

Review Article: Women and Development

EYE TO EYE: WOMEN PRACTISING DEVELOPMENT ACROSS CULTURES

Susan Perry and Celeste Schenk (eds)

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POWER POLITICS

Arundhati Roy

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WATER WARS: PRIVATIZATION, POLLUTION, AND PROFIT

Vandana Shiva

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As I watched the coverage of the devastation wreaked by the tsunami in the Indian Ocean, I was struck by its parallels with the ongoing crisis in Iraq and West Asia. In both cases, large numbers of lives have been lost, cities and villages have been destroyed, and human misery has plummeted to new depths. Things we take for granted – basic infrastructure, food, medical care, and social support systems – have disappeared. One obvious difference, of course, remains – the tsunami was nature's work, the war and West Asian crisis are human-made. Yet, one similarity that has received little media attention in either of these events is the differential impacts on women and men. Women's traditional roles in caring for family and the sick, as well as the grim reality of being targets of sexual abuse and rape, have increased women's vulnerability in ways that are rarely acknowledged in the media or by governments.¹ The overwhelming consequences of natural disasters and human actions make it easy to be cynical about 'development'. What can it possibly mean when lives are torn apart with such ease and with so little recourse to challenge?

To make sense of the profound failure of development in the Third World – increasingly evident in the international context of economic globalisation accompanied by turmoil and war in many parts

of the world – a focus on the centrality of culture, and on women's significance to the development process is key. Each of these terms – women, culture, and development – are at the centre of ongoing, often contentious feminist debates. The efforts to grapple with the complexities of these terms, their interconnections, and the ways in which their overlapping realities shape the development project are reflected in the provocative, readable and incisive nature of some of the current feminist scholarship.

Eye to Eye: Women Practising Development Across Cultures by Susan Perry and Celeste Schenk is an exciting, energising and absorbing work that revisits some core issues and assumptions in the area of gender and development. The editors state in the introduction that their intent was to see the book 'as a development project, one that would enable us to rethink traditional development theory and foreground innovative development practices across the globe' (p. 1). The book succeeds brilliantly in showcasing development praxis – the chapters are powerful, eloquent, and often poignant essays on what issues of gender, equity and justice mean in practice across differing cultural, national, and other contexts. The other two works reviewed here comprise essays on development by two prominent Third World writers, and offer in different ways an indictment of economic globalisation and the resulting privatisation of resources that are wreaking a painful destruction of the subsistence economies of rural India. Arundhati Roy, Booker Prize-winning author of *The God of Small Things*, offers us *Power Politics*, a brilliantly penned, often polemical, collection of essays, which explores the complex, messy contradictions and realities of India in the first three pieces. The remaining two essays, first published in the British *Guardian* newspaper, are a powerful indictment of the United States' foreign policy in the wake of the attacks of 11 September 2001 and the later war on Afghanistan. Vandana Shiva, a well-known activist and eco-feminist, sets out to illustrate in *Water Wars* the clash of two cultures, the culture of 'commodification' at war with 'diverse cultures of sharing, of receiving and giving water as a free gift' (p. x). Together these three works explore cross-cultural ideas and practices on women's empowerment, the power of dialogue and discourse, and peace activism, within a larger framework of economic globalisation and neo-imperialism.

Development as Empowerment

If a fundamental concern of feminism has been women's empowerment (itself a term that has generated considerable feminist analysis), then all of these books deal with the multiple ways in which it can be put into practice. One way of *doing* women and development has been through international development agencies and *Eye to Eye* offers two chapters on the World Bank and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). Sophie Bessis's chapter on the World Bank discusses the Bank's 'discovery' of women and the gender agenda in terms of 'instrumental feminism', where women's rights, women's education, and women's employment are actively encouraged, not to further the goals of social justice but as tools to further economic development and modernisation. Bessis poses the question that confront all movements at some point – how to collaborate with mainstream organisations and institutions without being 'duped' or co-opted. It is unfortunate that Bessis doesn't link her otherwise robust analysis with the abundant literature on the Bank that deals with precisely the questions and issues she raises (see, for example, Razavi and Miller, 1995; Razavi, 1997). A companion chapter by Aster Zaoudé and Joanne Sandler, on practitioners working with United Nations agencies, explores the ways in which the use of gender mainstreaming, the human rights 'machinery' and the coming together of women, inside and outside development institutions, have worked to promote women's empowerment. For those who believe in change from within, this analysis of the transformative potential of the 'gender agenda' of aid agencies is a heartening one.

