Women Seeking Environmental Justice

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ABSTRACT

This essay first critiques the lack of discussion on gender issues in the enviromental justice movement in the 1990s, and the danger of ignoring those issues. It then focuses on women's roles in the environmental justice movement as presented in three novels by Mahasweta Devi, Buchi Emetheta, and J. M. Coetzee. It concludes by discussing the importance for a post-colonial country to recover and cultivate a national culture that respects its land's carrying capacity.

KEY WORDS

post-colonial ecology
environmental justice
Buchi Emetheta
gender
Mahasweta Devi
J. M. Coetzee

The environmental justice movement advocates the pursuit of equal access to natural resources and equal protection regarding environmental regulations. It seeks to dismantle ideologies that form policies which discriminate based on race, ethnicity or social status. As much as the concept of environmental justice has helped people to see the links between environmental problems, racism, and social injustice, the issue of gender has not been the focus. In the Principles of Environmental Justice adopted at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991, for instance, gender is not mentioned. Executive Order 12898, signed by former President Clinton in 1994, which initiated and demanded federal actions to address environmental justice, did not mention gender. The results of the study by the Committee on Environmental Justice formed by this Executive Order have very little to say about effects of environmental injustice on women.[1] Ironically, many earlier grass-roots environmental justice groups were led largely, if not entirely, by women, such as Lois Gibbs' involvement in the struggle against toxics dumped in Love Canal, the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, and the Chipko Movement in India.[2] Failure to address the gender issue in such a culturally and socially transforming movement suggests the danger of neglecting the main cause of the unbalance that led us to the world today—the patriarchal ideology that depends on the domination of women and nature.

Christopher Boerner and Thomas Lambert Wave published an essay in *The Public Interest* at the end of 1995 affirming that "[e]liminating 'environmental racism' has fast become one of the premier civil rights and environmental issues of the 1990s" (61).

Environmental justice *is* a public issue because it involves democracy. A democratic and just society cannot separate itself from the living standards that a healthy and balanced ecosystem demands. The European-American, industrial, and capitalist patriarchal mindset defines nature, the living environment of all beings, as external to social constructions such as culture. The goal of environmental justice, therefore, aims to change consciousness or shift paradigms from the exclusive colonial ideology to an inclusive ecological feminist one. Julie Sze suggests that environmental justice is not only "a political movement concerned with public policy issues of environmental racism," it is also "a cultural movement interested in issues of ideology and representation" (163). To achieve environmental justice, therefore, will require society to incorporate ecological issues into a larger social and ideological reconstruction, to consider alternative forms of economic development that will maintain the balance of the natural environment, and to respect the cultural and biological diversities intrinsic to both the human and nonhuman dimensions of the world. The flourishing field of ecofeminism in the past decade, advanced by such scholars and environmentalists as Carolyn Merchant and Ynestra King, has made evident the connection between the twin oppressions of women and nature. Indian ecologist and activist Vandana Shiva, in *Staying Alive*, examines the exploitation of women and the environment at the global level, establishing the links between the oppression of women, ecological crises, colonialism, and neo-colonialism. Ecofeminism has thus re-directed mainstream ecocriticism to investigate ecological issues from a feminist perspective.

The harmful effects of colonization on the world's indigenous peoples are the disruption of life styles, destruction of cultures, subjugation or extermination of entire peoples, and, underlying all of these, the devastation of the land due to capitalist extraction and plantation exploitation. Although colonialism has seemingly ended, cultural and economic imperialism, practiced mainly by the U.S., has continued the work left behind by colonialism in the name of development. With the dismantling of European colonial empires, for

