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"Imaging the Oppressed": Genderscapes in Selected Documentaries

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ABSTRACT
Ecofeminist scholarship, particularly in India, has by and large concentrated on unearthing and documenting unequal and oppressive gender-power relations in the socio-political and economic contexts of the natural environment. The undeniable facts of women's exploitation and subjugation in Indian farming and food production gain additional gender dimensions when seen in relation to the processes of government-backed developmental schemes and the larger project of globalisation. It has been observed that films/documentaries purporting to record gender oppressions in Indian agriculture and natural resource management tend not to go beyond a stark portrayal of abject gendered suffering in their "imaging of the oppressed". There is a similar tendency in ecofeminism to link the impact of globalised notions of development/progress with the trajectories of oppression in the arena of women/nature. This has been viewed by recent critics as being somewhat essentialist and self-limiting in scope; it has also been pointed out that such a view, often adhered to by pro-women activists and environmentalists, positions Third World women inescapably as always-already victims of developmental and environmental degradation. Critics such as Sumi Krishna have taken issue with the romanticised image of the unchanging, self-contained village community in India as ahistorical and naive and understand it as a construct of foreign anthropologists and Indian nationalists. Recent scholarship has questioned the positing of the so-called equilibrium of the Indian traditional agricultural community against the sweeping changes of globalised progress/development strategies, exposing the former as something that is maintained through caste/gender oppressions and through women's drudgery and subordination. The purpose of this paper is to attempt to highlight the ways in which it is possible to move beyond mere portrayals of women's victimization, while documenting the deadly trap of the feminization of poverty in relation to Indian agricultural-developmental practices, in three selected documentary films.
Key words: gender, ecofeminism, gender oppression, portrayal of women

One of the most distinct features of Third World ecofeminism is that it makes direct connections between eco-degradation and gendered injustices. Some of the most common motifs of this ideology, in relation to women's life-worlds in Indian agriculture, are eco-ethics, the 'tragedy of the commons', ecocidal destruction, male-dominated land stewardship, profit-based maximisation of agricultural productivity, and consequent eco-martyrdom. India's entry into a globalised market, as ecofeminists (e.g. Vandana Shiva) have pointed out, has been a crucial factor in exacerbating the already-existing gender/caste/class hierarchies and oppressions in Indian agriculture and ecology. The grand narrative of globalisation

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makes use of the notions of 'development' and 'progress' in ways that are, according to many ecofeminists, inimical and destructive to both women and nature. The three short documentary films selected here (made by independent journalists Kavita Bahl and Nandan Saxena) record how Indian agriculture, food production and ecology, in which women have a vital part, are being sacrificed in the all-invasive, overarching and inescapable rhetoric of 21st century global cultural discourse.

Cotton for my Shroud (*CFMS*) traces the disastrous ecological and social consequences of the forcible introduction of the Monsanto genetically engineered Bt. cotton seeds by the Maharashtra government in the cotton growing belt of Vidarbha. *Candles in the Wind* (*CITW*) records the deeply ironical underbelly of the so-called Green Revolution in the wheat-growing parts of the Punjab region, directly connecting the modernisation of agriculture with the increase of cancer, farmer debt, suicide and human and ecological degradation on an unprecedented scale, and the direct impact of these on women's life-worlds. *Dammed* demonstrates through its visuality the play of meaning in the title of the film: the displacement and abandonment of the already-marginalised adivasi communities condemned to destitution by the government-backed damming of the Narmada river.

The ecological theorist Buell points out how the factors that define a given bio-region have moved inexorably from the local and indigenous to the transnational and global (Brereton 141-2). Local agricultural practices in a globalising India are becoming irrelevant to the project of modernity and are ruthlessly being eliminated by the government as unprofitable in the global scheme of things. Traditional notions of identity as belonging with the land, community and occupation are being replaced violently with the strategies of profit and loss. Viewed through the lens of conventional ecofeminism, the three documentaries trace both the unsustainability of the practices of development and their impact on already-existing social and gendered injustice. The films illustrate how the pressures generated by discourses of global thinking have eroded the traditional language of eco-sustainability, by exposing the links between the use of high-yield GM seeds, chemical fertilizers, intensive irrigation, high input costs, loans, debts, the larger world of State-backed global market forces and the ultimate impact on the women involved.

