

Body, Border and Beyond: An Ecofeminist Study of Srijit Mukherji's *Begum Jaan* and Deepa Mehta's *1947: Earth*

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Abstract

Ecofeminism connects women with nature, and proves that both of them are vehemently dominated by the patriarchal society. The term 'ecofeminism' is first introduced by the French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne in *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* (1974) and translated into English as *Feminism or Death* (1989). Ecofeminist Ynestra King argues, "Ecofeminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice . . . It is the same masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies and our own sexuality and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its way" (28). Ecofeminism represents a bridge between 'ecology' and 'feminism' in which 'female' is naturalized and 'nature' is feminized. The territory, nature and woman's body become play-things in the hands of patriarchal politicians. Driven by the inherent quality to protect and nurture her children, the female-body acquires a deep connection with nature, plants, land, soil, and animals as well. Srijit Mukherji's *Begum Jaan* (released in 2017) and Deepa Mehta's *1947: Earth* (released in 1998) are set in North-Western part of India during the time of independence. The drawing of Radcliffe Line and partition prove to be a massacre to the lives of the people in general and to the lives of the women in particular. In Mukherji's film, the titular character Begum Jaan—the brothel-owner, and her girls are ordered to evacuate their mansion or *kothi* as Radcliffe Line will pass directly through their *kothi*. Their bodies, their pet animals and Mother-Land are shattered by the hands of the political leaders. In Deepa Mehta's film, *1947: Earth*, based on Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India*, the narrator little Lenny in Lahore describes the story of cracking of India and tattering the bondage between herself and her nanny, Shanta. In both films, female bodies are commodified, tortured as well as naturalized and Mother-Land is tattered, shattered and feminized by the hands of patriarchal politicians.

Keywords- *Ecofeminism, Mother-Land, Female-Body, Nature, Animals*

Introduction

Ecofeminism connects women with nature, and proves that both of them are vehemently dominated by the patriarchal society. The term 'ecofeminism' is first introduced by the French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne in *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* (1974) and translated into English as *Feminism or Death* (1989). Ecofeminist Ynestra King argues, "Ecofeminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice . . . It is the same masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies and our own sexuality and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its way" (28). Ecofeminism represents a bridge between 'ecology' and 'feminism' in which 'female' is naturalized and 'nature' is feminized. The territory, nature, animals and woman's body become play-things in the hands of patriarchal politicians. Driven by the inherent quality to protect and nurture her children, female-body acquires a deep connection with nature, plants, land, soil, and animals as well. According to Ariel Salleh, "Eco-feminism is a recent development in feminist thought which argues that the current global environmental crisis is a predictable outcome of patriarchal culture" (31). Nature is idealized and simultaneously romanticized by using metaphors of deep ecology. The term such as, 'Mother Earth' bears such evidence of comparing nature with affectionate, loving woman who has an endless source of nourishment. The romantics perceive mother-nature as a pure woman or sometimes as a 'Platonic woman' who is beyond any physical dimension. This idealization and romanticisation of nature is further portrayed as a vulnerable, feeble, pervious, pusillanimous female-figure whom patriarchy must protect. This protecting attitude is masked by man's underlying desire to control and degrade woman and nature.

Srijit Mukherjee's Hindi film *Begum Jaan* (2017) is actually a remake of his own much acclaimed Bengali film *Rajkahini* (2015). At the very outset of the film, harassment of a girl inside an empty bus occurs at Connaught Place, New Delhi in 2016 which immediately reminds us the notorious real rape incident in 2012. The story soon leads us back in the year 1947 at the very moment of independence of India. Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India orders Cyril Radcliffe to draw two lines—one on the North-Western part dividing Punjab Province and the other on the Eastern part dividing Bengal Province. The North-Western line is going between two cities of Sakkergharh and Dorangla and literally dividing the brothel of Begum Jaan who lives with a number of girls who are somehow forsaken by their own families or rape victims of communal riots. There are also an old woman, a girl-child, two men and two dogs at that mansion. Two government officers are trying to evict them from their *kothi* as Radcliffe line will pass directly through the bordello dividing the mansion, parting the country and the lives of these isolated women as well. At this very point, the

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difference between mother-land, territory, women-bodies, nature coagulate and become a mere play-thing in hands of patriarchal politicians.

