

# Monoculture & Mono-woman: An Ecofeminist Critique

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## Abstract

**I explore and compare the consumerist view of women with the consumerist view of food, specifically seeds, in Western culture. Western propaganda conceptualizes women as domesticated and dominated and views nature in the same light. As a result of media manipulations, a monoculture and a *mono-woman* have arisen. Through the alteration of seeds, we have created a standard for fruits and vegetables sculpted around the ideal of perfection imposed by science and man. Similarly, the advertisement industry has shaped a new paradigm of women's beauty (*mono-woman*).**

This paper will explore beauty and the industrial ideal of women's beauty, which has been shaped by the advertisement industry, leading to an ideal of what I am calling the *mono-woman*. This *mono-woman* ideal is the result of consumerism. Women are now being exploited, transformed, and morphed into look-alike commodities in the projections of much of the advertising for beauty products; women's faces are being manipulated, wrinkles are being removed, and waists are being trimmed down to size 00 or smaller through Photoshop and other techniques. Advertising agencies are dismembering and artificializing women in order to sell specific goods, and, with this mentality, women become objects rather than humans. Similarly, through the alteration of seeds, we have created a standard for fruits and vegetables sculpted around the ideal of perfection imposed by science and man.

## Ecofeminist Viewpoint

Ecofeminism is the branch of feminist philosophy and activism that suggests that there are complex parallels between the ways women and other subjugated human groups are defined and treated and the ways

non-human nature is defined and treated (Ruether 13). Taking this direction from ecofeminism, I will parallel the rise of the *mono-woman* with the rise of the monoculture in food production that is taken over by global agribusiness corporations. In like manner, I will explore the consumerist view of women with the consumerist view of food, and specifically seeds, in Western culture. Our food sources have been genetically altered and turned into an industry, but we have been unable to see the potential and the real harms.

## Symbolic Meaning of the Terms Seed and Woman

According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, "[monoculture is] a culture dominated by a single element, a prevailing culture marked by homogeneity" (Merriam-Webster). To understand the terms *monoculture* and *mono-woman* and the connections between the exploitation of women and the exploitation and manipulation of food, we can begin by looking at the symbolism behind the concepts of *seed* and *woman*. Both terms represent fertility and continuance. *Mother* stems from the Latin word for mother,

*mater*, as does the English word *matter*, which is the most basic component of life. Matter connects all beings together. It is this link with nature that we must revere and respect. The seed is also a symbol for matter and fertility. A seed is the ultimate representation of creation and has much in common with the womb. It represents the beginning of life, the birth of fruit, grain, and vegetables. Vandana Shiva states, "In Sanskrit, *bija*, the seed, means the source of life" (Shiva 94). The terms *seed* and *woman* both stand for reproduction and sustainability.

### Media Manipulation of Women's Image

Through media and advertisements, women are being classified and designed to appear in certain ways very similar to the way food is meant to look: "perfect, predictable, and marketable." The concept of women is also being reshaped and morphed through daily advertisements and constant consumer propaganda. Women are shown in ads decapitated, dismembered, and oftentimes even appear to be dead. Jane Caputi writes in *The Pornography of Everyday Life*,

Numerous images [in the advertisement industry] support this kind of dehumanization by making it seem as if women are literal objects—vehicles, blow-up dolls furniture, collectibles, and so on. As objects women are denied autonomy and presented as perpetually accessible, something to toy with, something to possess, something to be consumed (Caputi 34).

Beauty is perceived through advertisements as white, thin, young, blonde, northern European, hairless, and tanned. New generations are constantly bombarded by an advertising industry that is totally profit oriented and promotes an impossible ideal woman. Believing this, women must spend untold amounts of money purchasing products to conform to this generic model. The ensuing distortion of the female body strips women of their natural beauty and hence their relationship to Mother Earth. Humans

are taught that beauty is only skin deep and that perfection can be achieved through consumer products. As a result of this manipulation, a monoculture and a mono-woman have arisen. Vandana Shiva states in *Ecofeminism*, "The marginalization of women and the destruction of biodiversity go hand in hand. Loss of diversity is the price paid in the patriarchal model of progress which pushes inexorably towards monoculture, uniformity and homogeneity" (Mies, Shiva 164).

