



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol.2.S.1.,2015



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print);2349-9451(online)

TRANSACTION FROM INSCRIPTION TO VISUAL: A STUDY OF BAPSI SIDHWA'S
CRACKING INDIA AND DEEPA MEHTA'S *EARTH*

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ABSTRACT

Transaction from a novel to a screenplay is, indeed, more an exercise of critical insight than just pulling dialogues from the pages of a book. Hence, in the comparative study between a novel and its filmic adaptation, it becomes essential to address the question: what is left out, added, and altered in the film and why? The objective of my article is to investigate the problem of representing the Partition of India in 1947 in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India* (1991) and its cinematic adaptation Deepa Mehta's *Earth* (1999) by comparing the two with particular focus on the depiction of body, border and betrayal. My method consists in interrogating the ways in which Mehta's film translates Sidhwa's narrative through an examination of the differences between the two works. I argue that while Sidhwa in *Cracking India* portrays multiple and playful forms of desire of the body as well as the violence on men and women's bodies during the Partition, Mehta's *Earth* features violence against the bodies within the matrix of nationalist violence.

Article Info:

Article Received:10/04/2015

Revised on: 17/04/2015

Accepted on: 22/04/2015

Key Words: Partition novel, Partition film, Bapsi Sidhwa, Deepa Mehta

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INTRODUCTION

George Bluestone, one of the first critics to study film adaptations of novels, in the beginning of his famous book *Novels into Film* quotes Joseph Conrad and D. W. Griffith to discuss the common intention of the novelist and the director. In Preface to *Nigger of the Narcissus* (1897), Conrad famously declares his novelistic intention: "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the powers of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make to see" (qt. in Bluestone 1). Sixteen years later Griffith, echoes Conrad when he confesses the aim of his cinema in the following words: "The task I am trying to achieve is above all to make you see" (qt. in Bluestone 1). The common agenda of a novel and a film—to make the reader and the audience "see"—also points at the differences between the two media. Bluestone makes the significant observation that "between the percept of the visual image and the concept of the mental image lies the root

difference between the two media" (1). Film stimulates the audience's perceptions directly through visual images. The juxtaposition of verbal language with colour, movement, and sound articulates a direct sensory experience than reading. On the other hand, reading a novel permits us the freedom a film denies—to interact with the plot or characters by imagining them in our minds. Absence of time constraints in a novel is replaced by compression of events into two hours or so in a film. The narrator, who mediates the meaning through his or her point of view in a novel, largely disappears in the film.

Along all such arguments, in the debate on transaction between fiction and film, a question becomes very pertinent: How faithful to the original written work should a film version strive to be? Bluestone believes that the filmmaker is an independent artist, "not a translator for an established author, but a new author in his own right" (62). Film adaptations are characterised by readjusting and restructuring of space and time tropes. In addition, the epistemic underpinnings of the representation of the visualization of the written undergo change in its power of gaze and ideological perspective.

Nevertheless, it is important to ask in filmic adaptation of a novel, what is left out, added, altered and why?

METHOD AND ARGUMENT

This article does not intend to argue about the richness of novels and the paucity of cinema, nor seek to establish the authenticity of either the 'original' text versus the adapted. With the interdisciplinary terrain of the literary and film studies gaining momentum, the present study seeks to address the representation of the Partition of India in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India* (1991, U.S.; originally published as *Ice Candy Man* in England, 1988), and its filmic adaptation Deepa Mehta's *Earth* (1999) by comparing the two works. I argue that while Sidhwa in *Cracking India* portrays multiple and playful forms of desire of the body as well as the violence on men and women's bodies during the Partition, Mehta's *Earth* features violence against the bodies within the matrix of nationalist violence.