the past half-century, the world has entered what Wolfgang Sachs calls "the age of development." Sachs and other historians attribute the origin of the negative concept of "underdevelopment" to President Truman's inauguration speech in 1949. In this speech, Truman called for embarking on "a bold new program for making the benefits" of the scientific advances and industrial progress of the U.S. "available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas" (6). Shiva sees this kind of "development" as "maldevelopment," which has led to "the death of the feminine principle" since it has been a project of Western patriarchal origins. Development is a "post-colonial project," an imposed choice that provides a model of progress "in which the entire world remade itself on the model of the colonizing modern west" (1). The deeper purpose of helping other countries develop the material living standards of the U.S., or the North in general, is to constitute economic dependence, subordination, and discrimination. It alters the mode of production from one that originally accorded with its natural environment, to an economic system that heavily relies on outsiders. Ynestra King remarks that the homogenizing of cultures of the South by the standards generated by those in the North has turned the world into "a giant factory" in "the name of helping people." As imperial countries have assumed the position of ruling with armed forces and violence, today's industrial countries of the North "export models of development that assume that the [capitalist, industrial] way of life is the best way of life for everyone" (77).

The change in the modes of production since colonial times has greatly impacted women's position in relation to the environment. Annabel Rodda states that when the environment suffers, women suffer first and foremost because in most of the Third World countries women are the land tillers and food bringers. Their lives are closely based on the health of the land. Gayatri Spivak echoes Rodda by stating that "for reasons of collusion between pre-existing structures of patriarchy and trans-national capitalism, it is the urban sub-proletarian female who is the paradigmatic subject of the current configuration of the International Division of Labor" (219). In this essay, I want to focus on how women act as their own agents in seeking environmental and

political justice in the contemporary works of three authors from two continents: Indian Mahasweta Devi, Nigerian Buchi Emecheta, and South African J. M. Coetzee. I will focus on women's position in the neo-colonial exploitation of the South which, since the age of European imperialism, has been facing a world market system that allows the rich North to exploit its people and to mine its raw materials. I will also discuss the concept of identity, and the reality of nationality in relation to a land's natural resources, because the post-colonial dilemma seems to address directly the problems of a nation's cultural and economic independence.

Mahasweta Devi's "The Hunt" from *Imaginary Maps*[3]

Ever since the fifteenth century, India had been under the sovereignty of European imperialism, especially that of the British, until 1947 when it achieved its political independence. The expansion of British imperialism during the nineteenth century exploited the land of India for many purposes, such as Britain's great need of timber to build its naval transport. As Shiva points out, "When the British colonized India, they first colonized her forests" and turned this primary life source of Indian people into a timber mine for British military purposes (61). The British Empire manipulated the peninsula of India into an "inexhaustible" source for the Empire, regardless of the fundamental needs of the Indian people who depended for their lives mostly on forest ecosystems. The Indian people's "subsistence economy" based on the forests was replaced by the commercial economy of British colonialism. The *sal* (giant trees) in central India were exhausted for the railroad system, which again served as an instrument for the Empire to further exploit the land and to "civilize" India—for Britain's interest and to India's detriment (53–61). Such a commercial economy was not terminated with the dissolution of the empire. India continues to provide raw materials for the North. Its landowners, since the time of colonization, have turned the forest into a mono-cultural plantation for cash crops.

"The Hunt," one of the three short stories in Devi's *Imaginative*

Maps, takes place in the village of Kuruda where the British planted the giant Sal for timber needs. The British, however, did not stay long enough until the Sal were ready for "felling." Knowing the price of the Sal, the landowner Banwari, now the newly arisen bourgeoisie, in cooperation with the city broker Tehsildar Singh, carries out the deforestation. Tree felling involves bulldozers and road construction, both of which require deployment of manpower. Not only are Oraon men called upon to participate in this process, women are also encouraged to step out of their homes to trim branches.

This new form of economy, which encourages the mode of production to depend on an outside force—companies and technology from the city—detaches villagers from the land by killing trees and leaving their traditional economic structures of hunting and farming behind. Once the trees are removed, soil erosion follows. The soil can no longer hold the water to provide adequate and self-sufficient life systems for the species, including human beings. The spring festival hunt practiced for centuries by the Oraons, however, has not been forgotten. With no trees to support the soil, the forest is soon emptied of life; thus, the spring festival hunt for the Oraons becomes a ritual without meaning: "Once there were animals in the forest, life was wild, the hunt game had meaning. Now the forest is empty, life wasted and drained, the hunt game meaningless" (12).