Within the arena of Indian ecofeminism, however, there are various opposing theoretical positions. The most commonly-understood strand, as propagated by ecocritics like Vandana Shiva, operates on assumptions such as biologically-determined division of labour and gender roles, the binary positioning of urban vs. rural spaces, as well as women-as-nurturers and men-as-exploiters, a direct connection between a dominant 'male' power discourse of commercialism and the further marginalisation and disenfranchisement of women/degradation of nature, a celebratory privileging of the 'feminine' principle which believes in the intrinsic nature of women's interaction with environment and natural resources, together with a belief that nature preservation should be done for its own sake. Others, namely Sumi Krishna, argue that this kind of ecofeminism is somewhat essentialist and that the predominant stance of pro-women activists and environmentalists is to position Third World women as constant victims of developmental and ecological degradation. Her objections to conventionally understood ecofeminism stems from, among other arguments, the contention that there is nothing intrinsic about women's relation with nature, and that an environmentally damaging development may not necessarily be detrimental to women only. Likening Vandana Shiva's theoretical stance to that of Western deep ecology, Krishna argues that it is perfectly possible to engage with gender-environment issues while remaining distant

from a simplistic and fundamentalist position, especially in the field of natural resource management(69).

I attempt, in this paper, to read the selected film-texts in the context of the interface created by these different ecofeminist positions. Significant parts of the selected documentaries can be seen as being illustrative of the traditional ecofeminist paradigm. For instance, in both *CFMS* and *CITW*, the Monsanto-marketed genetically modified non-regenerative seed requiring intensive irrigation and chemical fertiliser is exposed as the crucial factor in the deadly trap of degradation of farming land, crop failure, farmers' debt and suicide, destitution and increased vulnerability of the widowed women and orphaned children. In an interview-excerpt in *CFMS*, Vandana Shiva opines that seed-replacement is the code word used by the government if and when it gives compensation to the family of the farmer who has committed suicide; any financial relief thereof is negated since the loan/compensation money is specifically earmarked to replace traditionally-preserved seed with GM seed which is pest-prone, fragile and unsuited to the Indian soil and climate. Whoever controls the agro-chemical-fertiliser-seed companies, she says, controls the Indian agricultural scene and market as it is today, and consequently the food security in the country (Monsanto holds 95% of the seed supply and chemical fertiliser enterprise). The negative consequences of a profit-driven economy tell most upon those small and poor farmers who have succumbed to the trap of substituting traditional low-cost food crops like ragi and jowar with cash crops (like Bt. Cotton), in a bid to make a quick profit or to repay existing loans. Vandana Shiva points out that when all fails the farmer he and his family face immediate starvation, since cotton cannot be eaten, Bt. or any other variety. Subsistence food crops like maize, traditionally grown alongside the main crops, will not grow simultaneously with a GM crop which requires a different pattern of cultivation.

