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Mythological projections and ecofeminist discourse: Revisiting Maria Mies's and Vandana Shiva's *Ecofeminism*

Zusammenfassung

Mythologische Projektionen im ökofeministischen Diskurs: Eine Neubetrachtung von Maria Mies' und Vandana Shivas *Ökofeminismus*

Der Natur werden durch Projektionen menschlicher Vorstellungskraft seit jeher menschenähnliche Züge und Eigenschaften zugeschrieben, eine Entwicklung, die als Evolution mythopoetischer Tradition bezeichnet werden kann. Als Element der Lebensführung wird die Natur in Mythen und Mythologie als heilig und als integraler Bestandteil der kosmischen Ordnung dargestellt. Naturgottheiten, Fruchtbarkeitsgöttinnen und Schutzgötter, die Schöpfung und Zerstörung symbolisieren, haben zu binären Strukturen geführt, die in mythischen Erzählungen verankert und über Generationen hinweg zur Norm erhoben wurden, kulturelle Traditionen prägen und die Unterdrückung von Frauen und Natur legitimieren. In Anlehnung an Maria Mies' und Vandana Shivas *Ökofeminismus* untersucht diese Studie die Verflechtung mythologischer Projektionen im ökofeministischen Diskurs und geht der Frage nach, inwiefern ein neues Verständnis von Mythen das ökologische Bewusstsein fördern kann. Wie werden Natur und Frauen durch Mythen unterdrückt? Wie halten und verändern sich Mythen im Laufe der Zeit? Welchen Stellenwert haben sie im gegenwärtigen ökofeministischen Diskurs und können sie die kapitalistische Vorherrschaft im Sinne einer ökofeministischen Emanzipation de(re)konstruieren?

Schlüsselwörter
Mythologie, Ökofeminismus, Natur, Gender, Binäre Strukturen

Summary

The interaction of nature and man's imaginative projections has culminated in nature being given manlike appearance and characteristics marking an evolution of mythopoeic tradition. As a fundamental life supporting tool, myths and mythology projected nature as sacred and integral to cosmic order while projections like nature deities, fertility goddesses, and guardian gods symbolizing creation and destruction have created binaries. Ingrained in mythical narratives, these have been are normalized over generations, shape cultural traditions and justify control of women and nature. Within this frame and drawing from Maria Mies's and Vandana Shiva's *Ecofeminism*, the study explores the intersection of mythological projection in ecofeminist discourse, examining how re-imagining myths can foster environmental consciousness and address questions: How do myths subjugate nature and women? How do they survive and/or change over time? What is the scope of mythological projection in the present state of ecofeminist discourse? Can myths de(re)construct present state capitalist domination and ecofeminist empowerment?

Keywords
mythology, ecofeminism, nature, gender, binaries

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1 The genesis

Before delving into the argument on the subject matter, I make an attempt to look at the world (read nature) with distinct curiosity particularly ignoring the answers that science has given to certain phenomena. The red sky dangerously scares, the drizzle pleases and seems to be a blessing, the hailstorm is considered a punishment, the muddy river a wrath. The more I ponder the more inquisitive I find myself wondering how early man, unlike me who has answers owing to centuries of development of scientific and philosophical thought, addressed the mysteries of nature. What did it mean to him when the sun set or when it became hot and unbearable at times and or gradually became warm and soothing? How did he perceive the changing shape of the moon? Why does a part of once a flowering and fruiting plant/tree suddenly wither? Was he fearful or curious about what happened around him? The questions are as numerous as the imaginative projections that give the world, its phenomena and elements a pattern, a shape and evolving answers to satiate man's curiosity and overcome his fear. Possibly, man has found solace over the centuries and has developed, established and followed the belief systems, ideologies and theories that only strengthened his position and control over the mysterious world.

2 Myths as imaginative projections

Imaginative projection is a complex psychological phenomenon that variedly influences each kind of relationship one may have. In our reference to early man and his encounters, it is the perception of the external world and the expression of the same. It inspired man to derive materials from his immediate world, give it a form of expression and assign a character to its existence. The mystery that surrounded the elements and the phenomena was untangled; the apprehensions were countered through speculation (Frankfort et al. 1946: 3) created by man's imaginative projections. As the perception found expression one could observe the development of the mythopoeic tradition that was realized through storytelling, singing, dance performances, practices and establishing a belief system, culture and tradition. Raymond van Over argues that myths are "an expansion of awareness into alternative realities" and "evocative signs leading towards a sense of wholeness, a fullness of being" (van Over 1980: 1). Carrying his argument further he writes that early man needed a resolution and answers to the questions that kept coming to his mind regarding the creation of the world. On the contrary, Claude Lévi-Strauss argues that "myth is unsuccessful in giving man more material power over the environment […] it gives man, very importantly, the illusion that he can understand the universe. It is of course, only an illusion" (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 17). We shall try to see how myth, unlike to what Lévi-Strauss argues, gives man material power (control) over the environment.