DISCUSSION

Before attempting a comparison between the novel and the film, it is worthwhile to probe into the biography of both the artists. Sidhwa's unique position of being a Parsee Pakistani diasporic writer outside of the Hindu-Muslim-Sikh divide allows her to document the birth of Pakistan differently. Like Sidhwa, her narrator Lenny is a child of privilege, born into an upper-middle class Parsee family and is thus a doubly "neutral" narrator, by virtue of her age and ethno-religious affiliation. Mehta, on the other hand, was born into a Hindu family in Amritsar and her family migrated to Canada during the Partition. She began *Earth* in 1997, with the historical backdrop of the year that marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Partition. Therefore, *Earth* participated in a moment of collective remembering and it came with a nationalist agenda. My analysis of the biographic here is to suggest that the politics of ethnicity has also its role in the shaping and making of each work.

Mehta's adaptation of *Cracking India* into *Earth* makes many interesting additions as well as omissions. The shift from a young Lenny narrating the novel to an adult voiceover as the narrator in the film indicates from the beginning the kinds of changes that would take place in Mehta's film. It can not be denied that certain omissions become essential to translate a novel to the screen due to the difference between written as opposed to visual and auditory media. While Sidhwa's novel comprises of nearly 300 pages, the screenplay for the film had to be shortened to fit the 101 minutes feature film length. In her selection, Mehta excludes certain female characters such as Slavesister, Godmother, Electric Aunt and Hamida. Lenny is the narrator and hence, interpreter of everything in the novel, but the film does not accord her the status. Many instances like Lenny's frequent visits to the house of Godmother, her conversation with Gandhiji, the mother's use of petrol to help move women across the border are completely absent in *Earth*. A whole section called "Ranna's story" which describes the bodily suffering of a Muslim boy and occupies substantial importance in the novel, is reduced to an insignificant short narrative by a nameless boy at the camp in the film. Mehta excludes some other characters, but retains some of their scenes and assigns those to other characters, i.e. Masseur gives Ayah a ride in his cycle in place of Sharbat Khan, Ice-candy-man threatens to drop Lenny suspended from the air instead of her brother Adi, etc.

The film was first screened at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 1998; it was released in 1999 in India and the U.S.; and it has since had screenings in England, Australia, and France. It received varied responses across these locations—from deeply affected and enthusiastic to unmoved and critical. Kavita Daiya in her book *Violent Belongings* has criticised the movie. She pointed out that the film fails to fully represent the novel which has two threads in its narrative: “one is the story of the domestic, everyday conflicts and concerns that mark Lenny’s coming of age; the second is the story of how partition, ethnic violence and migration dramatically change the lives and relationships centred upon Lenny’s Hindu nanny, Ayah” (58). *Earth* relegates the coming of age of Lenny and elides the complex relationships and betrayals that Lenny slowly apprehends in her family like her mother being abused and cheated on by her father evident from the bruises on her body. The film also ignores Lenny’s awakening to sexuality, a part of her coming of age, which is mainly featured in the novel through her curious conversations and sexual play with Cousin. She notices and understands the covetous glances Ayah earns from men. Lenny’s growing realization of her sexuality can be marked in her interest as well as understanding of the bodily violence and violation that surround her. In her essay “Border Work, Border Trouble: Postcolonial Feminism and the Ayah in Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India*,” Ambreen Hai draws attention to how Ayah’s body mediates Lenny’s own sexual awakenings:

[Ayah] becomes the “subject” of Lenny’s story, the object lesson of her own adolescence. . . . Ayah is for Lenny simultaneously both [an] intensely desired self and other; she embodies a desirable adult femaleness that Lenny herself both ardently desires and desires to be. . . . It is perhaps Lenny’s desire for this body for which this body will later be punished, and Lenny’s desire subsumed by accusations of male violation. (396-397)

The novel brings out Lenny’s ambivalent attitude towards sexuality and opposite sex which is shaped by the ever pervasive character of violation of bodies in her world through her relationship to both her ayahs—Shanta and Hamida (the ayah who replaces Shanta is from a refugee camp of “fallen women”).

