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Food and Feminism

by
Ellie Myers

Honorable Mention

2012 Joyce Durham Essay Contest in Women's and Gender Studies

Food and Feminism

Food production is a rarely thought about topic in industrialized countries like the U.S. There is an assumption that our food comes from big farms in the states, but in reality, “the poorest two-thirds of humanity feed the richest third” (Hamer, 28). This paper seeks to understand how this patriarchal relationship of American agribusiness and between lesser developed countries, specifically India, is affecting both the producers and consumers of these bioengineered crops. This will examine how food production is a feminist issue and how eco-feminism believes this problem can be remedied by local knowledge is the solution to the global food crisis.

Before the significant rise in food and fuel prices in 2007, “70% of the world’s hungry were women and girls,” (Kinoti, 1). When resources are low, such as food, boys and men typically have first priority and women and girls are more likely to be deprived of food (Kinoti, 1). In India the food crisis has resulted in a staggering amount of hungry people. Out of the whole population of India, $\frac{1}{4}$ of the people are hungry. Women and children, as anticipated have higher numbers and $\frac{1}{3}$ of the women and hungry and $\frac{1}{2}$ of the children are hungry as well (Shiva 9/14). During the Green Revolution in India, agribusiness was introduced and it was thought to have solutions to protect from future famine in India. Looking at today’s number, agribusiness doesn’t seem to be doing what is promised. Due to the loss of biodiversity, the virtual destruction of seed saving, and environmental consequences this paper will argue that genetically modified crops are not the solution to the global food crisis. It is crucial that we look to a women’s centered approach and keep eco-feminism in mind if we want a holistic, sustainable solution to this problem of exorbitant food prices that is plaguing the nation.

For a specific example of how agribusiness is affecting the global food market we will look to India and the Green Revolution. In 1965 a drought devastated India's crop and the U.S. came in with a tempting solution. The U.S. gave 8 million tons of maize and wheat to India to help it avoid the pending famine; however in return the U.S. subjected India to "direct marketing and trial of fertilizers, pesticide and high-yielding seed varieties" (Hamer, 28). This new biotechnology gripped the country and a little over a decade later represented, "70% of India's wheat crop, 35% of rice and 20% of millet and corn crops respectively" (Hamer, 29). This introduction of bioengineered crops spurred significant dependence and has led a staggering loss of biodiversity. About, "ten multinational corporations control about half of the global seed market. In 2004 Monsanto's biotech seed and or trait technology accounted for 88% of the total GM (genetically modified) crop worldwide (Mascarenhas & Busch, 130). These businesses were able to penetrate lesser developed countries economies through patent laws and trade agreements which allow for the patenting of seeds. In addition to seeds having intellectual property rights, agribusiness companies, like Monsanto, have farmers sign agreements that for their seeds farmers must turn in the seed in which they have saved. So in return for a farmer's diverse seed collection they get one seed type in return (Mascarenhas & Busch, 131). Suddenly farmers become dependent on agribusiness for seed and their livelihood.

In a UN meeting in Leipzig it was established that 75% of biodiversity loss is due industrial farming (Shiva, 9/14). Biodiversity loss is dangerous as it is associated with the loss of seed saving. Both biodiversity loss and dwindling of seed saving is a direct result from agribusiness and companies demanding diverse seed in return for a monoculture unsuited for local conditions and associated with a host of health problems.

Seed-saving is thought to have been as old as agriculture itself. Seed-saving has traditionally been seen by farmers as a, “universal right to save, replant, and exchange seed from their harvests. Replanting saved seed has allowed farmers to maintain local control over their farming practices (Mascarenhas & Busch, 122). The introduction of agribusiness has stripped farmers of their control and other forms of ‘insurance’ from personal saving. Seed-saving has benefits of farmers having the ability to predict their next season’s crop, it also protects them if a drought or pests were to come in and ruin a crop because they have the choice and ability to replant without having to repurchase seeds from agribusiness (Mascarenhas & Busch, 124). Seed saving is a skill, which is being lost rapidly. In order to save seeds farmers have to hand pick seeds based on their parents performance, they must clean them and store them so that will germinate in the next season, (Mascarenhas & Busch, 123). The loss of seed-saving is particularly problematic in the wake of agribusiness because it takes away farmer’s autonomy and their ability to be profitable.