2.1 Myths as frameworks

Myths are more than stories, they are frameworks by which societies try to understand their environment and survival needs. They explain rituals and symbols that act as mediating forces, helping societies resolve these oppositions into meaningful cultural frameworks. Nature was given meaning through personal experience, investigation and empirical approach available and accessible to early man. So, myths were not meant to be mere imaginative or creative accounts, they were a pursuit of truth that man tried to find. The scientific pursuit that we most daringly argue for today has its foundations in the early history of mankind, which is largely mythical, upon which evidences are being sought, argued and contested. The evolution of mythology was made possible by early man's ability to reflect on cognitive processes – reasoning, decision-making, and problem-solving. This reflection allowed him to explain natural phenomena and create meaning, pointing to his meta-cognitive activity. Myths were a collective way of thinking and understanding the unknown. This meta-cognitive ability enabled early man to create culture, solve problems by reflecting on past experiences, and foster social cohesion through cultural and moral values.

2.2 Creation of binaries

Today, we have logical answers to questions regarding the elements of nature. But the same were an abyss for early man. The contradictions of day and night, life and death (sleep in between), were enigmatic, and answers to these were important to address anxieties and conflicts. The conflicting and paradoxical patterns of the external world posed a threat to man lest he gave them a meaning, even if they were an illusion that scientists were to term later. Considering Lévi-Strauss's idea of opposition driving towards a "natural mediation" one can understand that the human mind organizes experiences and meanings through binary oppositions (good versus evil, male versus female, life versus death). Though creating conflict in human thought and social structures, these opposites are not meant to remain in a state of pure conflict. Instead, they drive a process of mediation, where human cultures develop ways to bridge these oppositions and reconcile through symbolic systems like myths, rituals or language. Thus, myths evolve as natural mediating structures to resolve the tension between opposing concepts in a culture and work by taking binary opposites and finding symbolic ways to resolve them into a unified narrative. The opposition is omnipresent in every aspect of human engagement. In his analysis of culinary practices, Lévi-Strauss (1969) describes how the transformation of food (from raw to cooked) mediates the opposition between nature (raw, uncivilized) and culture (cooked, civilized), demonstrating how cooking becomes a cultural act that bridges natural and social realities. The concept of a "third term" or mediating element, which resolves the binary opposition that he introduced, creates a synthesis that unites opposites. For instance, in many cultural systems, human beings create categories like the trickster figure (e.g., *Coyote* in Native American mythology or *Hermes* in Greek mythology) which mediates between different realms or opposing forces, acting as a go-between and reconciling opposites like life and death, order and chaos, human and animal. This third term bridges the gap between two extremes, sym-

bolizing how oppositional forces drive toward a natural resolution/mediation. Thus, the conflicts as seen through binary opposition are not destructive but are rather driven towards natural resolution through stories, rituals, symbols or cultural practices creating coherence from opposition. One can argue that Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology presents oppositional binaries as fundamental structure of human thought, but these oppositions are not static; they drive the development of cultural and symbolic systems that naturally mediate or reconcile them.

2.3 Nature as the chaotic other

The system of binary placed man/nature in opposition (known, friendly versus unknown, hostile; powerless, as man having no power over natural phenomena, versus powerful, as nature having its own course). Since facets of nature posed danger to humans, myths from various cultures depict nature as wild, unpredictable and sometimes hostile. In Native American mythology, powerful spirits and creatures like the *Thunderbird* inhabit the natural world, requiring respect and appeasement. In Chinese mythology, stories such as *The Emperor Yu* and the *Flood* feature powerful dragons and other supernatural beings that control nature's forces. These beings are often depicted as unpredictable and capable of great destruction if not properly respected. The concept of yin and yang reflects the need for careful management of nature's inherent chaos to maintain order. This is prominently depicted in the *samudra manthan* (churning of the ocean) in Hindu mythology. The churning of the cosmic ocean by gods and demons, using Mount *Mandara* as a pivot and *Vasuki* (the serpent) as a rope is symbolic of nature's chaotic forces. Life-sustaining elements like *Amrita* (nectar of immortality) and destructive entities like *Halahala* (deadly poison) emerged. The concept of *Pralaya* (cosmic deluge) also represents nature's ultimate destructive force, where all creation is submerged in water during cycles of dissolution. In Norse mythology, *Ragnarok* is a cataclysmic event that marks the end of the world, characterized by chaos and destruction as forces of nature run rampant, threatening to engulf the world in darkness. God *Pan* is often associated with wild, untamed landscapes and his presence is thought to evoke fear and chaos. The wilderness beyond *Asgard*, the realm of Norse gods, is depicted as dangerous and unpredictable. The *Jotnar*, or giants, are linked with the untamed forces of nature, and their conflicts with the gods reflect humanity's struggle to control and overcome the wildness of the natural world. Thus, the natural world is often portrayed as harsh and unforgiving, and humanity is caught in an ongoing struggle to understand and in need to nurture and control the natural world.

