

RIVISTA DEGLI STUDI ORIENTALI  
NUOVA SERIE

RIVISTA DEGLI STUDI ORIENTALI

NUOVA SERIE

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DIPARTIMENTO DI STUDI ORIENTALI  
SAPIENZA, UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

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IN CLASSICAL AND MODERN INDIA

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FABRIZIO SERRA EDITORE

Pisa · Roma

Casella postale n. 1, Succursale 8, I 56123 Pisa

*Uffici di Pisa:* Via Santa Bibbiana 28, I 56127 Pisa,  
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‘WOMANIZING’ NATURE IN INDIA:  
A FEW CONSIDERATIONS ON THE POLITICS  
OF REPRESENTATION OF TRIBAL WOMEN  
IN BENGALI FICTION

MARA MATTA

This paper discusses the relationship between woman and nature in India from the point of view of contemporary Indian literature and cinema. Nature in India has been often allegorized as either a powerful maternal force or as the site of sexual enticement and ultimate seduction. The binary woman/nature has been pitted against that of man/culture, creating a dichotomy that entangles the destiny of Indian women to that of Indian natural resources, both downgraded by patriarchal customary laws and an increasingly exploitative society.

1. INTRODUCTION

Women must see that there can be no liberation for  
them and no solution to the ecological crisis within  
a society whose fundamental model of relationships  
continues to be one of domination

(Ruether 1995: 204).

«**B**ELONGING to culture, yet appearing to have stronger and more direct connotations with nature, she [woman] is seen as situated between the two realms» (Ortner 2005: 43). Such statement acknowledges the ‘situatedness’ of women in-between and betwixt Nature and Culture, at the «interplay between context(s) and situations» (Rohlfing, Rehm, Goeck 2003), putting women into a very peculiar ‘state’ of liminality.<sup>1</sup> This essays addresses the discourse of woman/nature as portrayed through the figure of the ‘tribal’ woman *vis-à-vis* the debate on eco-feminism, highlighting how indigenous women are represented in the Indian imaginary as the sublimation of un-cultured ‘femininity’, opposed to the cultivated (cultured) urban woman, whose tamed sexuality cannot symbolize any longer the perfect equation with Nature but has come to epitomize the perfect ‘womanhood’.

In particular, I would like to discuss the way tribal women are reconfigured in the novel by Sunil Gangopadhyay *Aranyēra Dinarātri* (*Days and nights*

<sup>1</sup> I employ the term ‘state’ in the way Victor Turner defined it, as «a more inclusive concept than status or office», referring to «any type of stable or recurrent condition that is culturally recognized». V. Turner, (1964) “Betwixt and between: the liminal period in rites of passage” in *The proceedings of the American ethnological society*, American Ethnological Society, Seattle, pp. 4-20.

*in the forest*), published in 1968 and revisited a few years later by the master of Bengali cinema, Satyajit Ray, in his homonymous film, whose successful release came to immortalize the character of the tribal Santal girl Duli as the animal-like creature of the jungle, whose 'natural' sensuality has fed the urban middle-classes' imagination for years. In 2004, when another Bengali director ventured into shooting a film in the tribal areas, the *avatāra* of Duli appeared almost unchallenged in the character of the Santali girl Saheli in the film by Sekhar Das *Mahulbanīr Sereṅg* (*The tribal song of Mohulboni*). Up to the contemporary times, this stereotypical representation of the tribal woman as 'at one with nature' has left unchallenged a set of presumptions built upon a binary that sees the binomial set 'woman/nature' as opposed to that of 'man/culture'. In such reductionist logic, the tribal woman has come to symbolize the fragile environment and, through the violence she is subjected to, the exploitative practices and processes of «maldevelopment», as conceptualized by Vandana Shiva (1989: 6) in her book *Staying alive*:

Maldevelopment is the violation of the integrity of organic, interconnected and interdependent systems, that sets in motion a process of exploitation, inequality, injustice and violence. [...] It ruptures the co-operative unity of masculine and feminine, and places man, shorn of the feminine principle, above nature and women, and separated from both.

## 2. ECO-FEMINISM OR ECO-WOMANISM? SETTING THE AGENDA FOR THE DEBATE IN INDIA

A criticism of these dualistic structures that justify the dominance of man/mind/culture on woman/body/nature has been expressed by some scholars of feminism, whose works posit such dualism(s) as an integral component of patriarchal societal structuring. Engaging Foucault, De Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, Judith Butler (1990) has put forward a strong argument on «gender performativity» and the «body as a historical idea», pointing out how 'unnatural' the gender roles we inhabit actually are and how they rely on a «strategy of survival» imposed under conditions of «duress». «Gender», Butler (1990: 273) claims, «is a performance with clearly punitive consequences». In order to avoid meeting such punishments, in the course of history, women had to learn to «become a woman», that is

to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility [...] (Ibid.).