Seed-saving has historically been important because it keeps the price of seeds relatively low. For example, “in 1994 a bushel of soybean seed cost \$12.21. However in 1997, one year after the introduction of Roundup Ready soybeans, the price jumped to \$17.40” (Mascarenhas & Busch, 132). Without farmers saving their own seeds, they are forced to give into the higher prices. This is significant because looking at the global food crisis, there are 1 billion people hungry world-wide, ironically 500 million of those hungry are producers of food, (Shiva, 9/14). Farmers are drowning under debt from seed, pesticide, and fertilizer costs that they have to sell every bit of their product in order to pay back debts. It is not uncommon for the debts to become too much. In India farm suicides are becoming increasingly prevalent. This is extremely

problematic for the wives when this happens because more women are becoming landless without any way to provide for their families (Shiva, 9/14).

Above details two very serious ways in which Agribusiness is affecting lesser developed countries which were subject to the Green Revolution. However; agribusiness is affecting the U.S. as well. Environmental destruction is a global concern and 40% of all green house gases emitted in the environment have been traced back to industrialized food production (Shiva, 9/14). Agribusiness has also been associated with significant water waste. “Seventy per cent of water abused is because of industrial farming” (Shiva, 9/14). There is also danger to the environment associated with the pesticides and fertilizers that farmers use on their crops. It is crucial that we look to women centered localized solutions if we are to combat the numerous problems associated with agribusiness

Keeping a feminist lens in mind and examining the affects of agribusiness on India’s society can be seen as the continuance of patriarchy and its priorities operating in the world. Patriarchy establishes dichotomies to keep certain traits valued over others. Certain dichotomies are essential for agribusiness and patriarchy to be maintained if they are to continue wielding power over others, such dichotomies are: advanced over primitive (Peterson & Runyan, 219), paid labor being valued over unpaid work, production favored of reproduction, and skilled work being valued over unskilled work (Peterson & Runyan, 190). Feminism is a tool in which one can examine these dichotomies and understand the power associated with these dichotomies and how they are currently perpetuating power of agribusiness over India. Looking to these dichotomies and the Western neoliberal capitalism’s role critically with a feminist lens can begin to lead to answers in solving this global food process.

The first critical question that feminism would ask of these dichotomies is why certain traits are valued and have power *over* others and what any of this has to do with capitalism. In all of the previously listed dichotomies one can see how they have been connected with gender and valued according to their capitalist producing ability. For example, the first, advanced over primitive, one can see that the word advanced is associated with technology, speed, efficiency, wealth, greater production which are masculine and more productive in a capitalist society in nature. On the other side we have primitive which is seen as slow, old, backwards, resulting in this words being weak and feminized and as faring poorly in a capitalist society. A feminist lens encourages one to look at these dichotomies and be curious as to why they exist and what the implications of the gender associations mean. In the case of agribusiness these masculine, neoliberal capitalist values have led to the disregarding of feminine solutions which are cast in a negative light and not seen as being productive in the traditional sense of a capitalist society.

A specific school of feminism, eco-feminism, has come in and challenged these dichotomies and has attempted to challenge the power of neoliberal capitalism and their agenda that production, paid labor, increased technology, and privatization is the answer to the global food crisis. It believes that, “The presence of sexism (as well as poverty and racism) enables social elites, corporations to maintain an appearance of progress and success while engaging in activities that are damaging not only to individual communities but to global ecological systems as well” (Norgaard & York, 510). Neoliberal capitalism has played a large hand in this and created an ideology that capitalism is desirable more importantly, inevitable in today’s global climate (Peterson & Runyan, 198).

