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Reclaiming the Food Commons: A Critical Analysis of *Who Really Feeds the World?* by Vandana Shiva

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Abstract: *Who Really Feeds the World?* by Vandana Shiva serves as a radical manifesto challenging the dominant narrative that industrial agribusiness and biotechnology are the only solutions to global hunger. Drawing on thirty years of research and activism, Shiva argues that the globalized, chemical-intensive food system is actually responsible for seventy five per cent of ecological destruction and the majority of food-related illnesses. This paper examines Shiva's central thesis that small-scale farmers, particularly women, are the true providers of global nutrition, producing eighty per cent of the world's food using only twenty five per cent of the land. Through an analysis of her concepts of seed sovereignty, the Law of Return, and agroecology, this paper explores her critique of biopiracy and the new enclosures of fake food and digital agriculture. Finally, the paper addresses academic evaluations of Shiva's work, noting both its power as a mobilization tool and critiques regarding her categorical rejection of modern biotechnology.

Keywords: Agroecology, Seed sovereignty, Agribusiness, Food democracy, Biopiracy

I. INTRODUCTION

Non-fiction is a type of writing that is based on facts and presents actual information and events. It is written to inform, educate, or persuade the reader, not just to entertain. Memoirs, biographies, essays, and journalism are among the many writing styles and genres that fall under nonfiction. Nonfiction is usually held to a higher standard than fiction. Nonfiction writing typically involves conducting research to ensure that the information presented is accurate and credible.

Vandana Shiva is an Indian scholar, environmental activist, advocate for food sovereignty, ecofeminist, and author of books on globalisation. She has written over twenty books. She is known as the 'Gandhi of Grains' due to her activism in the anti-GMO movement. Tamil Canal founded genetically modified organisms in response to the failure of California's Proposition 37 ballot initiative, which required labelling of GMO-containing products. Vandana Shiva established the Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Natural Resource Policy (RFSTN), an organization dedicated to developing sustainable agricultural methods, in 1982.

Shiva is a member of several Indian government organic farming committees. Vandana Shiva established Navadanya in 1987. Navadanya is an Indian non-governmental organisation that promotes biodiversity conservation, organic farming, farmer rights, and seed saving. She campaigned for biodiversity, intellectual property rights, and genetic engineering. When she founded Navdanya in 1987, she described it as a movement for biodiversity conservation and organic agriculture. *Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of Food Supply* is one of Vandana Shiva's major works, as is *Who Really Feeds the World? Agribusiness Failures: The Promise of Agroecology, Soil, Not Oil, and Earth Democracy*.

Vandana Shiva is also a leader and board member of the International Forum on Globalisation, as well as an activist in the anti-globalization movement.

This paper examines the ecological perspective presented in the book *Who Really Feeds the World? The Failures of Agribusiness and the Promise of Agroecology*. It is a powerful manifesto calling for agricultural justice and genuine sustainability, drawing upon Shiva's thirty years of research and accomplishments in the field. Rather than depending on genetic engineering and large-scale monocropping to solve the world's food crisis, it is all about exploring issues of diversity, the needs of small farmers and the importance of seed saving.

II. THEORY

Ecocriticism is defined as the study of literature's relationship with the natural environment, a concept that emerged in the mid-1990s. William Rueckert coined the term "eco-criticism" in 1978, referring to the integration of ecological concepts in literary analysis. The field, also known as "green criticism," reflects on how literature portrays human and nature interactions and the inception of environmental issues into discourse. Cheryll Glotfelty, in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, articulates eco-criticism as that evaluation of literature through an environmental lens. This interdisciplinary approach allows scholars to explore texts highlighting ecological concerns, such as deforestation and pollution.

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Cheryll Glotfelty, in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, articulates eco-criticism as that evaluation of literature through an environmental lens. This interdisciplinary approach allows scholars to explore texts highlighting ecological concerns, such as deforestation and pollution. Environmentalism gained traction in the latter half of the 20th century due to escalating ecological crises. Eco-criticism encompasses various theories, including ecofeminism and political ecology, and encourages inquiry into nature's representation and the dynamics between humans and other organisms within literary works.

Social ecology is introduced as a framework that examines the connections between human society and nature, advocating for solutions to the environmental crisis through a deeper understanding of these relationships. It critiques societal hierarchies contributing to ecological degradation and proposes a transformative approach towards creating sustainable societies. Central to social ecology is the idea of ecological communities, emphasizing a harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, and the need for both environmental protection and social justice.

Murray Bookchin, an American political philosopher, author, historian, and social theorist, developed the concept of social ecology. Bookchin pioneered and redefined social ecology and urban planning theory within anarchist, socialist, and ecological perspectives. Social ecology is an ecological philosophy that sees environmental problems as the result of social issues like capitalism, hierarchical power structures, and social inequality. Bookchin argued that human dominance over nature stems from hierarchical social relationships, and that the solution to ecological problems must include the establishment of a more democratic and egalitarian society.