Etymologically the word 'nation' comes from Old French word *nacion*—meaning 'place of origin' which in its turn comes from the Latin word *nation* which means 'birth'. So the word 'nation' is related to a person's birth place, own territory, homeliness, closeness to nature, freedom or motherland which can further be related to a clan's "matrilocality, matrilinearity" (Mies 125). The word 'motherland' means *janmabhumi* in Sanskrit where *bhumi* can easily be associated with *Bhumi-Devi* or 'goddess-earth'. According to Orenstein, Goddess spirituality "does not separate heaven and earth, spirit and matter, human and animal; [it is] a spirituality that images the Earth as sacred, and the Goddess as the Great Mother of all life" (6). On the other hand, the word 'state' is related to masculine quality or fatherliness—powered by politicians, military persons, fanatic zealots whose intention is to convert the 'mother-nation' into 'father-state'. In both films, Begum Jaan, her girls, Lenny and her governess become synonymous with home-land/Mother-Nation and consequently are ravished by the military-men/Father-State. On the very day of independence, the titular character Begum Jaan says, "For a prostitute all days are same, teacher. Once the lights are off, men are just men. This brothel is like a nation. And freedom" (Mukherji 21:04-21:17). In another scene, while replying to the Teacher's question about independence of India, Begum Jaan says, "Independence is only for men. Women don't even have the freedom to abuse. How can we hurl abuses at our mother and sisters" (Mukherji 20:17-20:25). Maria Mies does rightly argue:

Since the beginning of the modern nation-state (the fatherlands), women have been colonized. This means the modern nation-state necessarily controlled their sexuality, their fertility and their work capacity or labour power. Without this colonization neither capitalism nor the modern nation state could have been sustained. And it is this colonization that constitutes the foundation of what is now being called 'civil society'. . . . The state must also exercise control of women, because its needs soldiers to defend its territory, functionaries for its bureaucracy; and, too, the economy needs new labourers and consumers. Women are essential for this procreation of people. (120)

Colonization of women must be done not only to satisfy the congenital sadism but also to control the economy and population of military-men of our state. These purposes can only be achieved by allocating home-land and mangling its indigenous people and women.

Mehta's film starts in 1997 and in flashback the narrator speaks about the incidents of her childhood in Lahore in March, 1947. The narrator Lenny says, "Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs who had lived together as one entity for centuries suddenly started to clamor for pieces of India for themselves.

The arbitrary line of division the British would draw to carve up India in August of 1947 would scar the subcontinent forever” (Mehta 02:06-02:34). The friends from different religions who regularly gather at park—in the midst of nature, forget their friendly coexistence and soon become enemy to each other. Enmity towards nature, mother-land transforms their lives into a hellish one. The destruction of both ‘female-body’ and ‘mother-nation’ occur simultaneously as both become plaything in the hand of politicians who represents patriarchy. Mies comments:

To legitimize this militarization of men and the ‘logic of warfare’ and to bring about their identification with a fatherland, it is essential that the yearning for the destroyed and lost ‘motherlands’ (homelands) be mobilized and projected on to the nation-state. Nationalism, as well as religious fundamentalism, thrive on the socio-psychological plane, on these yearnings and projections. (124)

Territory and woman become similar. Land is controlled, mastered, divided, cultivated like a female-body and her womb is tilled like a virgin land. Begum Jaan says, “These two countries are playing the game of independence and so we must move out of our home. Our home, our land. I even marked a place for my burial. For years, I sold my flesh. I never imagined my brothel will be broken into two. Our bodies will be partitioned” (Mukherji 01:37:08-01:38:08). This allocation of territory and ravishment of women transforms the mother-land into a female-body and vice-versa and hence, “two bodies, woman’s and earth’s, are sympathetic” (Lauter 19). Mies comments, “The discussion on rape and warfare or militarism for long centered on the question of whether men are inherently more aggressive than women. The root cause was thus sought in the psychological and physiological difference between men and women, while the economic and political context was often ignored” (123). Whenever nature is feminized, it is sexualized and simultaneously culture is masculinized. Phrases, such as, “rape of the land”, “virgin ground” bear such evidences. Both mother and mother-earth are emblems of fertility, fecundity and bounty. Both are tortured, molested and raped by father-nation. In Mukherjee’s film, after making the mansion ablaze, the abettor appointed by the officers attempt to rape the devastated, homeless girls including Begum Jaan. And in Mehta’s film, the governess, Shanta becomes an easy prey of the frantic riotous people thereby proving the “twin domination of woman and nature” (Warren 6). The loss of the nourishing mother-figure is so immense that even after fifty years, Lenny says, “I lost a large part of myself” (Mehta 01:35:32).