But both chapters need to be read against the larger context of economic globalisation that is actively abetted by the World Bank, World Trade Organisation (WTO) and, ultimately, the UN. Can we talk about women's empowerment through the gender agendas of aid agencies whose primary goal is economic growth at any cost? Shiva and Roy analyse the increasing trend towards privatisation of resources globally. Water, as Shiva points out, is a billion-dollar industry, involving big players such as Monsanto and Coca Cola, who have the blessings of the international development agencies. Like Shiva, Roy dismisses the possibility of empowerment of rural people as long as the state remains complicit in fostering the wellbeing of private corporations at the expense of everything else. Her essay, 'Power Politics: The Reincarnation of Rumpelstiltskin', brings together a range of issues

that demonstrate the onslaught by private corporations – Indian and multinational – on several hundred million rural people whose lives depend on their access to natural resources. She comments, ‘To snatch these away and sell them as stock to private companies is a process of barbaric dispossession on a scale that has no parallel in history’ (p. 43). She shows how forces of economic globalisation led to the sanction of the first private, large-scale dam on the Narmada River in India, and the horrific extent of the scandal of the now collapsed US corporation Enron’s electricity-generating venture in India. Her essay reinforces for us the fundamental contradictions so often embodied in international organisations between their rhetoric of women’s empowerment and the practice of economic, cultural, social and political exploitation.

Women’s empowerment is also the focus of different kinds of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that flourish in the Third World. Many are amazing examples of activism and resistance, and offer an avenue for rural and urban women to develop their own sense of agency. *Eye to Eye* offers us three chapters focusing on women’s NGOs in Asia. Elora Shehabuddin charts the ways in which poor women negotiate between the differing agendas of secularists and Islamists, modernisers and traditionalists, and material and cultural challenges to create a space for their own vision of development in Bangladesh. Jael Silliman offers a snapshot of the resistance in the Narmada Valley in India to building the gigantic Sardar Sarovar Project, and includes a critique of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement) for its failure to foreground women’s issues in its years of mobilising the people of the Valley against the dam.

Roy, too, discusses the SSP in her three essays on India, focusing on how her criticism of the Supreme Court’s 1999 judgement allowing the Narmada project to proceed, incurred the wrath of the Court. In 2001, Roy was charged with ‘contempt of court’ for imputing motives to the Court and the third ‘essay’ in the book is her affidavit filed in the Court where she accused the Court of harassment and intimidation of those who disagreed with it. She argues that exercising the contempt of power serves to muzzle freedom of expression, so essential in a democracy. It is useful in this context to read Susan Perry’s portrayal of women’s NGOs in China’s one party dictatorship, which demonstrates how they struggle to survive in a context where free public debate is a rarity and any challenge to the state’s development or political agenda is still heavily frowned upon. Indeed, Perry’s chapter illustrates that democratic

political institutions do matter. The vigorous debate and robust activism that flourish in India – even in the face of an often authoritarian state – is clearly because of the larger democratic context.

Naming the Problem: Discourse and Activism

The power of public debate and dialogue is especially important today when the rhetoric and acts of war escalate in so-called democratic western states. The illegal and immoral war on Iraq, and others around the world, is at least partly a manifestation of not some crude cultural or civilisational differences (*cf.* Huntington, 1998), but quite frequently of more fundamental struggles over control of ecological resources, as Shiva says in her work. She argues, perhaps a little simplistically, that many of the political, ethnic and religious conflicts today, such as the on-going Palestine-Israel struggle, are in essence water wars. There is, undoubtedly, a significant ecological aspect to the conflict in West Asia, but there is much more to it too – reflective of the impulse of colonisation and domination that drives the Israeli state. The overwhelming, relentless nature of the oppression of the Palestinian people by the Israeli state is such that we have to ask whether peace can ever be possible when there is neither the political will nor the institutional framework to allow for it. This is notwithstanding the summit talks in Egypt between new Palestinian President Mohammed Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in February 2005.

