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Ain't I a plant? Ain't I a Woman? – A Reflective Journey Through Case II of the *CICC*

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Abstract

This essay reflects on Case II of the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes: The East India Company on Trial in London*, considering how the Witnesses and Advocate in this case highlighted the continuities between the socio-ecological destruction and exploitation perpetrated by the East India Company as part of its highly profitable trade in indigo, and contemporary practices of agribusiness in Africa that separate people from their traditional agricultural knowledges and drive their food production into dependency on multinational corporations. The text then addresses the indigo plant that grew at the centre of the *CICC*'s courtroom to pose questions around plant-being and speaking up from a feminist perspective.

Keywords: AGRA; agribusiness; colonialism; Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes; ecofeminism; indigo

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On 5th April, the second case hosted by the London iteration of the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* (*CICC*), titled ‘The Indigo Trade, the East India Company and the British Crown: Establishing Agribusiness, Destroying Interdependent Ecologies’, took place at Ambika P3 in London. The staging of this trial in this city is deeply intertwined with the colonial history of the East India Company (EIC), as London is also the central hub from which the British Empire expanded its vast colonial networks across Asia and Africa. I had arrived at the ‘scene of the crime’ to examine how the colonial control of the EIC shaped the agricultural and social structures of Bengal, and how that same power has since been internalised and inherited by contemporary transnational corporations, which continue to drive today’s profit-maximising, colonial logic.

The moment I stepped into Ambika P3, I was engulfed by its ghostly atmosphere. The vast, grey space, constructed from cold concrete and steel, resembled an immense industrial warehouse, radiating a suffocating sense of indifference and oppression. It felt as though that space itself was forewarning every person who entered: the trial about to unfold would speak of nothing less than brutality and suffering.



Figure 1: Witness Ghulam Nadri giving testimony. Image credit: Geyujing Shen.

About fifteen minutes after I found my seat, a bell rang: the court was officially in session. The first Witness, Ghulam Nadri, spoke. He exposed how the EIC, in pursuit of vast profits from the indigo trade, imposed brutal and relentless economic exploitation in Bengal. He testified that the Company employed debt traps, coercion and violence to destroy the traditional agricultural systems on which local farmers depended. Farmers were forced to abandon their food crops and instead grow indigo on a large scale. This act of violence completely stripped them of their economic sovereignty. Farmers lost their right to decide what to grow on their own land and were bound to exploitative contracts, through which the EIC seized the indigo at extremely low prices, plunging generations of farmers into poverty and cycles of debt.

Meanwhile, vast areas of forest were cleared to make room for indigo production, sacrificing countless natural habitats, devastating biodiversity and exhausting ecological resources. All the profit extracted through this suffering was funnelled into fuelling the further expansion of the British Empire's colonial ambitions.



Figure 2: Judge Sharon H. Venne questioning the Witness. Image credit: Geyujing Shen.



Figure 3: Judge Ramón Vera Herrera questioning the Witness. Image credit: Geyujing Shen.



Figure 4: Witness Leonida Odongo giving testimony. Image credit: Geyujing Shen.

The second Witness was Leonida Odongo, a social activist from Kenya. She laid bare the suffering endured today not only in Kenya but across the African continent, pain that stems from the intergenerational legacy of colonialism and corporate control over agricultural production. Hunger, micronutrient deficiencies, obesity and various non-communicable diseases are steadily eroding people's lives. In the meantime, the corporate-led models of agricultural development have brought ecological catastrophes: sharp declines in biodiversity, polluted water sources, degraded soil and worsening climate conditions. What is most infuriating, she argued, are the mechanisms behind these disasters. Manipulative legislation, debt traps, land grabs and fake promises of prosperity mirror what the East India Company did in Bengal centuries ago. Though the EIC is long gone, its colonial legacy lingers like a ghost, continuing in new forms to oppress the people of Africa today.

Odongo further condemned AGRA (formerly known as the Alliance for Green Revolution in Africa), which, under the guise of philanthropic capitalism, has driven a tripling of fertiliser use and hijacked the food and ecological future of African nations through policy interventions. She denounced the collusion between governments and corporations, pointing out how policies, laws and even livestock vaccination programmes have been deeply infiltrated, manipulated and controlled in the interest of agribusiness. Farmers are sold industrial agricultural products along with made-up hopes, while at the same time being discouraged from cultivating their own indigenous seed varieties. In this way, Odongo argued, AGRA suppresses traditional cultural knowledge and undermines farmers' autonomy over what they grow.

After the testimonies of the two Witnesses, the entire space was thick with a profound sense of outrage. I, too, was deeply shaken, finding myself immersed in this collective mourning and rage. Yet the solemn, austere atmosphere in the room continually whispered: 'Do not speak. Not yet'. My emotions surged within me but were held back, suppressed, leaving only a silent resonance.



Figure 5: Judge Radha D'Souza questioning the Witness. Image credit: Geyujing Shen.