2.4 Humanizing nature and gendering binaries

The meta-cognitive ability of man that started a cycle of communication and projected the wilderness variously in myth were "a system of communication", "a message", that assigned historical limits, condition of use and linked to society. This was a "mode of signification, a form" (Barthes 1991 [1957]: 107) rather than an object or a concept or idea. They were treated as speech (communication) that was chosen by history (early man) to bear a message (understand external world) using varied representation (writ-

ten, pictorial, oral, performance). To be easily imagined, perceived and accepted myths required to be concrete and had to connect to man. To give the unknown a known character particularly in relation to self, early man characterized nature and other phenomena with human-like forms and ascribed them with superpowers. However, there is a difference in how this characterization is signified. In Indian mythology, nature is personified as feminine. *Devi*, the goddess often referred to as the divine mother in Hinduism is the embodiment of the creative energy of the universe and is associated with fertility, abundance, and nurturing aspects of nature. She is depicted in various forms, including *Parvati*, *Lakshmi* and *Saraswati*, each representing different aspects of feminine energy and the natural world. *Prithvi*, the goddess of the earth in Hindu mythology, is revered as the mother of all beings and is a nurturing and benevolent deity who provides sustenance and support to all life forms. She is often depicted as a beautiful woman adorned with flowers and surrounded by lush vegetation, symbolizing the fertility and abundance of the earth. *Nerthus*, a Germanic goddess allied to fertility, agriculture, and the earth is a nurturing and maternal figure who brings forth the bounty of the earth and ensures the fertility of the land. The Norse goddess *Freya* is a powerful and independent deity who possesses great beauty and charisma symbolizing love, fertility, and abundance.

Likewise, specific natural elements or phenomena are allied to men with superpowers. *Varuna*, the god of water, ocean and the underwater world governing the collection and distribution of water, is a powerful and sometimes wrathful deity who controls storms and floods. The god of thunder and rain, *Indra,* reigning rainstorm and heaven uses thunder and lightning to strike down enemies and sinners. *Thor*, the god of thunder, controls storms and protects the world from giants and other threats with his mighty hammer, *Mjölnir.*[1] It is not a mere weapon but a powerful symbol in Norse mythology, representing *Thor's* role as a protector and his control over the natural elements of thunder and lightning. Its mythological significance is deeply tied to themes of strength, order and divine power in the face of chaos. While primarily associated with wisdom and war, *Odin*, often seeking knowledge and power to prepare for the prophesied end of the world, *Ragnarök*, is also allied to wind and poetry.

The visible process of binary characterization attributes specific traits and roles to male and female deities associated with natural elements. These reflect cultural perceptions and interpretations of the natural world, thus gendering nature.

3 Myth to form

Seeking to explain natural phenomena such as storms, earthquakes and celestial events by attributing them to the actions of gods, spirits or supernatural beings, and personification and anthropomorphizing of natural forces, myths depicted humans as having a special relationship with gods or divine beings who grant them dominion over natural world reinforcing the idea of human superiority and entitlement to exploit and manipulate nature for their own purposes.[2] Being innocently consumed (as inductive system),

1 Deities are assigned with many powers and associated to more than one element/phenomena. This accounts to a variety of names within and across cultures.

2 Man subordinated and tamed the animal world by using them as vehicles of gods.

they transform meaning into form (Barthes 1991 [1957]: 131) and have an immediate impression. Having productively structured the unstructured (environment), and merged man/nature, the mythopoeic traditions naturally lead to the establishment of traditions, value systems and beliefs. Once established, their force got stronger than any rational explanation that mankind was to offer in the times to come. Despite attentive readings, numerous attempts of de(re)constructions, the significations achieved by myths, as argued by Barthes, remain "imperfectible and unquestionable" (Barthes 1991 [1957]: 128). As the unknown became familiar (human form with superpower), the cycle of manipulation (a superhuman – god) of the external world to satiate man's need (food, safety) turned nature to a commodity and placed man at the center. The Anthropocene can trace its origins to this historical moment, when man's centrality was mythologized, embedding a culture of dominance under the guise of progress and modernization. It could hence take any form – of violence, of war, of ecological irresponsibility, injustice and systematic inequality. Created through mythical narrations the culture of dominance, rooted in the culture of inequality, answers man's need to control. Since man does not have the ability to bear life, he is not the beginning (like nature and women) contoured by androcentrism the need to control has, as Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies argue in *Ecofeminism*, in the evolving times taken the shape of capitalist patriarchy that develops reproductive and genetic technology to overpower, demean and destroy women and nature.