The multiple stories of love, violence and betrayal remain unexplored in Mehta’s film due to another reason. Rani Neutill rightly comments that an analysis of Mehta’s feminist trilogy of films—*Fire*, *Earth*, and *Water*—reveals that each film intends to represent a single form of violence against women within South Asia (74). *Fire* deals with the repressive apparatuses of the family and religion that work to suppress same-sex female desires, *Earth* with violence against women during the Partition and *Water* with the social restrictions imposed on widows in Hinduism during the mid-twentieth century. In her engagement with documenting such oppressions individually, Mehta misses the complexities of desire that saturate *Cracking India*.

But film has its own advantage over the written medium. While Sidhwa’s novel is written in English, Mehta’s film is in Hindi. Mehta takes liberty to incorporate sentences in Urdu, Punjabi, Gujarati, and English in the film which give the idea of the ‘multilinguism’ and ‘multiculturalism’ of the country. Also, since most of the characters are drawn from working class background, the preference of Hindi language and code mixing with other Indian languages was a befitting choice for the film.

Mehta exploits the film’s greater visual potential to render two iconic episodes of the Partition—the train scene and the scene of migration of people which are absent in the novel. In the train scene, the background music becomes loud and disturbing, and the hue is dark. When Ice-candy-man gets onto the “death train,” in the darkness, he gradually recognizes that what his fingers dip into is blood. He identifies the bodies in silhouette— they are in various gestures, upside-down, piled, or mutilated, all dead. In Sidhwa’s literary account, we get a short indirect reporting by Lenny: “‘A train from Gurdaspur has just come in,’ he [Ice-candy-man] announces panting. ‘Everyone in it is dead. Butchered. They are all Muslim’ (149). It suggests that since Lenny is not present on the spot, she is not able to depict the scene that she herself does not witness.

Sidhwa’s novel informs about the mass migration of people in a line that appears in Chapter 20: “wave upon scruffy wave of Muslim refugees flood Lahore—and the Punjab west of Lahore” (159). In the film, Mehta gives a graphic picture of the migration through the perspective of Masseur who is stunned by the scene of desperate, lifeless countless Muslim refugees walking in a procession carrying cattle and children.

They are directed to the refugee camps by the police officers with one of them announcing through a megaphone. Mingled with the sound of babies' crying, the haunting background music becomes heavier and more perturbing. Thus, the dynamics of visual medium visibly alters the structure and content of a literary work; thereby it constitutes a new perspective. Film in this sense becomes an interpretation of the original work. The above two scenes also work to employ the emotional power of melodrama to evoke in a transnational South Asian audience an affective identification with a community united across so many lines of difference.

Since music is one of the strongest sources of emotion in a film, the music in *Earth* is worth analysing. Lipscomb and Tolchinsky in their definition of film music also include musical score, ambient sound, dialogue, sound effects and silence and opine that these elements "overlap or interact with one another, creating a harmonious counterpoint to the visual image" (384). *Earth* has Javed Akhtar as the lyricist and A. R. Rahman as the composer, both being considered the living legends of Indian cinema. The lyrics as well as the music supplement to reinforce, alter, and augment the emotional content of the film. The sound pattern is consistent with the narrative in succession. While the soothing music of the songs "Dheemi Dheemi", "Ruth Aa Gayee Re", etc. in the first part of the film successfully recreates an idyllic world of romance, in the second part the background music is disturbing in the scenes of communal violence and migration. This emotional polyphony of the film has been beautifully captured by its music.

In the representation of the Partition, both Sidhwa and Mehta beautifully present Ayah's transforming state—from the center of fascination to a victim of abduction and rape. Quite early in the novel, Lenny describes how Ayah draws "covetous glances" from a variety of men—beggars, holy men, hawkers, and so on (Sidhwa 3). In *Earth*, Mehta represents the eroticization and objectification of Ayah in the adoration of her admirers in the scene of their meeting in Queen's Garden. In the circle they sit in, Ayah is the center and the admirers compete for her attention. During the conversation, Ayah's sari slips off her shoulder and her admirers all fix their eyes on it. Beginning to be aware of the men's lustful gazes, Ayah puts the sari on. In addition to the male gaze, she receives physical advances from the male characters. Lenny narrates, "Things love to crawl beneath Ayah's sari. Ladybirds, glowworms, Ice-candy-man's toes" (Sidhwa 19). Mehta visualizes this situation as she represents Ice-candy-man's attempt to penetrate inside Ayah's sari with his shoed foot when they sit together under a tree. Ayah gets angry, but Ice-candy-man does not repent and apologizes in a playful manner.