Relating this to Western agribusiness’ relationship with India it seems to explain how this phenomenon continues to operate. Agribusiness is using sexism, poverty, and racism to continue

its power over Indian farmers. Agribusiness is using sexism in the sense that they do not recognize women as farmers which devalues their work, their knowledge of local farming, and their sustainable methods. Agribusiness exploits the poor by tempting them with a seed that is superior than all others which turns out to be costly not only to purchase, but is costly for the health of farmers and their local environment, as well as endangers the resources of the world. “Neoliberal capitalism favors accumulation of wealth (for some) over social reproduction and environmental sustainability for all (Peterson & Runyan, 198). Lastly racism is used by agribusiness because the Green Revolution took place in countries like India that were deemed “primitive” by the West. The global acceptance surrounding capitalism ensured that modernizing was seen as the only way to pull India away from the 1965 famine. Eco-feminism questions why capitalism is seen as the universal solution and, “ties both gender discrimination and environmental degradation to a common hierarchical social structure that simultaneously devalues both women and nature,” (Norgaard & York, 508). Agribusiness was able to employ these dichotomies to essentially feminize and devalue India. If India was seen as poor and primitive then neoliberal capitalism could pose a solution of bio-engineered seeds which with advanced technology would solve the problems of India’s food crisis. However eco-feminism begins to unveil to problems such as bio-diversity loss, creation of debt, and environmental devastation as discussed earlier as consequences specifically arising from the valuing of masculinity and neoliberal capitalism over feminine and traditional knowledge.

Looking to eco-feminism we can find a few solutions that would be helpful in ending the Indian food crisis such as valuing women’s skills and opinions. The global recognition of women as farmers is important because the global community needs reminding that agribusiness is the not majority producer and should not continue to wield so much power, but to give

autonomy back to the small farms and especially women's farms that make up 80% of today's food production (Shiva, 9/14). Recognition of women farmers will encourage the global community to listen to what they have to say about things such as seed-saving knowledge to promote bio-diversity, local farming conditions, and organic farming which avoids wasting water and the use of pesticides and harsh fertilizers.

Another path towards solving the food crisis is the inclusion of more women in power positions in both the West and India. In the U.S. women make up 17% of the Senate (Ginsberg, 441) and world-wide women make up about 19% of the members of parliament. (Dahlerup, 1). In the case of environmental degradation associated with agribusiness it is believed that women are more likely to "express support for environmental protection and that women consider a variety of environmental risks, from nuclear power to toxic substances to be more serious than do men, (Norgaard & York, 508). However there is much discussion over adding women and the belief that it alone can solve problems.

Even though eco-feminism seems to be a holistic approach to the global food-crisis the situation is complicated complicated and it is important to look at critiques of eco-feminism as a solution. Eco-feminism in general makes out women and the environment to be victims. This is problematic because it makes the rest of the world believe that they need to be "rescued" from their situation, which could be seen as how agribusiness came in to India in the first place, as "rescuing" India from their "primitive" way of life. Also, the first advice from eco-feminism is the recognition of women farmers. This hopefully contradicts the first critique and helps women farmers to be listened to and valued by the global community, rather than seeing them as a population which needs rescuing. However there is another critique of this advice because it advocates women being seen as a homogenous group and doesn't attend to women's differences

for those that are not farmers or have different, but just as valuable experiences. (Peterson & Runyan, 260). The last advice was that of adding more women to power holding positions in government. There are a few critiques of this; the first one just mentioned above, that adding women doesn't necessarily mean policy change. It also encourages this addition of women as the solution "rather than altering the institutional practices and underlying systems that continuously generate problems," (Peterson & Runyan, 260).

Overall I believe these critiques have merit; however you have to start somewhere and I find that eco-feminism is an important step in solving the global food crisis because of its attention to detail in world processes of the global food trade. I believe eco-feminism is correct in advocating more women in politics and positions of power even though "adding women and stirring" isn't the most ideal solution I believe it can foster more respect for women as well as respect for our environment. With greater respect for women I think we have a chance of changing how neoliberal capitalist dichotomies function in our society and feminine traits have a chance of holding the same esteem which masculine traits do today. Eco-feminism is not only about promoting women and protecting the environment, in the case of agribusiness it encourages us to see this food production in a new light. This is a business which is flourishing from sexist and racist ideals as well as costing our health, our water, our soil, and these are costs that our world can simply not afford. It is time we question what counts as knowledge, skill, production, and how ancient, local, organic solutions, may be the solutions we have been looking for all along.

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