III. THE CONFLICT OF TWO PARADIGMS

Vandana Shiva, a physicist turned environmental activist, presents *Who Really Feeds the World?* as a reckoning with a global food system she views as being at war with the Earth. Her intellectual journey from quantum theory to ecological activism was catalyzed by the Chipko movement and the 1984 disasters in Punjab and Bhopal, which exposed the violent underpinnings of the Green Revolution. In this work, Shiva contrasts two distinct paths for the future of food: one defined by corporate domination, chemicals, and fake food, and another defined by Earth Democracy, biodiversity, and local sovereignty. She asserts that the feeding of humanity is not merely a technical problem but a question of knowledge systems, pitting a reductionist, mechanistic paradigm against a living, self-renewing one.

In terms of *Who Really Feeds the World*, traditional agriculture and organic farming have their roots in several strands of knowledge, which are collectively recognised as the emerging knowledge paradigm of agroecology. The debate over who truly feeds the world is, first and foremost, about which knowledge paradigm provides the best guarantee for long-term food supply. Industrial cultivation contributes significantly to climate change.

Agroecology is a farming system that is based on ecological principles such as biodiversity, soil health and local knowledge. Shiva's argument is based on social ecology theory because it recognises that humans are a part of nature and that our actions have consequences for the environment and society. She argues that the problems with agribusiness are not just technical but also social and political and that a more sustainable and equitable food system requires a shift in our values and priorities. "Food is life, and it is created through living process that sustain life" (Shiva, 2016, p. 20).

Shiva's book provides a social ecology perspective on the global food system and offers a critique of the dominant agribusiness model. She argues that a more sustainable and equitable food system is possible through agroecology and a deeper understanding of the relationship between humans and the natural world.

A soil teeming with healthy life in the shape of abundant microflora will bear healthy plants, and these, when consumed by animals and man, will confer health on animals and man. But an infertile soil, that is one lacking sufficient microbial, fungus, and other life, will pass on some form of deficiency to the plant, and such plant, in turn, will pass on some form of deficiency to animals and man. (Shiva, 2016, p. 36)

IV. THE FAILURES OF THE AGRIBUSINESS MODEL

A primary objective of Shiva's book is to debunk the myth that industrial agriculture is necessary to feed a growing population. She provides a scathing critique of the Green Revolution, arguing that while it was hailed for increasing yields, its true legacy is environmental degradation and social displacement.

Shiva notes that agribusiness consumes seventy five per cent of the world's resources, including soil, water, and biodiversity, yet produces less than thirty per cent of the food consumed by humans. Furthermore, forty per cent of current climate devastation is directly attributable to globalized industrial agriculture. The reliance on synthetic fertilizers and pesticides has not only poisoned ecosystems but has created a shadow economy of health costs, including rising rates of cancer, autism, and diabetes. In India, the chemical impacts were so severe that a cancer train was established to transport affected farmers from Punjab for treatment.

The energy math of agribusiness is a central point of Shiva's critique. She cites data showing that "agribusiness requires 10 units of energy to produce just 1 unit of food energy. In contrast, agroecological systems produce 10 units of food for every 1 unit of input" (Wild beim Wild, 2021). This 100-fold difference in energy efficiency calls into question the economic viability of the industrial model, which Shiva argues survives only through externalizing its massive environmental and social costs.

Shiva views the modern food system as a continuation of colonialism, where the Empire of Cotton has been replaced by the Empire of the Poison Cartel. Corporations like Monsanto (now Bayer) seek to enclose the commons of seed and knowledge through patents and intellectual property rights (IPRs). Shiva describes this as biopiracy, the process of patenting indigenous knowledge and the genetic material of life itself, which she considers an ultimate arrogance.

V. THE PROMISE OF AGROECOLOGY AND SEED SOVEREIGNTY

Against the industrial paradigm, Shiva proposes agroecology—an applied science that uses natural materials and management methods to bolster ecosystems rather than poisoning them. For Shiva, the seed is the foundation of our being and the first link in the food chain. She advocates for Seed Satyagraha (civil disobedience), asserting that farmers have an inherent right to save, breed, and exchange seeds freely. Her organization, Navdanya, has "established over 125 community seed banks across India, saving more than 4,000 rice varieties and promoting forgotten crops like millets and pulses that are more resilient to climate change" (Navdanya International).

Sustainable agriculture, according to Shiva, must follow the Law of Return, the principle of constantly giving back to the Earth. This involves maintaining nutrient and water cycles, creating a circular economy where organic matter is returned to the soil. Shiva points out that returning organic matter to the soil can increase its nitrogen and organic content by hundred per cent in twenty years, offering a comprehensive solution to climate havoc.