After surveying the traumatic experience of rape-survivors, it is found that they are being treated as nothing but lumps of meat. These immolated women are either treated simply as lumps of masses or animals which are consumable to assuage the fleshly hunger. Carol Adams argues, “When women are victims of violence, the treatment of animals is recalled” (43). Woman’s body is also dissected like an animal and it is fragmented and objectified in slangs—cunt, pussy, tits etc. Begum

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Jaan says, “Sir, your Mr. Radcliffe turned out to be a butcher. And an amateur at that. If he wanted to divide the country he should’ve been gentle and surgical. [. . .] Ribs, thighs, kidneys, liver, slicing in the middle . . .” (Mukherji 47:43-48:05). Women are treated most cruelly in war fares. The dead body of Dil Navaz’s sister is carried in a train full of corpses. Lenny asks, “Ice Candy Man, did you see your sisters in the gunny sack?” (Mehta 56:59). Things which are ecocentric such as woman’s body, land, nature, animal are marginalized. On the other hand, whatever is androcentric, masculine, cultured are centralized and are given higher status in power structure resulting in a “hierarchial dualism” (Warren 6). Man is superior to woman, animal, nature and consequently he represents himself as a ‘hunter’. The very act of killing establishes his superiority. Women are compared to animals as Begum Jaan is compare to a snake by the officer, “Actually she is a serpent” (Mukherji 4:01). Sometime natural phenomenon like measurement of month is also done by comparing it to a feminine feature as Begum Jaan says, “We certainly know a thing or two about periods and months. They leave me bloodied every single time” (Mukherji 51:41-51:46). To eradicate the women from that place, Kabir, even slaughters the pet dogs of the gunman Salim and make them eat the meat of that dog. Slaughter of the dog for shadows the mass-killing of the girls. He even compares the flesh of the dog with “your meat” (Mukherji 01:21:01). Not only the adult women, but also the girl-children—the little friend of Lenny is married to an aged dwarf and the traumatic rape-survived girl is offered to the elderly Raja Sahib. In both cases these girls are decorated with jewelries and cosmetics. Celebration of the freedom of motherland is actually the celebration before her immolation. As a dead body is decorated before the funeral, the nature and female bodies are also decorated before destruction.

Begum Jaan and her companions fight bravely when Kabir and his abettors attack them. They throw lighted torches into the brothel and make the entire mansion engulfed by flame. Begum Jaan and the other surviving girls determine to stay inside the igneous house as they consider themselves the indigenous people of that place. Eventually they burn to death like the brave historical figure Rani Padmavati of Chittorgarh who “jumped into that fire and let her self-esteem prevail. She made it immortal” (Mukherji 01:59:53). This episode of incineration evokes the witch-hunting incident of past centuries. Only after killing of these ‘bad-women’ or witches, the images of ‘good-women’ will come out who are nourishing, malleable and motherly and they will depend completely on ‘father-state’. Mies comments, “This holocaust of women was not, as is usually assumed, an outcome of dark, superstitious Middle Ages, but was contemporaneous with the beginning of the New Ages, of modernity, the era of discoveries and inventions, of modern science and technology But it [witch-hunting] must be reiterated that this orgy of violence was the foundation upon which modern science, medicine, economy and the modern state were built up” (145-46).

During colonial period, the image of 'Mother India' stands for inspiration for the freedom fighters. Shockingly after independence this image of 'Mother India' is transformed into the image of 'Bharat Mata' by the thoughts of fundamentalists. The provenance of power transfigures into the cause of communal conflict. Vandana Shiva does rightly argue:

The paradoxical process of the masculinization of the mother-land has been that precisely when external borders disappear, new, internal borders and boundaries are being created. It seems that deeper the global integration, the deeper the national integration. The further removed centres of governance become from people's lives, the deeper are the divisions that appear where there was diversity before. (109)

With the division of land on the basis of ethnicity and religion, "meaning and identity [also] shift from soil to the state and from plural histories to a singular . . . ethnic religious, and regional differences which persist are forced into the straight-jacket of 'narrow nationalism'" (Shiva 112). Diversity is transformed into duality, inclusion becomes exclusion, cohabitation is mutated into coercion. Rather considering 'diversity' as a ground of abundance and prosperity, it is considered as a cause of 'disintegration'. The demolition of the living beings of a land or soil also leads to the decimation of the status quo of the society. The very idea of forming nations on the basis of religion or ethnicity leads to nothing but a parochial nationalism.

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