### Differing Views of "Mother" and "Seed" Through Time and Across Cultures

While mother and seed were once viewed with respect and reverence, our contemporary culture is dramatically shifting the meaning behind these terms. In *The Good Mother*, Ellen Rose states, "whatever 'mother' means to a given culture will metaphorically infect the meanings it attaches to Mother Earth" (Rose 151). Western propaganda conceptualizes women as domesticated and dominated, and views nature in the same light. Rose states,

In Western civilization the association [with women and nature] has led to and in many instances justified men's exploration of both nature's and women's productive and reproductive capacities, since both women and nature are seen in patriarchal thought as 'other' than and inferior to men and culture (Rose 150).

We have been programmed to see nature and women as separate from men, and "understand power not as capacity or potential but as power over or domination" (Caputi 1).

### Conquest of Women and Food by Modern Media's Concept of Beauty

Women have been turned into objects of conquest, and, to reiterate, this pattern can be seen through mainstream advertisements in television, magazines, billboards, and even movies. The correlation between conquering the seed by altering it genetically and

conquering a woman by altering her physically and digitally in a monotonous ideal forms a striking parallel. Industry has distracted us from the beauty and nature of diversity and instead shifted our minds to focus on external beauties. Social psychologist Britain Scott states in *Babes and the Woods*, “The notion that feminine beauty is epitomized by an artificial and rigorously maintained appearance is, to some extent, a product of industrialization” (Scott 148).

The advertising industry, reflecting the ideals of this complex, has shaped our new paradigm of beauty, which, as Jean Kilbourne points out in her video *Killing us Softly*, is an image of beauty in which failure is inevitable. The images directed to women are impossible to uphold and, in response, women begin to separate from their bodies and blame them. According to Kilbourne’s video, we view over 3,000 advertisements per day, and our brains are constantly being bombarded by images of “perfection.” Scott states,

The culture’s feminine beauty ideal puts women in an antagonistic relationship with their natural bodies, and this is currently exacerbated by the fact that contemporary media images promoting the ideal are completely unrealistic (Scott 148).

This quote explains the contemporary monoculture’s beauty ideal and relates to Kilbourne’s message of beauty ads being unrealistic and impossible to attain.

### **Media’s Image of Beauty is Pervasive**

Advertisements are everywhere in our life; they influence us on emotional and psychological levels. They are not simply on television; they are on clothing, signs, even benches and sidewalks. It is important to take a critical look at the pervasive false and mono-cultural messages the advertisement industry is sending us and which have become integrated into our lives. The concept has been planted in our minds that beauty is a single look (mono-woman), that diversity is feared, and that beauty can only be attained through endless consumer products. We have sep-

arated ourselves from true beauty and decided that diversity is not a suitable basis for an aesthetic ideal. Yet, all life is sustained through diversity and change.

### **To Achieve Beauty We Disguise Our Natural Bodies and Natural Foods**

Our society has been completely brainwashed to believe that beauty should be our greatest goal in life. A potato with a bruise and dirt on it is thrown away. A woman who is aging is depicted as used up. Our fear of losing beauty through aging has been promoted by a constant onslaught of products that claim to slow down the aging process. We have separated ourselves from our natural bodies.

If we continue to separate from our bodies and alter them to conform to what we are told is perfect, we are only separating ourselves further from the earth and our connection to nature. Caputi states the paradox of our culture,

The cumulative cultural opprobrium causes us to hide, isolate, and repress those aspects of our being that are pejoratively understood as our ‘natural’ selves (Caputi 5).