3.1 Selective appropriation

Driven by the need to find purpose in his existence and to make sense of its relationship with the natural world, man has historically sought to establish order and exert control over nature. The characterization of nature as chaotic, untamed and often adversarial has justified the pursuit of dominance over it. This perspective laid the foundation for an ideology centered on humanity's supremacy over the environment. Myths and narratives have reinforced this belief, positioning humans as superior to other living and non-living elements of the natural world. Further, the gendering of nature gave rise to eco-feminine symbolism, drawing parallels between the domination of nature and the subjugation of women. Jack Goody's *The Theft of History* highlights how myths are selectively used for the appropriation of cultural histories by dominant groups to shape identity and consolidate power. To this end, myths perpetuate patriarchal norms glorifying male deities and heroes as figures of strength and authority while subordinating female characters who, despite their inherent power, are cast docile or depicted as seductresses or antagonists. The notion of men as superior, natural leaders and decision-makers versus women as submissive and deferential is established. For instance, in the *Ramayana, Ram* embodies ideal heroism, while *Sita*, despite her virtues, faces the *agnipariksha* – a trial rooted in patriarchal expectations. Similarly, in the *Nibelungenlied, Siegfried* embodies heroism, whereas *Brunhild*, a powerful Valkyrie, is deceived and subdued through a scheme orchestrated by *Siegfried* and *Gunther*. These depictions undermine women's agency and reinforce male dominance. Mythological narratives often penalize women who challenge societal norms or assert independence, warning against defying gender expectations. In the *Mahabharata, Draupadi's* defiance in the *Kaurava* court is met with scorn and blame for the ensuing war, casting her as a disruptor of societal harmony.

Likewise, *Surpanakha* in the *Ramayana* is mutilated and mocked for openly expressing her desires, framing her challenge to gender norms as monstrous and deserving of punishment. Similarly, *Gullveig*, a powerful witch in Norse mythology, is repeatedly burned by the gods for practicing *seidr* (magic), symbolizing the fear and suppression of female power outside patriarchal control. These portrayals not only reflect but also perpetuate patriarchal attitudes, reinforcing the idea that women who step outside societal bounds are threats to be subdued or feared.

Myths from Germanic, Indian and broader global traditions embed exploitation within narratives of cosmic or societal balance, legitimizing human – especially male – authority over nature and women. These stories normalize the use and control of both entities for personal, communal, or divine ends. By portraying nature as chaotic or threatening, myths frame human intervention as essential for protection and preservation, masking exploitation as a virtuous act. For instance, *Thor's* battles against natural forces like storms and floods are depicted as acts of safeguarding order, justifying the subjugation of nature to human needs. Similarly, the dismemberment of *Ymir* in Norse mythology symbolizes the notion that nature is a resource to be transformed for societal benefit, reframing exploitation as a creative and necessary endeavor. Parallel to this, women are often depicted in myth as resources to be negotiated or controlled. *Freya*, though powerful, is frequently portrayed as a beautiful goddess whose body is treated as a commodity in social and political transactions, reinforcing the idea that women's beauty and sexuality exist for male benefit. This normalization of exploitation is evident in her reduced value to her physical attributes and how they serve male agendas. In Indian mythology, *Vritra's* withholding of water is framed as unnatural, positioning *Indra's* violent conquest not as an act of exploitation but as a necessary intervention for human prosperity. These narratives blur the lines between exploitation and necessity, perpetuating structures of dominance that justify the subjugation of both nature and women.

3.2 Patriarchal exaltation

Depiction of humans as the pinnacle of creation placed in a position of authority over the natural world has been central to the creation of myths. They reflect and legitimize authority over key aspects of life, including nature, resources and women by portraying them as elements that must be controlled, subdued, or ruled over by male figures, gods, or kings. Evidently, myths use gendered symbolism and thereby reinforce patriarchal values and hierarchies. Consider how, male deities are often associated with the sun, sky or other symbols of power and authority, while female deities are linked to the moon, earth or other nurturing and passive symbols. These associations contribute to the perception of men as active agents and women as passive objects within the cosmic order. In Judeo-Christian tradition, the *Book of Genesis* describes God giving Adam dominion over all living creatures, implying human superiority and entitlement to subdue and rule over the Earth. Myths and legends often feature heroes who conquer or overcome natural obstacles and adversaries as a demonstration of human prowess and dominance. For instance, *Heracles* (Hercules) is celebrated for his legendary feats of strength, including battles with mythical beasts such as the *Nemean Lion* and *Hydra*, symbolizing humanity's triumph over nature's challenges. Divine figures presented in