Figure 6: Advocate Ruth Nyambura. Image credit: Geyujing Shen.

Then, Ruth Nyambura, a Kenyan feminist activist, took the floor. Her voice was sharp and unwavering as she condemned the oppression and structural exploitation endured by women under corporate-led agricultural systems.

According to her testimony, during the colonial period in Bengal, women were an indispensable part of the indigo industry. These women toiled in gruelling, low-paid positions, forced to work under regimes of violence and coercion; even armed forces were employed to suppress farmers and secure raw materials for the factories. In some indigo factories, women made up as much as one-third of the workforce (Van Schendel 2012). Within these violent structures, it was the women workers who bore an even heavier burden of exploitation.

Nyambura highlighted the ways in which the issues that began during colonial regimes continue to this day: modern corporate agriculture, driven by the pursuit of efficiency and maximum profit, operates through a logic of commodification and centralisation that completely disregards the multiple and vital roles women play within informal economies and smallholder systems. In this context, women are placed at the very bottom of the labour hierarchy, performing the most precarious and poorly paid tasks, such as harvesting and sorting. At the same time, their reproductive labour, such as caring for the family, fetching water and cooking, is rendered invisible within the corporate remuneration system and is neither recognised nor compensated.

It is within this institutionalised neglect that women's labour rights and autonomy are systematically stripped away, further entrenching the hierarchical structure of gendered labour division. In the agricultural

contexts of many developing countries, women typically bear a triple burden: productive roles, such as participating in farming and informal economic activities; reproductive roles, particularly caring for households and raising children; and community management roles, including organising resources and engaging in grassroots initiatives. Yet, within the framework of corporate agriculture, this heavy triad of responsibilities is ignored, or worse, denied, only deepening the existential precarity and systemic oppression that women face (Nindi 1994).

I turned my gaze toward the indigo plant growing at the centre of the courtroom. Introduced only briefly by the Judge at the beginning of the trial, it stood silently in the middle of the space – like a mute ornament, easily overlooked. And yet, this single plant had become the vortex of power, exploitation and ecological catastrophe as discussed in this session of the court. But because it could not speak for itself, it had to rely on human intermediaries to be narrated, to be represented. While the indigo was being addressed as a witness and a comrade, it also served as a kind of metaphor: though the court aimed to decentre the human and give voice to the plant, human discourse still firmly dominated the space.



Figure 7: The indigo plant placed at the centre of the courtroom. Image credit: Geyujing Shen.

This led me to reflect on the profound connection between women and plants. In Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* (2016), the female protagonist gradually withdraws from the order and power structures of human society by choosing to become a plant. She abandons language, refuses to eat and eventually dissolves even her sense of self. The becoming-plant, in this narrative, acts as a symbol for a form of embodied resistance, a silent defiance against a violent world. The protagonist no longer resists through speech but instead retreats entirely into herself, into a radically different form of being.

When language, space and social identity are all stripped away, the body becomes the final fortress and yet, even this is something women are relentlessly pressured to surrender. The female protagonist in *The Vegetarian* shows a silent protest against the collusion of patriarchy, misogyny and capitalist colonialism. But as this case has shown, the collusion between capital, the state, patriarchy and empire has been ongoing. They have merely changed faces, continuing to oppress those who cannot speak – be they plants or women.





Figures 8 & 9: Lightbox installation of *papaver somniferum* and *indigofera tinctoria* in the courtroom. Image credit: Geyujing Shen.



Figures 10–12: Lightbox installation of *chorchorus olitorius*, *saccharum* and *gossypium arboretum* in the courtroom. Image credit: Geyujing Shen.



Figure 13: Clerk Jonas Steel tallying the votes of the Public Jury. Image credit: Geyujing Shen.

When the court unanimously declared the East India Company guilty of intergenerational climate crimes, the indigo plant still stood silently at the centre. And I couldn't help but wonder: Can the justice, suffering, and

ecological scars narrated through human words ever truly represent the story of the plant itself, if indeed it possesses a form of consciousness (Marder, 2012)?

As I stepped out of the venue, the April night in London felt like winter once again. Then, a quiet voice within me whispered: 'It's time. Speak!'

Why must we always rely on others to speak for us? Can we refuse to be mere vessels for projected meaning and instead speak for ourselves, write for ourselves, resist in our own names? For the women erased, exploited and turned into footnotes in the history of the indigo trade; for those crushed into underpaid labour and unpaid care within corporate-controlled agricultural systems: within these silenced, represented existences, I heard the cry of indignation.

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About the author

Geyujing Shen (she/they) is a PhD researcher and visual practitioner at the University of Westminster. Their work spans queer studies, migration studies, resistance studies, and decolonial pedagogy. They are particularly interested in participatory visual methods and embedding these within a queer feminist standpoint to challenge and critically interrogate processes of knowledge production.