We have been taught to hide and suppress our natural bodies, and therefore we have become detached from the true simplicity of beauty. The chemical and digital altering of beauty through botox, airbrushing, and photo-shopping can be paralleled to the production of aesthetically appealing, low-nutrient, high-output crops of the corporate agriculture industry.

Society also tends to reject natural foods in favor of artificial replacements that are easier and quicker to prepare, have a longer shelf life, and taste good because of their chemical flavorings. We are encouraged to seek artificial replacements rather than natural foods. This is how corporations thrive: by replacing sustainable and natural ideals with consumer-friendly and perishable but profitable items.

### **Patenting Seeds and The Ideal Woman**

The ideology of the mono-woman has led women

to disconnect with their bodies and the earth. The alienation of women's bodies with nature can be seen through ads, many of which place women under men so they appear both subordinate and animalistic. This need to conquer women comes parallel with patenting life. Patenting life is a process corporations are using to monopolize seeds and narrow the diversity of available seeds. This theory of patenting life stems from the ideology that if you can control the source of life, then you can control mass production. Green Consciousness theory (Ecofeminism) shows that the way a society defines and treats nature reflects the way a society will treat women. There is a striking correlation between the need to control and monopolize seeds and the need to alienate women from their bodies. Both forms of manipulation stem from the ego-driven and often male-identified or patriarchal need for power over others and power over nature.

Rose states, "Both women and nature are seen in patriarchal thought as 'other' than and inferior to men and culture" (Rose 150). This is the basis to justify man's exploitation of nature and women, since women are viewed as below men. This statement is also, one would imagine, corporations' justification for altering seeds. Since seeds are seen as "other" and separated from man, man feels the need to dominate and alter the seed through means of science. Through the alteration of seeds, we have created an ideal for fruits and vegetables that has been sculpted around the idea of perfection in appearance imposed by science and man. We have created a monoculture of the mind in which perfection is strived for, yet impossible to achieve.

Nature is not perfect. Its beauty lies in its imperfection and diversity. Delores Williams states,

Violation and exploration of the land and of women's bodies is, in part, caused by widespread human disrespect for the unity of nature's placements. This disrespect has led to the destruction of the natural process of nature (Williams 26).

The natural processes are also diverse and in a con-

stant process of flux or change. By creating an image of supposed perfection, stasis, we have separated ourselves, conceptually and materially, from our natural life source, the earth. This separation is ritually enacted with the artificialization of the female body.

### **Food as Basis for Life**

Our world has become a fast-paced global market for selling and trading goods, and with the rise of globalization, food quality in terms of diversity and nourishing capacities has declined. But so, too, has our spiritual understanding of food. Food was once regarded as a basic unit of life created from the ground, a gift of the Earth. Shiva illustrates the importance of food in the *Taitreya Upanishad* text,

"From food, all creatures are produced...all beings are born from food, when born they live on food, on being deceased they enter into food" (Shiva 164).

This ancient script illustrates the connection each organism shares with food and the seed of life. Seeds are the building block for all organisms; they perpetuate growth and diversity on our biosphere. Unfortunately, today seeds are being manipulated and designed in a lab to produce ideal-looking vegetables, stripped of their fertility and naturally occurring genetic variances.

### **Consumerist View of Food**

In *Earth Democracy* global environmental activist and theorist Dr. Vandana Shiva notes that in its basic meaning, "to consume means to destroy." Extrapolating from this, she and other environmentalist and ecofeminist theorists and activists show the ways that a consumerist view of food leads to destruction of the food source. The consumerist view of food furthered by global capitalism and agribusiness, according to Shiva, "has been an experiment with non-sustainable, chemical intensive, water intensive, and capital intensive industrial agriculture" (Shiva 152). Food is seen as a commodity, not a form of living energy or being. Companies such as Monsanto, who patent and commodify

seeds, now maintain historically unprecedented power over food production, and consequently have devalued the intrinsic beauty of creation. Shiva states,

Patents on life and the rhetoric of the ‘ownership society’ in which everything—water, biodiversity, cells, genes, animals, plants—is property express a worldview in which life forms have no intrinsic worth, no integrity, and no subjecthood (Shiva 3).