myths serve as role models for human behavior, reinforcing male leadership and dominance as natural and divinely ordained. In many stories, men are portrayed as creators or progenitors while women are often depicted as secondary or derived from men such as in Brahmanda Purana in which Brahma creates Saraswati from himself as his consort symbolizing knowledge emanating from the male creator. In Edda traditions, the first woman, Embla, is fashioned from a tree trunk by the gods alongside the first man, Ask (Ash Tree) (Sturluson 2005). In the Book of Genesis, Eve is created from Adam's rib, underscoring her derived and subordinate role. Also, these narratives celebrate traits traditionally associated with masculinity while often portraying female characters as passive or in need of rescue as can be seen in case of *Sita* who waits for rescue by Lord *Ram* after being abducted; and also in the helplessness of *Andromeda* who depends on the heroism of *Perseus* for survival.[3] With the glorification of male heroism, myths not only validate male dominance but also reinforce the idea that men are natural leaders and protectors. Stories of divine punishment meted out to those who challenge or disobey the established order are also projections in myth for patriarchal control. These punishments frequently target individuals or groups who defy patriarchal norms or authority figures, serving as warnings against disobedience and reinforcing the idea that male dominance is both natural and necessary for maintaining order. Consider for illustration *Niobe* and *Arachne* in Ovid's *Metamorphoses. Apollo* and *Artemis* kill *Niobe's* children in divine retribution for mocking *Leto*, thereby gods, and boasting about her superiority as a mother. Similarly, Arachne is punished and transformed into a spider by *Athena* for her challenge and superiority in weaving.[4] By depicting idealized versions of masculinity and femininity, myths naturalize and perpetuate patriarchal expectations regarding the proper roles and behavior of men and women.

4 Myths – Surviving and evolving

Myths originally thrive in oral cultures and as societies change they are retold, often adapting to new social, political, and environmental contexts.[5] In the process the original significance of a nature-based myth shifts to accommodate the values of industrial or urbanized societies, losing its ecological or feminine reverence. Also, when different cultures or religions come into contact, their myths often merge, thereby creating hybrid stories.[6] Over time, this blending of traditions alters the original myths. For instance, as Germanic and Roman mythologies intertwined in the early Christian era, pagan symbols

3 As exemplified in the epic *Ramayana* and in the myth of *Perseus and Andromeda*.

4 See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 6 for the myth of Arachne and the story of *Niobe*.

5 The transformation of myth is evident in numerous versions, e.g. the epic *Ramayana*, the epic of *Gilgamesh* or the various adaptations of the *Nibelungenlied*.

6 In Hinduism, *Avalokiteshvara* is a bodhisattva who embodies the compassion of all Buddhas. In Buddhism, particularly in the Mahayana tradition, *Avalokiteshvara* is known as *Lokesvara*. The merging of these myths reflects the syncretism between Hindu and Buddhist traditions in regions like Nepal and Tibet. The Norse myth of *Ragnarok*, which describes the end of the world and the rebirth of a new one, has parallels with the Christian concept of the Apocalypse. As Christianity spread through Scandinavia, elements of Norse mythology were incorporated into Christian teachings, see also Goody (2010); *The Power of Myth* by Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers and *Myth, Creativity and Repressions in Modern Literature* by Lorna Hardwick.

were adapted to Christian meanings, shifting the focus from nature worship to monotheistic divine authority. Ancient fertility goddesses originally associated with the Earth's cycles and agricultural abundance, as discussed earlier, were over time reinterpreted to emphasize male dominance over women and nature, aligning myths with emerging hierarchical power structures. In modern times, myths survive through literature, film, and other media. Nationalism often revives ancient myths to create a sense of cultural identity, sometimes transforming their meanings to support contemporary ideologies. Myths like the *Nibelungenlied* were revived in the Romantic era to celebrate national identity (Watson 2010: 312), emphasizing heroic values over the myths' earlier ecological dimensions. This is done primarily for creating a historical continuity, mobilization of collective identity, political legitimacy and ritualization. Also, consider how the epical myths of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have been crucial to the rise of Hindu nationalism. The story of *Ram*, especially his battle against the demon king *Ravana*, has been linked to themes of good versus evil, and his role as the ideal king has been appropriated to promote Hindu values in the nation-state. Later, the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya was driven by the claim that the mosque stood on the birthplace of Lord Rama. The revival of the *Ramayana* myth was used to mobilize political support for the construction of a Hindu temple, which eventually became a symbol of Hindu identity in the modern Indian state. Myths, thus, evolve and adapt over time, often changing their meanings and significance based on the needs and ideologies of the societies that tell them.