The book highlights the 80/20 rule: despite a century of assault by industrial methods, "80% of the food people eat today still comes from small, biologically diverse farms using only 25% of the land" (Wild beim Wild, 2021). Shiva argues that if all farming transitioned to organic, biodiversity-based systems, people could feed twice India's population while significantly reducing the acreage needed for agriculture.

VI. ECOFEMINISM: WOMEN AS CUSTODIANS OF LIFE

A distinctive element of Shiva's work is her ecofeminist perspective, which identifies women as the primary custodians of biodiversity and food production in traditional societies. Shiva argues that while women's roles in agriculture have been critical for community survival, they remain invisible in dominant development paradigms. Women possess unique knowledge of seed selection and the agroecological connected web of food and life. Shiva asserts that when women control the food system, everyone gets their fair share to eat, as women prioritize nourishment and community well-being over corporate profits.

VII. MODERN THREATS: DIGITAL AGRICULTURE AND FAKE FOOD

In recent years, and reflected in her addresses related to the book's themes, Shiva has identified new forms of corporate enclosure facilitated by Silicon Valley and big data. She warns that Big Data is the new oil, used to mine information from farmers to create farming without farmers through surveillance and robotics. Shiva critiques the move toward genomic reading, where corporations seek patents on life forms by simply mapping DNA sequences, a process she likens to mapping empty land under the colonial doctrine of terra nullius. Shiva is highly critical of the trend toward lab-grown meats and plant-based substitutes (e.g., the Impossible Burger), which she labels fake food. She argues these products rely on the same raw monocultures that destroy biodiversity and are designed to prevent organic farmers from becoming a mainstream alternative.

Who Really Feeds the World? The Failures of Agribusiness and the Promise of Agroecology, is a holistic approach to agriculture that emphasises ecological sustainability, social equity and food sovereignty. Agroecology can provide a viable alternative to the agribusiness model and help address issues such as climate change, hunger and poverty. In today's world, it is essential to preserving biodiversity and promoting food security, and it is threatened by the dominance of multinational corporations that control the seed market. Women farmers are often marginalised and face systematic discrimination and empowering women in agriculture is essential to achieving food sovereignty and ending social injustice. Shiva's book makes a compelling case for the need to shift away from the agribusiness model and towards a more sustainable and equitable approach to food production based on agroecology and food sovereignty.

For better soil quality, organic farming practises help to maintain and improve soil quality by promoting the growth of beneficial microorganisms, increasing soil organic matter, and reducing erosion. Organic farming reduces environmental impact, minimises the use of synthetic chemicals, which can be harmful to the environment and pollute water sources. This makes organic farming a more ecologically friendly and sustainable choice. Healthier food, organic food is grown without the use of synthetic chemicals or GMOs, which means that it is less likely to contain harmful residues or allergens. Organic food is also often richer in nutrients than conventionally grown food. Organic farms typically have higher levels of biodiversity, including a greater variety of plants and animals. Organic farming typically organic farming practises promotes natural ecosystems and habitats.

Genetic engineering, also known as genetic modification or biotechnology, is a technique used in agriculture to modify the genetic makeup of plants or animals. This is done by transferring genes from one organism to another, often from a different species, in order to introduce new traits or characteristics. Genetic engineering can be used to develop plants that are more resistant to pests, diseases, environmental diseases and environmental stresses, which can help increase crop yields and improve food security. It can also be used to increase the nutritional content of crops, such as by introducing genes that increase the levels of vitamins or minerals.

Chemical fertilisers have been widely used in agriculture since the 1950s and they have had negative consequences for the environment and human health. Chemical fertilisers contribute to soil degradation and erosion, reduce soil fertility over time and pollute water sources. In addition, chemical fertilisers are derived from fossil fuels, which are a finite resource and a major contributor to climate change. Shiva argues that living soil, on the other hand, is a sustainable solution to the world's food needs.

Living soil is able to retain water more effectively, reduce soil erosion and support biodiversity. When soil is alive with microorganisms, it is able to break down organic matter and release nutrients in a way that is accessible to plants. This leads to healthier crops and higher yields over time. In order to promote the use of living soil, Shiva advocates for organic farming practises, which prioritise soil health and biodiversity over short-term gains. Shiva also advocates for the preservation of seed diversity, which allows farmers to select seeds that are adapted to local soils and weather conditions. By preserving seed

diversity and promoting organic farming practises, people can build a sustainable food system that is able to feed the world's population while protecting the environment and human health.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Vandana Shiva remains a vital Gandhi of Grain in the global pursuit of justice. *Who Really Feeds the World?* is a call to return to the Earth as healers and to reclaim the commons of seed, water, and knowledge. Her vision of Earth Democracy provides a decentralized, environmentally sustainable alternative to corporate globalization, rooted in the rights of local communities. Ultimately, Shiva's work serves as a permanent Satyagraha, a force of truth, reminding people that seeds are not mere objects; they are the embodiment of life, and that by controlling the seeds, people reclaim their freedom.

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