At such a time when peace has been a mere fantasy for so long, the extraordinarily inspiring, powerful dialogue between Sumaya Farhat-Naser and Gila Svirsky in *Eye to Eye* serves as a reminder of the risky, courageous work undertaken by Jewish and Palestinian women peace activists. Marginalised by the mainstream in both societies, these women have been part of a process of building dialogues between women from both sides of the divide. As Farhat-Naser comments:

When we have lived fifty years knowing each other only as enemies, with pain and bitter experience very much alive on the Palestinian side, it is very difficult to say ‘Let’s sit together and hug.’ We can’t hug ... The aim is not to learn to drink coffee together. Anyone can drink coffee together. The aim is to discuss political issues, very difficult political issues, and to come out of these discussions with a consensus that is good for both sides. This is the aim of the dialogue programme that caters to young women, old women and target groups such as students and policewomen (pp. 137–8).

The section features a moving exchange of letters between the two women that captures their mutual respect and admiration for each other even in the face of their political differences.

Similarly, clashing feminist political perspectives are captured in the riveting section on female genital mutilation (FGM), an issue that has received widespread if problematic international media coverage. Molly Melching, a US-born activist, and director of an NGO, TOSTAN (meaning 'breaking out of an egg' in Wolof) in Senegal, has been part of creating a 'holistic and rights-based educational process' that has seen 174 villages make a public declaration to end the practice of 'female genital cutting' (p. 156). Melching argues that a law against the practice is only effective after people have gone through 'a process of non-directive education, and truly understand the risks involved in the practice' (p. 166). In contrast, Linda Weil-Curiel, a French lawyer who has been part of the efforts in France to eliminate the practice of FGM, sees FGM as a form of child abuse, a violation of human rights that must be fought primarily through the courts. The successful trial and imprisonment of those parents and practitioners supportive of FGM in France, she argues, has succeeded in bringing home to the African community that female genital mutilation in any form is unacceptable.

In contrast to both these authors, Obioma Nnaemeka, a Nigerian scholar and activist based in the US, offers a devastating critique of western feminist imperialism that has served to objectify and degrade African women by the way in which the issue of 'female circumcision' has been dealt with. She comments, 'It is not necessary to violate African women in order to address the violence that was done to them. In effect, African women are doubly victimised: first from within (their culture) and second from without (their "saviours")' (p. 174). Nnaemeka singles out for particular critique the film *Warrior Marks* by Alice Walker and Pratibha Parmar (misspelt in the book as 'Parma'), two western women of colour, whose work epitomised the:

unequal power relations between the West and the so-called Third World; the reduction of the myriad issues facing African women to female circumcision; the reduction of the complexity and the totality of the African woman to the clitoris; the objectification and silencing of African women; the obsessions, prejudices and deafness of the West (p. 180).

Nnaemeka's trenchant critique certainly resonates with my experience of many western feminists' inability to focus on anything other than

issues that personify an apparently primitive Third World oppression of women – such as ‘sati’, in the Indian context – that ignores not only how pervasive women’s oppression in the west is, but also western women’s complicity in international systems of oppression. Recall, for example, the media (and public) obsession in New Zealand a little over two years ago about the need for Miss New Zealand to boycott the Miss World competition in Nigeria where a woman had been sentenced to death by stoning. The absolute absence of any reflexivity in the ‘debate’ on this issue was astounding. There was *no* acknowledgement, for instance, of the fact that there was not a similar call to boycott the United States, which has one of the highest rate of incarceration of its citizens, most of them black or latino, and one of the highest rate of capital punishment, again disproportionately affecting blacks (see Human Rights Watch, 2002; Mears, 1999). Neither was there a call to boycott the US and Britain for their bombing of Afghanistan (oh, but we were saving the women from the Taliban, weren’t we?) and then Iraq. If, as Nnaemeka argues in her chapter, forces of globalisation have too often served to reinforce and justify repressive local traditions, then Roy’s incisive analyses of US foreign policy and the bombing of Afghanistan help to remind us that the US (with its allies) has used its political hegemony to actively work against the Third World. As feminists we need not only to condemn the possible ‘stoning to death’ of a Nigerian woman but also to call our governments to account in our efforts to create a more just world.