It is worthwhile to analyse two more interesting additions in Mehta's film. Mehta designs and adds a scene of Ayah visiting the house of Ice-candy-man on Basant festival¹ to prefigure Ice-candy-man's desire to control Ayah's body. He teaches Ayah to fly the kite holding her closely and compares the kite to a lover, thereby expressing his wish to regulate her body. However, Ayah does not seem to be strange to these male gazes and acts of sexual harassment; she only "tolerates them" (Sidhwa 19). Her passive reaction suggests her dilemma under the patriarchal oppression. Under this oppression, her body becomes the object where the patriarchal power is imposed. The scene also speaks of communal harmony before the Partition as Hindus and Muslims fly kites together. Perhaps Mehta contrives the episode to bring out the contrast of Ayah's second visit to Ice-candy-man's house which records the violence of the Partition all around and the scene of Muslims burning the Hindu colonies.

During this second visit, Ayah and Lenny also witness a man being tied by his arms and legs to two jeeps which drive in opposite directions—an image whose emotional and psychological impact registers in Lenny's subsequent action of tearing a female cloth doll in half with Cousin's assistance. Mehta's addition is Ayah's frantic attempts to pin the ruptured doll back together. These acts signal Lenny's and Ayah's internalization of the Partition. Ayah's inability to mend the doll and her subsequent loud lament signify that she relates it not only to the division of the country, but also to her impending fate under patriarchy and communal violence. Mehta appropriates this scene to reinforce the traditional comparison of woman with land.

When Independence approaches, the meeting of Ayah and her admirers is shifted to a restaurant. Ayah is no longer the center of the circle. Even though she is welcomed by the admirers, she occupies a more

marginal place at the table. The group consisting of heterogeneous religious affiliations discusses about political and ethnic matters and the talk gradually turns to heated exchanges against each other's religion. Ayah, who showed her disfavour of such a topic in the earlier meeting at the park, remains silent and stuffs food into her mouth. Her position has altered from the centre to the margin.

On the day of Independence, Ayah is represented as even more marginal. She is hardly represented on the screen in the scene when they get together in the house listening to the radio about the news of Independence and the Partition. Mehta makes a meaningful addition to the scene to intensify the situation. We hear Nehru's famous "Tryst with Destiny" speech on the radio: "At the stroke of the midnight hour [August 15, 1947], when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom." These comments invite cynicism and disgust, with one of the characters declaring that "independence from the British will be soaked in our brothers' blood." We can view Ayah with Lenny sitting on her lap at a distance. She is paid little attention, and she takes no part in the discussion. In contrast to her earlier position of being an all encompassing figure consolidating all religious groups—Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Parsee around her, her position becomes marginal with the accentuating of nationalism. Eventually, Ayah receives the utmost violence of national oppression—she is abducted and raped by the Muslim mobs headed by Ice-candy-man and she becomes the sole representative figure of female violation in the film. At a symbolic level Shanta's abduction signifies the loss of the community united across numerous differences. Ambreen Hai notes, "As national borders are drawn to define postcolonial nationhood, the Hindu Ayah becomes the embodiment of the border that is crossed by men of all sorts, the site of transgression itself" (411). The abduction of Ayah at the end of the film is enactment of the form of gendered violence that is implicit in the attitudes of many of the male characters throughout the film.

However, Mehta's film does not represent what happens to Ayah after she is abducted. After the abduction scene occurs the closing scene of the film which represents a much older Lenny in the Queen's Garden with her voiceover saying, "I never set eyes on her again." But *Cracking India* draws an account of Ayah's life after her abduction—her life in a brothel in Lahore and her recovery by Lenny's mother and Godmother. About the ending of *Earth* Kavita Daiya remarks, "*Earth*, thus, reproduces the very silences that feminist historians and anthropologists like Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin have encountered in their attempt to recover and record oral testimonies about the experience of abduction and sexual violence by female survivors" (62). In the novel Ayah refuses to succumb to Ice-candy-man's force and persuasions of love and married respectability, refuses to forget and forgive his betrayal and chooses to cross the border, paradoxically, to retain her identity. This resistance is absent in Mehta's film.