5 Myth and *Ecofeminism*

In the context of ecofeminism, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva have reinterpreted myths to critique the domination of nature and women and to emphasize how patriarchal and capitalist systems have used and gradually distorted the original meanings of these myths to justify exploitation. They argue that pre-capitalist societies often revered nature and women, but these elements were later degraded by patriarchal power structures. Vandana Shiva argues that ancient myths from cultures like India reflected a deep reverence for nature and celebrated feminine principles of creation, fertility and care. Figures like *Prithvi* (the Earth Goddess) and *Ganga* (the River Goddess) symbolize a reciprocal relationship between humans and nature, where the Earth is seen as a mother, not as a resource to be exploited. Shiva believes that such myths originally promoted harmony with nature and respect for the life-giving powers of women and the Earth. She further argues that as patriarchal and capitalist systems emerged, these myths were distorted to validate the domination of nature and women. For instance, myths that once celebrated the Earth's fertility were repurposed to frame nature as passive and in need of control, aligning with capitalist principles of resource extraction and domination. She critiques the transformation of the Earth from a living entity into "dead raw material" (Mies/Shiva 1993: 44), which aligns with capitalist exploitation.

Similarly, Maria Mies critiques how patriarchal systems have appropriated myths to justify both the exploitation of women and the natural world. She emphasizes that many myths that once celebrated women's roles in sustaining life were transformed to em-

phasize male power and control. She notes that goddesses associated with fertility were often subordinated to male gods in later versions of myths, symbolizing the transfer of power from women to men. Mies explores how myths have been used to justify the control of women's reproductive labor and the commodification of nature. Myths like those in the Bible or in the classical Western tradition (e.g., *Pandora's Box*) depict women as sources of chaos or disorder, and these narratives have been used to legitimize the control of women's bodies and the exploitation of nature under capitalism. This reflects a dual domination of both women and nature, which ecofeminism seeks to deconstruct.

5.1 Myth of progress

The Western narrative of progress, rooted in Enlightenment thinking, is indicative of human advancement as measured by technological and economic growth. This myth has justified colonialism, industrialization, and the subjugation of both nature and women. Countering this myth, Mies argues that it obscures the violence done to women, indigenous peoples and the environment in the name of development. Mies critiques the myth of progress which presents industrialization, economic growth and the conquest of nature as universally beneficial, while masking the exploitation of both women and the environment. According to her, the modern myth of progress frames industrialization and scientific rationality as superior to traditional ways of living in harmony with nature. This progress myth has led to the destruction of ecosystems and the subjugation of women, particularly in the Global South. She opines: "The myth of progress has been used to legitimize the exploitation of women and nature, presenting this destruction as necessary for human advancement. In reimagining progress, we must focus on sustainability and the well-being of all living beings, not just economic gain" (Mies/Shiva 1993: 85). She, therefore, calls for the deconstruction of this myth and proposes an alternative rooted in subsistence economies, which prioritize meeting basic needs over profit and growth.

5.2 Subsistence within capitalism

Maria Mies's concept of subsistence stands in sharp contrast to the capitalist mode of production and consumption. While capitalism is characterized by the accumulation of wealth, profit maximization and exploitation of labor and natural resources, subsistence emphasizes the satisfaction of basic needs, ecological balance, and equitable social relations. Interestingly, capitalism indirectly depends on the existence of subsistence economies. Women's unpaid household labor, for example, subsidizes the formal economy by caring for workers and children, ensuring that capitalism can continue to function. Likewise, the destruction of subsistence farming pushes people into the labor force, where they become dependent on wage labor, further fueling the capitalist system. The challenge is to make subsistence central to the way society is organized rather than a mere survival strategy. Subsistence economies inherently respect ecological limits, emphasizing the need to preserve natural systems for future generations and align with principles of degrowth, sustainable living and community resilience countering capitalism's endless growth model. Resources are shared equitably, and decisions are

made collectively, ensuring that the needs of all are met without overburdening the environment. Many subsistence economies are found in indigenous communities like the San People, the Yanomami, the Maasai, the Dongria Kondh, the Sami people have historically resisted capitalist domination. Myths have played a crucial role in embedding sustainability into their everyday practices. For instance, the Dongria Kondh views harming forests as violating *Niyamraja*, promoting sustainable use. San stories discourage greed, fostering ethical hunting. For the Maasai, myths link cattle to *Enkai's* divine gift, encouraging careful herding and collective resource management. Reclaiming and valuing subsistence is a step toward decolonization and indigenous sovereignty, affirming their right to manage land and resources according to sustainable, non-exploitative principles.