Between 2001 and 2007, according to Bahl and Saxena, 200,000 farmers who grew Bt. cotton committed suicide, some by drinking the very endosulfan pesticide they had taken loans to buy (*CFMS*). Both these films reveal, through interviews with the widowed women, how globally-marketed hybrid seed is projected through government sponsored media: their ads hit on the four most basic crucial needs of the average small farmer—daughter's marriage, son's employment, housing and medical care for aging parents—selling the seed as the miraculous ingredient which will help him achieve all these goals through profit. In actual experience, a very different cycle is set in motion by the farmer who invests in GM seed: untested hybrid seed—pest infestation—decreased land fertility—more investment in terms of water, labour, fertiliser, pesticide, loan amount—deeper debt—inability to meet vagaries of drought, flood, famine, market price fluctuations—the absence of government support price - suicide from despair. If at all there is a good crop from hybrid seed, the surplus does not benefit the farmer because the government is pressurised by the WTO corporate lobby to invest in cheap imports, which will lead to a price-crash which the local farmer cannot compete against. In short, as Saxena points out, the farmer whose toil feeds the entire country is himself facing starvation, along with the inability to repay loans or sow next year's crops (*CFMS*). The farmer's widow and orphans are even lower in the food chain. The opening images of *CITW* show a group of widowed Punjabi women of widely varying ages manually picking for leftovers in a wheat field that has been mechanically harvested, throwing into sharp focus the fact that women in Indian farming communities have, by and large, been left completely out of the processes of modernised agriculture and that its technologies have increased the gaps in already existing gender hierarchies.

The narratives of both these documentaries expose the textbook adage that India lives in her villages as a complete travesty; drawing upon the Gandhian precepts of self-reliance, Saxena comments that any upliftment scheme projected by the welfare state should, by definition and necessity, keep at its centre the poorest and weakest sections of its society if it is to be implemented at all. Swaraj as self-reliance and sustenance has long been forgotten by the governments of independent India, reducing the Gandhian legacy to the symbolism of statues and currency notes and ritual rhetoric on October 2nd and Sarvodaya Day (*CFMS*). The urban-rural divide has increased with the modernisation of Indian agriculture and economy, with the job market being mainly concentrated in cities, and the downward spiral of the farmer's toil.

The widowed women left behind are doubly oppressed in the sense that they have to now shoulder the burdens of what are traditionally understood as 'male' responsibilities: raising their orphaned children, paying off the debts, and managing daily sustenance, their own and that of dependants. These gendered roles have to be played out while being restrained by the patriarchal frameworks by which they have been bound, as women and now as widows. Variations in age and social status work against them in the struggle for survival; the death of a male 'protector' figure leaves the old and young alike vulnerable to an unsupported uncertain future, to sexual and other kinds of predation by local moneylenders, who often force them to sell their land to pay off debt. This in turn leads to the growing phenomenon of once-landed farming communities becoming landless labourers and migrant daily-wage workers. The struggle for survival is so brutal that it also precludes the pursuance of traditional local skills like weaving and embroidery, which Vandana Shiva characterises as the "cushion" which would ensure their livelihood security (*CFMS*).

In tracing the tragic history of Bt. cotton farmers and their ultimate suicides, *CFMS* seemingly veers away from specifically examining, as *CITW* does, the lives of the women involved. A closer look, however, makes us realise that this seeming lacuna consciously points to a crucial aspect of female oppression, i.e. the double entrapment of the patriarchal socio-cultural norms by which their lives are bound, plus the victimisation as a consequence of the globally-factored economic meltdown of which they are forced to be a part. The culture of silence in which patriarchy implicitly binds these women prevents them from even articulating their sense of loss and grief, let alone of the economic-social calamity brought about through the death of their men folk. In almost every household shown in the film, where a farmer's suicide has happened, the women sit indoors, their tear-stricken faces veiled from the public and their voices choked. But this is not mere "imaging the oppressed", to borrow Manu Chakravarthy's phrase (9 -10). I argue that the documentary goes beyond stark portrayal of oppression and ably demonstrates, instead, through specific images of female suffering, the literal as well as metaphoric invisibility of women in agriculture, the more so when things go wrong. An example of this prescriptive invisibility is to be seen in the clipping which shows Lakshmi Manikrao Modak (the sister of a Vidarbha farmer shot dead in a police clash with agitating farmers) arguing for her dead brother's rights, alongside the Guardian Minister's speech to the Press. The simultaneous talkers are completely at variance with each other: the 'male' narrative is of Bt. cotton seeds = economic success, while the not-oft-heard 'female' narrative is of hybrid seeds = suicide. What is significant is that the Minister's speech, apart from its total disengagement with Lakshmi's expression of actual and real concerns, is shown up as completely negating and drowning out the demands of the downtrodden woman, rendering her voiceless. This clip emerges as a metaphor for the large and destructive sweep of global economic forces, which does away with indigenous and small-scale agricultural producers, who do not contribute to its modern project of creating