In Oraon culture, every twelve years women become the hunters. While the spring festival hunt no longer bears meaning for the men, the women give the festival another level of meaning: a hunt for justice and survival. Mary, the mixed daughter of an Oraon and an Australian, avenges the wrongs done to the villagers by killing the exploiter, Tehsildar. Trying to violate Mary's virginity, Tehsildar is labeled with the image of an animal, "the biggest beast," while Mary is metaphorically seen as "the flamboyant tree in motion" (15). With the hatchets that fell trees, Mary kills the biggest beast that brings destruction to the village. With the felling of the man-beast, the hunt brings festivity, and women dance and sing around the fire, pleading

Ooh Haramdeo our god

Let there be a Spring feast like this every year—
Let us hunt this way every year— (17)

After the hunt, Mary is rejuvenated through the taste of blood, not the blood of her virginity, but that of the beast, and is ready to consummate her promise to her tradition-bound Muslim fiancé, Jalim. A marriage is hinted, and "the spring festival fires are scattered in the distance" (17)—a fertility promised and spread across the region. Under neocolonial environmental destruction, men in the story are emasculated, while Mary, empowered by her hybridity, symbolizes a speaking subject that takes action and seeks justice with her own hand.

Buchi Emecheta's *The Rape of Shavi*

The destruction of nature and tribal land in the name of development, as presented in Devi's "The Hunt," is also portrayed by an author from another continent, the Nigerian Buchi Emecheta in *The Rape of Shavi*. Taking place in an imaginary country on the edge of the African Sahara in 1983, *The Rape of Shavi* charts the history of violation of a pastoral country.

The interaction of the people of Shavi with the "albino aliens" commences when the airplane of seven British people, who attempt to escape from a possible nuclear explosion in Europe, crash into their region. The British are received with generosity and kindness and treated as "members of the human race." Anoku, "the skull-headed priest," however, prophetically warns his people that the albino aliens "will take advantage of our kindness and laugh at us, because they cannot appreciate kindness. They think it is weakness" (38). All is well until one of the British, Ronje, misinterprets the kindness of the future Mother of Shavi, Ayoko, as flirtation and rapes her.

Ronje is the embodiment of British colonial ideology. Being forced to land on the African continent, Ronje, abhorring being turned

into a "white slave," maintains a colonial mindset that "'[w]hen a white man lands in a place like this, he is always superior. He makes the native his servant, not the other way round'" (87), and that "it had been the duty of Europeans to impose their culture on whoever they came in contact" (106). To Ronje, the act of rape means nothing other than an act of racial superiority because he does not understand or respect the high status women have in Shavi. In his mind, black women are objectified and are meant to do nothing but please the white master.

To the people of Shavi, the rape of the future Mother is tantamount to the rape of their country (104). Women of Shavi, however, do not remain silent in the face of such violation. Rather than accepting the rape and becoming victims, women revenge the rape by trapping Ronje in a net and leaving him in the desert for vultures. Ayoko's mother, Siegbo, is "transformed into a warrior" (98). The net and the vultures symbolize how Ronje is trapped, consumed, and destroyed by his own assumed superiority, which is not agreeable to the Shavians. Siegbo and the women's revenge illustrates the Shavian women's resistance against outside forces invading their culture. Siegbo believes that "[w]e must purify our land. This is our war" (99). Unwilling to objectify themselves into passive victims of colonial patriarchal power and domination, Shavian women, like Mary in "The Hunt," are subjects who resist, seek justice, and survive. Instead of being the victim, they reverse the colonial position by first creating their own discourse: "[y]ou have not been violated. The creature, Ronje, is an animal. . . . And we can't let an animal destroy you" (98). These women refuse an essentialist position; instead, they fashion a discourse that enables them to negotiate and define who they are.