Women, Culture and Development: Reflections

Literature is the focus of the final section of *Eye to Eye*, bringing home the fundamental materiality of culture. From the moving analysis by Dierdre Gilfedder of the autobiographical narratives of the Aboriginal children of the ‘Stolen Generation’ to the insightful discussion by Françoise Lionnet of the life of Shyne Pillay in Mauritian novelist Lyndsay Collen’s *There is a Tide*, and Celeste Schenk’s readings of Arundhati Roy’s *God of Small Things* and Jane Tagaki-Little’s *My Year of Meat*, we see that culture and the depiction of development in literature are reflective of the social realities of particular contexts. This book as a whole, and this section in particular, offers a clear argument for the necessity of a new paradigm for feminist development studies – termed ‘women, culture, and development’ (WCD) in recent scholarly contributions (see Chua, Bhavnani and Foran,

2000; Bhavnani, Foran, and Kurian, 2003).

The final short story by Nigerian writer Chinyere Grace Okafor, 'Beyond Child Abuse', 'surveys with grim contempt a number of development tactics and theories ... [such as] the imposition of structural adjustment programmes, the targeting of specific scourges (FGM, child abuse) by eradicators from outside the local culture, token appointments – even certain feminist discourses such as those that exclude men from a community of resisters' (p. 257). Certainly this last story has a particular relevance for institutional feminist practices in the west, including New Zealand, where men are often excluded from participating in the creation of a more socially just and equitable world. As Sandra Harding has commented elsewhere, 'I find it paradoxical – and frankly, suspicious – that most of the European American feminists I know ... appear to overestimate their own ability to engage in antiracist thought but to underestimate men's ability to engage in feminist thought' (1993, p. 147). Okafor's vision of women and men collaborating to challenge oppressive practices and institutions gives us hope; it is a vision that is in tune with the politics of many feminists – Third World and other – for whom the process of creating a better society must necessarily include men.

If the focus of Perry and Schenk is on culture, then Roy's is more overtly on politics. Her essays are witty, often insightful, and provocative. Roy writes with a passion on issues many of us care deeply about and she offers a point of view as critical of the west as it is of the Indian state. Yet, despite this, I have some reservations about these essays. In the too easy condemnation of the excesses of the Indian state, in the insistence on painting the institution of the Supreme Court solely in terms of particular judgments or actions she disagreed with, there seems to be a Manichean worldview of absolute rights and wrongs that leaves me troubled. It is certainly the case that there is much that is wrong with the state and its institutions in India (as with any other state). But a more complex analysis would be able to take better account of a state that has remained resolutely democratic when almost no other formerly colonised country has succeeded. It would recognise that there is a difference between the institution of the Supreme Court and the specific judgments that one may disagree with. Reading Roy's essays, no one would guess that the Supreme Court has been pivotal to sustaining the democratic institutions of India over the last fifty-five years (*cf.* Baar, 1990). A more complex analysis would have softened

the sometimes strident edge of the critique of the state and made for more persuasive reading.

In a similar vein, Shiva's *Water Wars*, while an easy read, lacks the rigor that one would expect of good scholarship. The book is an ode to local self-governance, a celebration of traditional systems and practices around water that allowed ingenious, sustainable water conservation and distribution even in drought-prone areas of the world. There are numerous examples, primarily from India, but also a few from other parts of the world, illustrating how communities everywhere historically treated water as a commons, creating institutional rules and structures that put controls over access to and use of water. Yet, there are the occasional sweeping generalisations that left me wanting a more grounded analysis. For instance, in lauding the traditional water conservation practices from India, Shiva fails in any way to recognise that not all these traditions are necessarily good or empowering. Indeed, her discussion of the role of Harijans, the most oppressed caste in the Indian caste hierarchy, as *nirkattis* or water managers, would leave us thinking that we are dealing with an equitable society where there was no institutionalised discrimination against the lower castes. Equally frustrating is the fact that despite her commitment to diversity and democracy, the spiritual traditions she tends to draw on in the Indian context, especially in the last chapter of her book, are overwhelmingly Hindu. India's extraordinary cultural and religious diversity over the last several millennia manifests in practices of many religions – Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity and animism to name but a few – that have contributed to Indian cultural traditions in ways we do not really hear about here.

Ultimately, with Roy's and Shiva's works, I am left wishing for a more nuanced analysis of some of the vital issues that they touch on – something that goes beyond mere adulation of the traditional and condemnation of the evils of globalisation. Yet, they, as much as Perry and Schenk's work, are valuable because they make us think more seriously about culture, development and women.

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Note

- ¹ <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=13039&Cr=tsunami&Cr1=>