profit-based wealth. The image of young women dressed in colourful clothes dancing to harvest songs in green fields, oft-used in commercial cinema, is a construct that seeks to romanticise the Indian village community as an unchanging, self-contained entity which can be relied upon in times of confusing and disorienting global change. The ecotheorist Sumi Krishna takes exception to this romantic image as being ahistorical and naive, besides having been a construct of foreign anthropologists and later of Indian nationalists (15). To posit the equilibrium of a traditional community against the sweeping changes of progress/development strategies is self-defeating, she says, because this traditional life is maintained through caste/gender oppression and through women's drudgery and subordination (Krishna 16).

In his book *Moving Images: Multiple Realities*, Manu Chakravarthy speaks of how the notion of individuality becomes political in the context of globalisation; he argues that while imaging the oppressed, it is important to take stock of their individual/collective socio-cultural realities and local/daily survival skills (which may be embedded in socio-cultural codes) if the imaging is to transcend mere portrayal of oppression: " ... the relative truth (is) that the oppressed might cherish their abundant creative sources and imaginative powers to sustain themselves amidst all their gloom and hardship, even if all that cannot really help them overcome the darkness of their existential reality ..." (1 – 11). There are some instances of widowed women in the selected documentaries shown as courageously withstanding the tragic texture of their individual lives, deriving meaning in creative ways from their narrow and unyielding life-worlds; in *CFMS*, a young woman who lost her husband to debt-related suicide now teaches the local children in an Anganwadi, while in *CITW*, another widow with three children abandoned by the extended family is seen painting with bright colours some handmade toy wooden trucks for sale outside her home. Both these and other women speak with a confidence born of utter hardship, of being able to pay off their debts through their own hard work, of fending off the predatory advances of the moneylender and family relatives, of bringing up their children with self-respect and dignity. Another memorable image in *CITW* is of a family of destitute widowed women battling with debt, starvation and untreated cancer offering Kavita Bahl a glass of milk, while refusing her individually-offered monetary support, saying she was like a daughter come home to them, and it was they who ought to be giving her a gift. Yet another example is of Karamjeet Kaur in *CITW*, a young widow who has decided to continue her struggle for survival for the sake of her small children, having, in her own words, turned her heart to stone and referring to herself as an ox in the shafts. Amazingly, this reference in the film does not signify feelings of dehumanisation, but instead draws upon the stoicism and endurance of a beast of burden in order to know and negotiate her present condition. These instances illustrate what Sumi Krishna calls "'situated knowledge', (which) reflects the experience and perspective of the person who is located in a particular situation", a concept she identifies as central to feminist epistemology. They also demonstrate that "a feminist standpoint is not the articulation of women's experience in itself, but the insights and theories about nature and social relations that are produced by such a perspective" (Krishna 59).

The regional and local richness of detail in all three films make them excellent examples of traditional ecofeminism, while at the same time, they do not stop with imaging women's oppression, but go on to document women's survival strategies in such ways as to prevent us from seeing them as mere pitiable victims. Both *CITW* and *Dammed* show to some extent a creative realisation of the 'feminine' principle by the people affected by modernity. The widowed women in *CITW* and the displaced and abandoned adivasi women in *Dammed* are partly supported by the Bharatiya Kisan Union-Ekta (Ugrahan) and Narmada Bachao