As the women in Emecheta's novel take action in fighting against injustice, most men of the country remain passive. Unfortunately, the destruction of Shavi as a nation after the rape does not stop with the return of the British to England. The prince of Shavi, Asogba, the embodiment of a new generation, the national elite, beguiled by British technological advancement, leaves for England to see for himself the "beautiful life" there (139). Mistreated by the English for his visible ethnicity, Asogba returns with bitterness, jeeps, guns, and the colonial

ideology to expand his territory. Cooperating with the British greed for diamonds found in Shavi, Asogba trades the natural resource of his country for technology. Tired of the long drought season, Asogba abandons the traditional way of cattle grazing and chooses to follow the British path of invading other tribal lands. Blinded by the taste of power with the aid of technology, Asogba, internally colonized by British imperialist ideology, re-enacts the colonial war on the African continent and his own people.

As Joni Seager points out, what contributes to the environmental crisis is a culture of power and profit that institutionalizes bureaucratic arrangements which create and maintain conditions of environmental destruction. The primary agents of the environmental agenda, Seager reminds us, are governments, militaries, and multinational institutions that are run by male elites, who, at war or at peace, exercise military operations and create toxic military bases. Asogba's new policy of war and robbery brings more destruction to his country and Africa than the rape of Ayoko. While Asogba exploits the diamond mines in exchange for guns and gas, agriculture and culture grazing are completely abandoned. With their own prince as the cause of their downfall, Shavians have no power and strategies to cope with possible genocide due to war and draught. The internal destructive force proves to be more devastating than the external invasion. The external invasion provokes resistance from the people as a whole; the internal colonization by imperialist ideology carried out by the national elite (the prince), however, leaves the people powerless. They are robbed of their own cultural values by their own people under the influence of neo-colonial ideology accompanied by technology.

Having contracted syphilis from Ronje, in another form of colonial invasion, Ayoko is symbolically infertile and passes on the disease to the new king, Asogba, who again gives it to his other wives and leaves the royal line childless. The new Shavi is succeeded by Asogba's half brother, Viyon, who recognizes the values in his own culture and its connection to the land. Viyon tells his people, "[w]e don't have to run away. We should go on living the way we used to live, surviving our droughts, cultivating our land" (178). As Homi K.

Bhabha explains, in order to rebuild independent national cultures, post-colonial countries should resist the temptation to treat their own cultures as a totality and to incorporate their own cultures into the Western category of civilization. Leaving Ayoko and Asogba infertile, Emecheta peoples Shavi anew, ridding the country of its colonial/neo-colonial legacy.

The mistake Asogba makes in *The Rape of Shavi* is that he refuses to listen to Ayoko's advice of treating his land with respect; instead, he turns their ecologically balanced land into a mono-cultural resource to exploit for capital, and thus brings environmental injustice upon his people. This transformation of nature into a resource deprives people of the right to "nature as a source of sustenance" and changes the "earth-centered economies" to "market-centered economies" (Shiva 215). Even though Shavian women seek justice for the land and the country, their effort is eventually undermined by the new mode of production. In order for a national culture to be built and sustained for the needs of people as an evolving entity, as Amilcar Cabral points out, its material base needs to plunge its roots into the physical reality of the environment—that is, into Nature, the land. A nation's cultural, political, economic and ideological independence requires that its mode of production to be in accordance with its natural environment, so that the nation will not need to depend on outside forces for material needs.

J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting For the Barbarians*

J. M. Coetzee in *Waiting for the Barbarians* begins with the visitation of Colonel Joll, who comes to the South African frontier to settle a possible uprising of "barbarians." He visits the county Magistrate who is "in the service of the Empire, serving out his days on this lazy frontier, waiting to retire" (8). Life, however, does not turn out the way the Magistrate imagines it would. The empire is waiting for the barbarians, a suspense that justifies the intrusion of the imperial army into the peaceful frontier, which is the empire's way of materializing land rights. Being a servant of the empire, the Magistrate has no choice but to assist Colonel Joll's investigation, until later when the

Magistrate's life is intertwined with a blind barbarian girl. The blind girl is never named in order to symbolically critique the inhumane nature of colonial occupation in which the individual identity of the colonized bears no significance to the ruling class.