The ownership society refers to the capitalist, ego-centric, and money-dominated agricultural industry that has arisen due to major corporations owning seed rights. Shiva defines the capitalist view of nature as “raw material, and acts of domination, destruction, and exploration as acts of creation” (Shiva 138). The capitalist view of nature does not value land. It values monetary worth,

Everything is a commodity, everything is for sale, and the only value a thing has is the price it can bring to the global marketplace (Shiva 141).

In *The Manifesto On The Future Of Seeds*, Shiva and her co-author Claudia Martini define a monoculture as, “The erosion of diversity [that] has been propelled by the drive for homogenization” (Martini, Shiva 6). Homogenization leads to the destruction of the diversity of foods, and particularly of seeds. Homogenizing or monoculturing food, moreover, is directly related to globalization. Concomitantly Vandana Shiva contends, “Globalization is a project of capitalist patriarchy that has accelerated and deepened the violence against women” (Shiva 130).

In our monoculture, large corporations have replaced small family farms. Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO’s) and agribusinesses are diminishing the local food industry while polluting and damaging the delicate biosphere of the earth. It is not natural to have a tomato that is chemically forced to ripen using ethylene gas, a carrot that is perfectly cone shaped, or an apple glistening with wax, yet these

fruits and vegetables are a main part of our diet. The food industry has turned the beauty of eating into a profit machine, while losing sight of the importance of quality food. Food is essential for life; it binds humanity together. If we continue to detach ourselves from the farm and the art of growing and consuming food, we will lose sight of our health and our relationship with the rest of humanity.

### **Detached from the Earth**

The reason many individuals lack respect for the earth is because in our monoculture today they are completely detached from the beauty of raising food from the earth. Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh states, “because we are so distant from our Mother Earth, we become sick” (Hanh 106). We are becoming a numb society, attempting to survive off of government-subsidized junk food and genetically altered vegetables. We cannot survive with these subsidized foods. Our bodies will become sicker and our minds will become more polluted. As the movie *Food Inc.* points out, companies have placed an iron veil separating us from our food source, and because of this separation, we have lost sight of the true meaning of existing on this planet, which, I contend, is to connect with our Mother, the Earth. We cannot continue to remain ignorant about our food source, as Shiva states,

We are not living in a knowledge society if we don’t have the very basic choices that allow us to lead a human life, a life of dignity, [which] allows us to know how our food is produced [...] and what’s in our food (Shiva 38).

A distancing or alienation now marks the relationship of modern humans to our food source. Humans have become detached and further disconnected from the elemental or natural world we live in and from each other.

### **Conclusion: Closing Thoughts on Monoculture and Mono-woman**

In sum: Our biosphere thrives on diversity and individuality that is embodied in genetic uniqueness. If

this diversity is ruined and replaced by profit-driven monocultural products and ideals, it will only lead to our diminishment, if not extinction. Seeds should not be manipulated and transformed for the needs of corporate profits, and neither should women. We are at the tipping point. It is the “twelfth hour” and time for us to take a stand. We are at an age where “globalization is redefining the very status and understanding of creation” (Shiva 138). We must break the corporatization of life and begin to realize the beauty and prosperity of Mother Nature. As I have demonstrated in this paper, monoculture and mono-woman are viral ideas that have spread throughout the world due to consumerism and corporate propaganda. As members of this earth, we must respect biological diversity with women and with food. We must realize the innate nature of diversity and allow it to thrive in our environment rather than morphing it for our own aesthetic or economic desires. The biosphere of life requires diversity in order to survive. We cannot alter and control life and beauty without destroying the very things we try to possess. As beings on this earth, we must respect the intrinsic order of nature.

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