Biological functions and gender performances came to be conveniently clubbed together as 'facticity' and not as 'constructions'. As Foucault (1980: 154) had already remarkably highlighted in his *History of Sexuality*, «the notion

of 'sex' [...] enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle [...]. As Butler (1988: 282) further debated, however,

Regardless of the pervasive character of patriarchy and the prevalence of sexual difference as an operative cultural distinction, there is nothing about a binary gender system that is given.

Patriarchal societies have thus constructed an idea of 'womanhood' based on assumptions about 'femaleness' that sustains their personal strategies of survival, maintained through coercive and punitive measures. The intervening of eco-feminists in this debate added a new perspective to it. The dismantling of these binary assumptions as the ones outlined, in fact, came to lay at the core of the eco-feminist agenda as well. The violence against nature came to be equated to the violence against women, as two forms of subjugation and exploitation that derived from what Shiva (1989: 6) termed the «subjugation of the feminine principle». However, when it comes to issues affecting 'tribal' women, as Laura Hobgood-Oster (2005) has pointed out, even the label eco-feminist revealed itself as inadequate. Hobgood-Oster has discussed how some activists from indigenous people movements felt uncomfortable with being labeled 'eco-feminists', preferring to use the term 'eco-womanist' to dissociate themselves from a rather Western-centric perspective where the sensitive nexus between gender, race and class had not been adequately addressed.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, in outlining the problem of the biased dualistic conceptualization of woman as intrinsically linked to nature and of man as related to culture in India, we must keep in mind the subtle, but quite crucial, distinction between eco-feminist theory and eco-womanist theory, the latter putting at its core the issues of race and class as the prevailing forms of oppression, relegating 'sexism' to a secondary – albeit unavoidable – position. Before looking into more detail at the ways indigenous women have been portrayed in some literary and filmic works in India, I would like to draw a few considerations on the debates that occurred in the West, where the connection between woman and nature has been utilized in processes of nation-building and sometimes essentialized into fictional characters. It would come to no surprise as such arguments may not be to-

<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the Western approach to the question of the environment may itself be quite distant from the view of the indigenous people, whose apprehension of the necessity of further problematizing the eco-agenda has been very perceptively expressed by Marie Wilson, member of the Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en Tribal Council (British Columbia): «At the risk of sounding scornful or derogatory I have to say that the Indian attitude toward the natural world is different from the environmentalists. I have had the awful feeling that when we are finished dealing with the courts and our land claims, we will then have to battle the environmentalists and they will not understand why».

See J. Plant, (1989) *Healing the wounds: the promise of ecofeminism*, New Society, Philadelphia, p. 217, quoted in L. Hobgood-Oster, Hobgood-Oster, L. (2005) "Ecofeminism: historic and international evolution" in Bron Taylor (ed.), *The encyclopedia of religion and nature*, Continuum, New York, pp. 533-39.

Accessed online at: <<http://www.religionandnature.com/ern/sample/Hobgood-Oster-Ecofeminism.pdf>>

tally suitable in addressing the positionality of the Indian tribal women *vis-à-vis* current debates on nature, the environment and the processes of nation-building in India.

### 3. THE 'POCAHONTIZATION' OF INDIAN TRIBAL WOMEN: FROM COLONIAL IMAGES TO POST-COLONIAL IMAGINARIES

In *Ecofeminism through an anticolonial framework*, Andy Smith (1997) discusses how native women experience colonization as a primary form of oppression and claims that «it is essential that ecofeminist theory more seriously grapple with the issues of colonization, particularly the colonization of Native lands, in its analysis of oppression» (Smith 1997: 22). Smith also dismisses the appropriation of native culture and spirituality by some white eco-feminists as unethical and «imperialist», highlighting the latent risk of misusing indigenous cultures. Often, through an uncritical consumption of exotic artifacts and commodities, we come to feast on certain narratives of the 'indigenous'. As passive consumers at the receiving end of printed and broadcasted materials, we tend to internalize forged representations of the 'tribal', weaving them into a complex web of associations that we eventually conceptualize as given facts. What it should be emphasized when discussing the relationship between nature and woman in India, it is how this web of associations has been created in the first place. Can we look at indigenous cultures as the epitomized sites where the harmonic union between human (especially woman) and nature can be found? Wouldn't that be just another way of reinforcing the colonial image of tribals as the «children of the jungle»? Shouldn't we start to look 'back-ward', not in an anti-progressive way of reading time, but in a total reversal of ideas of progress and development?

Roxana Preda (2001), in her analysis of the Disney animated cartoon *Pocahontas*,<sup>3</sup> has pointed out how the «mind as epistemic tool» and the «body as a seat of the emotions» are represented as unified in Pocahontas, who apprehends the world around her through her body, because «to feel is to understand» (Preda 2001: 334). Preda suggests to read Pocahontas as the perfect model of the Western eco-feminist, since for her nature is not just passive matter or a resource to exploit, but rather a speaking, bodied agent – impersonated by Mother Willow. «She takes into account that emotion is bound into knowledge, that reality is 'tasted' through the body» and, more importantly, she comes out as a highly eroticized figure, who rolls in the grass and plunges into the river. The representation of the indigenous woman, who engages herself with the colonizer but renounces, at the same time, to her love for the

<sup>3</sup> *Pocahontas* is an animation directed by Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg (Walt Disney, USA, 1995, 81'). It tells the story of an English soldier and an indigenous girl, Pocahontas, the daughter of an Algonquin chief, who fall in love at the time the English colonists invade Virginia (xvii century). It was produced by Walt Disney in 1995 and it immediately became a blockbuster.