The girl's relationship with the Magistrate, however central to the novel, is not clearly defined. Out of a tender corner of his heart, the Magistrate takes in the girl because of her physical mutilation. For the Magistrate, the girl's mutilated body becomes a constant reminder of the cruelty imposed by the colonial power. Although the Magistrate has political power over the girl, he is frustrated by his "confused and futile gestures of expiation" (135) and is not able to fulfill sexual intercourse with her. Bewildered by his "impotent yearning" (43), the Magistrate is even more puzzled by the girl's seemingly subservient spirit. As he insistently probes the girl with questions, the Magistrate "attempts to untangle his ambivalent feelings about her and the barbarian culture she represents" (Penner 36). Their communication, however, appears to be more a monologue than a dialogue because the reader is allowed to see the girl only through the colonial lens—the Magistrate's narrative and his imagination about her. Since the Magistrate (the colonizer) does not speak her (colonized) language, the attempted communication, however ardent, proves to be fruitless and leaves him even more frustrated.

Although being blind and never named, the girl's subjectivity remains strong and unwavering throughout the story. She, who can still see peripherally, resists the Magistrate's interrogation and curiosity with silence. Her seemingly acquiescent submission to what happens, while never degrading herself to the Magistrate's inquisition, sharply contrasts his doubting mind. She empowers herself by letting the Magistrate beg to take care of her and wash her. She *allows* the Magistrate to show the nurturing and caring side of the ruling class that the empire lacks.

Deciding to take the girl back to her community, the Magistrate has his troop travel across the desert to bring her home. As they progress closer to the girl's community, the Magistrate and the girl become more intimate: "In twelve days on the road we have grown

closer than in months of living in the same rooms" (70), and he begins to develop "comradely affection" towards her (73). By leaving his logistical territory where his authority is granted by the existence of the empire, the Magistrate is set free by the colonial boundary and is able to fulfill sexual intercourse with the girl. The Magistrate is finally aware of the existence of the desert land by physically stepping on it, and his sexual ability is symbolically rejuvenated by this connection with the desert which feeds his barbarian girl. He is finally capable of establishing a mutual relationship with the girl after he lies with her on the sandy ground that is her land: "five months of senseless hesitancy are wiped out and I am floating back into easy sensual oblivion" (63). Being further away from the empire's territory that crosses "the limits of the Empire" (70), the Magistrate sees the other side of his silent and acquiescent "concubine," who can joke freely with soldiers: "I am surprised by her fluency, her quickness, her self-possession. I even catch myself in a flush of *pride: she is not just the old man's slut, she is a witty, attractive young woman*!" (63; emphasis added). The girl in the Magistrate's perception is changed from a "slut" to "witty, attractive young woman." Although she is blind and considered a barbarian, she is never a helpless or powerless subaltern. Through knowing her and her land intimately and simultaneously, the Magistrate regains his humanity during his last days of serving the empire.

By being on the land with the barbarians who "are the people being pushed off the plains into the mountains by the spread of Empire," the Magistrate finds himself "on equal terms" with the northerners whom the empire regards as barbarians. He feels "shame" to step on their land because of his association with the empire and his ignorance about the people and their culture (72). The Magistrate, however, cannot easily cut off his connection with the empire that authorizes his existence as a person in authority. His position bears resemblance to Colonel Joll, of whose cruelty he does not approve. The resemblance between the Magistrate and Colonel Joll lies in their official obligation to the ruling class. As much as the Magistrate feels sympathetic towards the blind girl and the nomadic (barbarian) people, being the instrument of the empire to rule over the barbarians, he and