Ambreen Hai complicates the reading of the novel by pointing that the text is silent about Ayah's story after her abduction. Her reference to the silencing in Sidhwa's narrative is not that the Ayah fails to speak of what happened to her, but that the narrative disallows any entry into her mind or feelings or consciousness. Her fate after rape is to be found or to be packed off by other women—Lenny's mother and Godmother; she is not to act but to be acted upon (404). Ayah herself has no voice of agency or independence of purpose—her story is told by Lenny. There can be no "life after rape"² or accession to subjecthood for Ayah in Sidhwa's text. Therefore, there can be no actual "recovery."

Going by Hai's interpretation of Ayah's story, I would suggest that, Ayah's inability to tell her own story in the novel and Mehta's non-inclusion of her post abduction state tell the same story—the silence that still haunts the narration of the violence of the Partition. Even the survivors' accounts such as those included by Butalia, Menon and Bhasin describe murder, suicide and honour killing but do not acknowledge rape. The so-called "recovery" of women in the aftermath of the riots was an attempt to legitimate the new nation-states and both the novel and the film hint that there can be no meaningful recovery.

Both Sidhwa and Mehta illustrate the male body also as a site of violence though with certain differences. In *Cracking India*, Hari, the gardener's body is eroticized and desired in a scene where all other servants and children pretend trying to uncloth him. In the next scene the men attempt, and are successful, at removing his dhoti. The final scene involves Hari's corporeality, wherein he has become Himat Ali, a Muslim and is dressed in a shalwar. The Muslim mob coming in search of him wanted to make sure if he was a proper

Muslim by undoing his shalwar (180-181). Unlike the previous two scenes, the interest in his unwrapped body is apparently purely religious. There is no actual move to expose him and the men ask him to recite the Kalma in order to prove his faith. But in *Earth*, the initial two scenes of playful desire around Hari are absent. Mehta presents the third scene with alterations to represent the bodily violence men experienced during the Partition. The order of demanding Hari recite the Kalma and unclenching him is reversed and he is actually denuded to confirm his faith.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would say that while Sidhwa in *Cracking India* portrays both the violent repercussions on men and women's bodies during the Partition and the multiple and playful forms of desires of the body, Mehta's traditional feminist perspective of delineating violence against the bodies of women and men obscures her ability to picture Sidhwa's novel beyond the matrix of nationalist violence. But she successfully refashions the spirit of the novel with her own vision and tools to reproduce the story of body, border and betrayal in an impressive way.

NOTES:

1. According to the Hindu Calendar, Basant festival falls on the fifth day of lunar month of Magha (in late January or early February) marking the commencement of Spring. Though it is celebrated as a religious festival in many regions of India, in North India and in the Punjab province of Pakistan, it is considered to be a seasonal festival and is celebrated as a festival of kites by people of all religions. Mehta's mention of Basant is significant particularly because the festival speaks of the communal harmony that existed before the Partition.
2. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan in her much acclaimed book *Real and Imagined Women* titles a chapter "Life after Rape," where she invokes the representation of rape in literary texts chosen from varied historical, cultural and racial locations to discuss the different politics they engender within feminism. She focuses particularly on Anuradha Ramanan's Tamil short story "Prison" (1984) in which the protagonist Bhagirathi, a "fallen woman," rebels and decides to live in the house of her rapist, forbids him to touch her again, and thrusts her raped condition upon her rapist. The story offers a different subjective status to a raped woman and the possibility of her life after rape against the traditional feminist solutions like getting legal aid to prosecute her rapist or seeking maintenance from her husband. See, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, "Life after Rape," *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism* (New York: Routledge, 1993): 61-78.

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