5.3 Possibilities – Subsistence and the new world order

The concept of a new world order typically refers to a hypothetical or speculative global political or social structure characterized by a new balance of power, governance systems and norms. Whether such an order could be gender-neutral depends on how it is constructed and implemented. In theory, it could strive for gender neutrality by promoting equality and inclusivity across all aspects of society, including governance, economics, education, and culture. Adopting subsistence in the new world order – marked by global capitalism, technological advancements and widespread consumerism – requires a profound rethinking of economic, social and environmental structures. While the idea of subsistence contrasts sharply with the dominant capitalist growth model, its principles of sustainability, equity and sufficiency offer solutions to some of the most pressing global challenges, such as climate change, resource depletion, inequality and ecological degradation. The first and most critical step is challenging the prevailing paradigm that equates progress with economic growth. In the capitalist framework, GDP and consumption are key indicators of development, while in a subsistence-based model well-being, sustainability and equitable distribution of resources take precedence. *Degrowth*[7] advocates for reducing the scale of production and consumption in wealthy nations, redistributing wealth, and focusing on well-being rather than perpetual economic expansion. Proposing this economic philosophy Latouche writes: "The fundamental contradiction of the growth society is that the pursuit of growth, the objective of the system itself, is leading to its own destruction. We need to think beyond growth to ensure that human societies and ecosystems can survive together" (Latouche 2009: 17). Degrowth, thus, aligns with subsistence, which emphasizes meeting basic needs without over-extraction or overproduction. Countries and communities must transition from growth-centric policies to well-being-driven models that prioritize health, equity,

7 *Degrowth* by Giorgos Kallis (2018) provides a thorough critique of the growth paradigm and proposes a transformative vision for a more sustainable and equitable future. The book combines theoretical insights with practical recommendations, making a compelling case for why and how societies should reconsider their approach to economic development; *Farewell to Growth* by Serge Latouche (2009) presents a critical examination of the growth-oriented economic model and offers a vision for a more sustainable and equitable future through the principles of degrowth. The book combines theoretical critique with practical suggestions, advocating for a fundamental rethinking of economic priorities and practices.

sustainability, and social cohesion. This requires moving beyond GDP-focused metrics to address factors essential for a balanced life. Emphasizing local production for local needs can reduce reliance on global supply chains and large-scale industrial agriculture, fostering sustainability and resilience. The globalized food system drives environmental degradation and social inequality, as industrial agriculture exploits both land and people for mass production. A shift toward agroecological and permaculture practices – modeled on natural ecosystems and prioritizing biodiversity – can mitigate these harms. By reducing dependency on synthetic inputs and enhancing food sovereignty, these approaches offer sustainable alternatives already proven successful worldwide, supporting community resilience and combating climate change.

Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva highlight the vital role of women's unpaid labor in sustaining families and communities that is often overlooked in capitalist systems. Women bear the brunt of resource depletion and environmental harm while contributing through caregiving, household work, and community-building. Recognizing this labor is essential for societal well-being. Policies like universal care credits, gender-responsive budgeting, women-centric sustainable entrepreneurship, and gender-sensitive digital infrastructure can promote gender equality, redistribute care burdens, and integrate subsistence values into modern economies, fostering sustainability and equity.

While subsistence emphasizes low-tech, localized solutions integrating modern technology can make it more relevant today. Sustainable innovations like biodegradable smart packaging, off-grid solar water distillers, and small-scale renewable energy systems (solar, wind, hydro) align with subsistence principles, reducing reliance on fossil fuels. Community-owned energy cooperatives decentralize production, fostering self-reliance, while open-source tools like 3D printing, sustainable building materials, and solar-powered desalination support local production and reduce environmental impacts. For instance, solar-powered water harvesting systems, combined with indigenous myths about water's sanctity, merge technology with cultural narratives, reinforcing ecological stewardship. This integration can appeal to those with capitalist mindsets by highlighting economic efficiency, market opportunities and risk management. Sustainable technologies lower long-term costs and improve resilience against global disruptions. Green markets offer lucrative potential, while eco-friendly branding enhances reputations in competitive industries. Decentralized systems further ensure stability, aligning profit motives with sustainability. Additionally, by linking practices to well-being and cultural relevance, subsistence values demonstrate their adaptability to modern contexts, ensuring ecological balance, economic growth, and cultural continuity.

