplier.
- 2) Biological Legacy: Human beings fear death. We have always longed-for immortality. Since that is impossible, the closest compensation man could afford oneself was the presence of his bloodline on earth.

The roots of the above two assumptions can be traced back to various patriarchal cultures, and in religious writings where blessings are translated via progeny. But more unfortunate than such ancient customs are that, such sentiments still dictate our contemporary modern world where the value of a woman is directly attached to the fertility of her womb. A woman who is barren is perceived as unblessed, and a woman who refuses to bear children as less-of-a-woman. More disturbingly, in the rural areas, copulation and bearing children are seen as wifely duties. It is more disturbing because,

- a) These women are uninformed about their rights over reproduction, and
- b) They usually do not have any access to contraceptives, or maternal healthcare.

Such cultural maxims that dictates our lives are detrimental to natural wellbeing of all lives, because it results in the overpopulation of the human species. Which is a major problem, as it disrupts the harmony of biodiversity[19].

The Problem of Overpopulation: Right since the 70s, various scholars have been warning the human species of the problem of overpopulation. First made famous by Robert Thomas Malthus, expounded ferociously by Garrett Hardin, and carried forwarded by Arne Naess, the exponential growth of the human population is said to have been the major cause of environmental degradation. Various discourses have been carried forth, from the perspective of subsistence management to the wellbeing of biodiversity. But one essential view that they all seem to agree on, and that one view which is essentially relevant to this paper is that, they all agree that the root cause of the problem of overpopulation is that of *misplaced morality*.

As illustrated throughout this paper, our sense of right and wrong or the moral values that we attached to our relationship with women, children, and childbearing has been wrong-side-up and right-side-down. This in simpler terms is *misplaced morality*; which is the essential problem as Merchant puts it, *humans reproduce themselves biologically in accordance with the social and ethical norms of the culture into which they are born*[20]. Therefore, such cultural maxims that are based on *misplaced morality* needs fixing. The *feminine principle* of potency and fertility needs to be liberated and extended towards the non-human world which has suffered equally, the brunt of patriarchal abuse.

But there are various other people who do not believe that population is a problem at all. And that there is no need to address the culture associated with reproduction. The following are two common arguments:

- 1) The equal distribution of goods argument: according to which, the lack of subsistence is not due to the problem of overpopulation but of unequal distribution of goods[21].
- 2) The scientific/technological argument: according to which, the problem is not that of overpopulation but of the lack of more advanced green technologies that could cure all environmental ills[22].

One could notice that such views are not just anti-nature but anti-women too. They refuse to acknowledge that nature or women are under any

immediate constraints. The proponents of such views are comfortable gambling with the present woes of nature and women on some ideal hypothesis. Garrett Hardin notes that such views are laudable. They are cute but they do not really solve the problem at hand. They merely deviate it. Moreover, he opines that, say even if an ideal justice system was established and all goods were distributed equally, and that the problem of lack of subsistence and coal based energy has been solved by advanced green technologies – the problem of overpopulation will still persist if we do not change the customs, traditions, and the socio-political and economic framework of our lifestyles. The problem he says is not a technical one, but a problem of values[23].

Transformation of Values: Karen J. Warren, while advocating *Ecological Feminism* talks of preferring *contextualist ethic* over *objective theory*. According to her, to address a problem, we need to address the relationship quotient of the problem; treat the values involved and redefine the relationship again[24]. Thus, as Hardin suggested, we need to change the values involve in the relationship of man-woman-man-nature. What can be the possible transformation of values? Formulating Warren's *Ecological Feminism*, Glazebrook writes, the needed transformations would be, transformation of:

- a) Values of possession to reciprocity,
- b) Values of conquest to harmony, and
- c) Values of accumulation to mutual interdependence[25].

According to Fritjof Capra, these changes in values will come from the changes in our thought procedures. Out of four suggestions he made, one is the transition from *reductionism* to *holism*[26]. When applied to the context of this paper, it will mean that the *feminine principle* needs to be extended towards the nonhuman world. It should not be limited only to meet the man's desire of excessive reproduction.

For a proper functioning of the cosmology, as Shiva comments, needs both *masculine* and the *feminine principle*[27]. Women needs to get liberated from the cultural maxims that measures her worth on the grounds of her fertility and submissiveness to gender biased customs. There is an urgent need to fix the values that governs our social life. Because, it is only when the female body is liberated from the patriarchal demands of excessive reproduction, the problem of overpopulation can be addressed in a significant way.

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