Andolan respectively. But their own collective efforts at rehabilitation, which necessarily stem from resistance to oppressive measures at their own local grassroot level, are generated through a revivification of the so-called 'feminine' principle. This revival mainly comes about through their recognition of the gendered and patriarchal frameworks within which they and it have survived. For instance, the farmer widows of Punjab have been successful in getting liquor shops shut down in their villages, and in some cases, ensuring government procurement of their crops by stopping a train and chasing off the police who had come to arrest them. In *Dammed*, the displaced adivasis demonstrate their protest against the dam by submerging themselves for 16 days at a stretch in the very floodwaters that it has created and which has displaced them from their homes. They are able to do this by drawing upon the traditional connotations associated with the image of the river as a nurturing mother-figure. Amazingly, when the flood waters of the selfsame river invade their villages and render them destitute and homeless, the displaced adivasis' celebratory attitude to nature does not change because of their immediate recognition of the calamity as a man-made one.

The idea of "'feminist environmentalism'" has been forwarded by Bina Agarwal as an alternative to traditional ecofeminism. Accordingly:

> "'People's relationship with nature is centrally rooted in and shaped by their material reality. Ideological constructions of women and nature impinge on this relationship but cannot be seen as the whole of it. People's responses to environmental degradation thus also need to be understood in the context of their material reality, their everyday interactions with nature, and their dependence on it for survival. To the extent that both women and men of poor peasant and tribal households are dependent on natural resources for livelihoods or for particular needs, both are likely to have a stake in environmental protection...'"(qtd. in Krishna 72)

The film *Dammed* does not foreground the problems of women alone, but takes into its purview the impact of developmental narratives on all those affected by it. The oustees' knowledge of notions of freedom, democracy, constitutional and human rights and nationhood, as documented in the film, not only dispel modernity's construct of adivasis in general as backward and ignorant, but expose these very same ideas as mirages in the overarching narrative of development, through the construction of dams in particular. The oustees of the Indira Sagar Dam and the Sardar Sarovar Dam were paid Rs. 135/- individually as compensation by a government whose agent (National Hydro Power Corporation Ltd) made 3000 crores profit after taxes by building dams, according to Bahl and Saxena's researches. Bigger compensations were paid only to those who complied with the Government's condition that the displaced also demolish their own houses and settlements before evacuation. The clash between the priorities of the development project and local material realities is illustrated in one oustee's lament that a few currency notes cannot compensate for the loss of one's entire life-world. The film also clearly points to the traditionally evolved adivasi knowledge of the dams as ecological disasters: they create stagnant toxic disease-breeding pools instead of free-flowing clean water, they overflow and break, leading to flash floods, they divert water unnaturally causing inundation of inhabited areas, drought in cultivated lands and deforestation. If a distinction is to be made between displacement and marginalisation, as Manu Chakravarthy avers, it is by arguing that alternatives become possible by the very nature of displacement, but not so in the case of those marginalised, who might lose even the little they have (43-45). This distinction blurs when applied to the film *Dammed*, however, because the always-already marginalised adivasis are further disempowered by displacement, caused by forces of modernity such as damming.

The film brings out the politics of oppression in terms of caste/class /gender without the foregrounding of women's perspectives as seen in the other two films. One of the strongest criticisms levelled against the activism of the NBA is that it has not prioritised women's rights as the focus of its struggle, with no recognition of women's roles in public/private life-worlds (Krishna 338). While noting that women's participation in environmental protests has not led to their emancipation from patriarchal authority structures (322-323), Sumi Krishna points out that any land rights/environment/natural resources movement that emphasises women's roles solely as nurturers also does not really empower women in the larger sense of the term, nor liberate them from the patriarchal structures of which they are a part (342). What emerges clearly in all three films is that the hegemonising forces of modernity are such that those who cannot cope or contribute are ruthlessly eliminated and destroyed, even as they resist its erosive influence. The "politics of abandonment" (Chakravarthy 49) is shown to be at work in ways that cut across caste/class /gender and render the problematics of a traditional ecofeminist approach even more complex.

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