6 Revisiting, realigning and reimagining myths

One cannot doubt that myths (great or small) have existed at all times and have influenced people to varying degrees. It is also important to recognize that myths do not always promote domination or exploitation of nature. Reimagining them for the present moment, particularly within the context of subsistence, involves revisiting ancient narratives to reflect contemporary challenges such as sustainability, ecological balance and social justice. Moving back in history, it is found that many traditional narratives

emphasize harmony, reciprocity and reverence towards the Earth and its ecosystems. For instance, a fresh focus on veneration of *Yggdrasil* by gods including *Odin* supplemented by The *Norns's* care for *Yggdrasil*, would sensitize towards the reciprocity between divine forces and nature and revive the belief that nature must be preserved and respected. The health of *Yggdrasil*, tied to the health of the cosmos, would imply that humanity and the gods are responsible for the care and balance of nature. Similarly, the worship of *Prithvi* underscores the belief that the Earth is sacred and must be treated with reverence. Humans are her children, and they are expected to care for the Earth in return for the sustenance she provides. This reverence would promote a reciprocal relationship, where humans are stewards of the Earth and must maintain balance to ensure the well-being of all.

Remembering that myths were deeply embedded in the processes of food production, communal living and ecological balance a fresh alignment on the reverential ecosystems would place nature back to the center. Reimagining these myths for subsistence involves a shift from seeing them as static cultural artifacts to viewing them as dynamic tools for addressing modern challenges. Mies's and Shiva's theories of ecofeminism also emphasize the importance of revisiting traditional narratives to challenge modern capitalist structures, which often disconnect people from nature and sustainable practices. Shiva writes: "The metaphor of the earth as a nurturing mother must be revived as a basis for an ecological worldview and subsistence perspective that recognizes the limits to exploitation" (Mies/Shiva 1993: 44). In this context, Shiva refers to *Annapurna*, the goddess of food and nourishment, revered as the provider of sustenance. Traditionally, this myth has been celebrated in agricultural communities where food security is tied to religious practices and gratitude toward nature. Annapurna's myth can be reinterpreted to address the modern challenge of food sovereignty. In a world where industrial agriculture often undermines small farmers, this myth can be instrumental in promoting community-led food systems that prioritize local, organic farming. By viewing *Annapurna* not just as a deity but as a symbol of food security, communities can integrate sustainable farming practices, seed conservation, and traditional knowledge into modern agricultural practices. Shiva argues that "[i]n reimagining the myth of Annapurna, we can see that the true abundance of the earth comes from maintaining biodiversity and traditional agricultural practices that nurture both nature and community" (Shiva 1989: 89). She uses the myth to advocate for seed sovereignty and sustainable agriculture and argues that the myth emphasizes the importance of biodiversity and community control over food production, opposing the corporate control of seeds and industrial farming practices. Her work in seed sovereignty through her organization *Navdanya* draws on traditional Indian reverence for the earth and food, linking it to the protection of biodiversity and the rights of small farmers to subsist independently from corporate control.

7 From theory to practice

Integrating myths into modern subsistence practices offers transformative potential by merging traditional knowledge with contemporary environmental challenges. This approach demands not only cultural reinterpretation but also concrete actions to address

issues such as climate change, food security, and resource management. For instance, myth-based renewable energy systems, inspired by the reverence for the sun in ancient stories, can foster a connection to natural energy sources and raise awareness about sustainable practices. Myth-inspired agroforestry systems, based on stories of trees as life-givers, can create biodiversity-rich environments that support agriculture and wildlife, enhancing soil health and ensuring long-term food security. Decentralized water management systems using IoT-enabled rainwater harvesting can incorporate storytelling to educate communities about conserving water, reflecting its vital role in myths as life-sustaining. AI-driven water recycling technology, inspired by stories of rivers, can employ modern methods to filter and clean water, making it suitable for reuse. Community-based circular economies, informed by the cyclical nature of life in myths, can adopt closed-loop systems that minimize waste and promote sustainability. Eco-friendly products themed on epic tales, such as those inspired by the *Mahabharata*, encourage eco-conscious consumption and reduce the environmental footprint of production. Biomimicry, drawing from myths like the story of the lotus, can drive forward sustainable design solutions, such as self-cleaning materials. Reviving myths through community education – via storytelling circles, festivals, and educational programs – can raise awareness about these sustainable practices, adapting their messages to modern issues like climate change and food security. By reconnecting people to these traditional stories and integrating their wisdom into daily life, we preserve cultural heritage and inspire innovative, sustainable solutions for subsistence in the modern world.

8 Conclusion

Mythology serves as a profound counterforce to scientific discourse and capitalist ideology by offering alternative ways of understanding the world that emphasize interdependence, balance and respect for nature. While capitalist systems are built on myths of control, progress and scarcity, mythological traditions often promote sustainability, community and a subsistence economy. Whether it is through the story of *Annapurna* in India or *Frau Holle* in Germany, myths have the power to inspire practices that sustain both the environment and the communities that depend on it. By reimagining and reclaiming these myths, movements for ecological and social justice can challenge the exploitative narratives of capitalism and create a more harmonious relationship with the earth.

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