Colonel Joll are like two sides of the same coin. His strong resemblance to the Colonel horrifies him and leaves him wondering who actually are the barbarians. The term "barbarians" thus turns into a signifier. For the empire, the barbarians are the nomadic, desert-dwelling people who, in the empire's imagination and frontier rhetoric, plan to rebel. The barbarians justify domination and rationalize the empire's existence. In other words, without the barbarians, the empire has no reason to invade the frontier territory. To the Magistrate, the word "barbarian" is given a new definition: it is the cruel imperial way of domination and exploitation of people that is barbarous. Thus, the Magistrate questions himself as to what is more barbarous than raping the land of the people. Disappointed by the imperial, de-humanizing way of ruling the barbarians, the Magistrate wishes that "these barbarians would rise up and teach us a lesson, so that we would learn to respect them" (51). As a fine irony, he is taught to see by a blind girl. Shamed by participating in destroying that "paradise on earth," he "want[s] to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects." He does not wish to be part of the history of oppression. He therefore regards himself as incapable of writing the history for the people; instead, for the Magistrate, the people's "cries of rage and woe" should inscribe history (155).

Although the narrator constantly criticizes his own subject position in the history of the oppression of the barbarians, the novel does not end with absolute closure. Instead, the Magistrate wakes up to a snowy day when children are building a snowman outside. Disoriented by the scene he sees, he leaves it "feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere" (156). It implies that no absolute values can be assigned in an age of uncertainty when people have no control over their own land and are governed by an inhumane empire. The scarred body of the girl is the symbol of the land savaged by colonial domination. By nurturing the blind girl's body, the Magistrate finds the only certainty in the novel—his remaining humanity.

Conclusion

While the world's economy is dominated by multi-national corporations and globalization—the stepchildren of colonialism—which seek capitalistic profit by exploitation, environmental justice cannot be possible. Martin Khor explains that the "key aspect of the globalization and development relationship is inequity: in power, capacity and resources" (15). This inequity negatively impacts the countries of the South in their ability to determine the economic policies that are most conducive and feasible to their own land capacity and development. This inequity in power also maintains the continuing exploitation of natural resources and thus induces the capitalist production that overrides the land's carrying capacity, as we have seen in the stories portrayed by Devi and Emecheta.

Crucial to rebuilding one's culture and nation, therefore, is to the dismantling of the colonial ideology of exploitation embodied in the neo-colonial concept of development. Both Devi and Emecheta present the problems of post-coloniality in which the land suffers from Western standards of development. J. M. Coetzee critiques imperial domination over a foreign land through a colonial official's eye, who, ironically, sees the truth through a blind woman's peripheral vision. All these authors infuse hope for post-colonial countries and environmental justice by characterizing their female characters as speaking subjects who take on the responsibility of purifying their lands, resisting domination and invasion with their strength, and seeking justice in order to bring the environment back into balance. What seems crucial to rebuilding a nation after colonization lies in Emecheta's new king's realization that a culture should cultivate and respect its own land according to its carrying capacity because not until a national culture is rooted in its native land and when women and their caring attributes are respected and honored can the country call itself truly INDEPENDENT.

NOTES

[1] For instance, the study on cancer done by the Committee on Environmental Justice, neglects to report the cancer rate of women and does not identify the potential environmental health hazards that threaten women's health (*Toward Environmental Justice* 13–15).

[2] See *Dangerous Intersections*, edited by Jael Silliman and Ynestra King, and articles by Celene Krauss and Barbara Epstein in *Toxic Struggles*, edited by Richard Hofrichter, for more detailed accounts of women's involvement in grass-roots environmental movements.

[3] There are three stories in this book. For the purpose of this essay, I will only discuss the first story, "The Hunt." For an article-length discussion of *Imaginary Maps*, please see my article "Mahasweta Devi's *Imaginary Maps*: Colonial Legacy and Post-Colonial Ecology in India," *Phoebe: A Journal of Feminist Scholarship, Theory, and Aesthetics* 9.1 (May 1997): 11–20.

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