'white man' and stays behind in the forest where she 'belongs to',<sup>4</sup> seems an acceptable solution which conforms to the image of Pocahontas as a spirited native woman committed to the struggle against oppression and colonialism. In this sense, she may also be read as a perfect model of a 'womanist':

A womanist acknowledges the [...] experiences and cultural heritage of black women, resists systems of domination, and insists on the liberty and self-determination of all people (Preda 2001: 335).

However, a cartoon like *Pocahontas*, where the highly eroticized female character is constantly portrayed as a child-like, disturbingly sensual, creature of the jungle cannot but feel like a projection on the big screen of an object of hegemonic, patriarchal and exploitative 'gaze' of which, as passive viewers, we partake of.<sup>5</sup> *Pocahontas*, then, may also convey the need of the middle-class spectatorship to feel reassured in their good intentions at 'protecting' and 'respecting' the environment and the indigenous people, while, at the same time, resting on the conviction that these issues remain outside their 'real' world, as they belong to a far-away – almost magical – dimension which is vanishing and entering, despite all the good efforts, into the realm of fantasy.

In the colonial representation of 'tribal' India, benevolent irony and romanticized realism were often displayed to illustrate what the British saw as the «child-like» nature of the tribals. In a documentary titled *The children of the jungle*,<sup>6</sup> produced in 1939 by the film division of the British-owned newspaper *Times of India*, the filmmaker presented the practices of various forest tribes of central India, especially the hunting activities of the Gonds and the wedding rituals of the Bhils. As Richard Osborne (2009) highlights in the presentation of the documentary,

The presumptions of the filmmakers become readily apparent. An opening title card excuses their use of the word 'children' by stating that Sanskrit literature refers to the jungle tribes as the 'children of the forest'. Much of the film strives to show how *at one with nature* these people are: the Gonds are described as being 'like their friends the an-

<sup>4</sup> Such solution appeases the anxieties of the bourgeois middle classes who – albeit sympathizing with the issues raised by the fictional representation of exploitative imperialism – would rather dissociate themselves and feel disengaged at a deeper level, preferring at the end, that everybody stays/goes back to her/his own world.

<sup>5</sup> As Rekha and Anup Beniwal highlight, following Laura Mulvey's considerations in her book *Visual and other pleasures*, «The gaze probes and masters. It penetrates the body and bounds it as a passive object. *Vis-à-vis* women, this objectification inheres in their stereotyping – through *devaluation* or *over-evaluation* – as a symbol either of sexual corruption or of Platonic purity and beauty».

See L. Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Routledge, London, 1984, reported in Rekha and A. Beniwal, (2008) "Confronting patriarchal violence: a comparative reading of Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi' and Ambai's 'Black Horse Square'", *ICFAI Journal of English Studies*, Vol. 111, No. 1, p. 40, note 9.

<sup>6</sup> The cinematography is by Marcus Bartley, who is credited as 'newsreel cameraman' for the paper. (Country: UK; Year: 1939; Running Time: 21 minutes; Film Gauge (Format): 16mm Film; Colour: Black/White). It can be accessed at <<http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/node/1332>>

For a more detailed account on the film, see Richard Osborne essays on colonial film accessible at <https://eprints.mdx.ac.uk/9930/1/RichardOsborneColonialFilmEssays.pdf>

imals' and they are shown climbing trees 'like monkeys'. [...] For the filmmakers, these people are also children due to their lack of development. [...] The film concludes by describing the people as 'sturdy, simple, loyal, likeable' (Emphasis added).<sup>7</sup>

The British stressed the point that they were dealing here with 'ethnic specimens' in no way «typical of the millions who constitute the rural population of India»: <sup>8</sup> they framed the tribal populations of India as belonging to a realm of 'specialness' that kept them in an interstitial domain, outside the real boundaries of civilization – as defined by the Empire – and outside the realm of 'Indian culture', whatever such definition may have meant. The tribals were, per definition, «at one with nature», «sturdy» and «simple», but they were also «loyal» and «likeable», just like a wild animal that could be eventually made into a domestic pet. But the effort was beyond the agenda of the colonizers, as they were already dealing with other Indians who were considered 'deficient' on the development ladder, but nevertheless less wild and more easily tamable.

This colonial image slowly percolated and began to be revived in the neo-colonial imaginary of independent India. Discussing the «politics of the 'colonial' gaze/discourse», Rashmi Sawney (2009: 103) has pointed out how the term 'colonial' could be aptly used in the metaphorical meaning of a «position of power in fields of representation» to disclose the way such politics of representation discuss «adivasi and non-adivasi relationship» in discourses «often shaped by factors and hierarchies familiarly at play in colonial contexts» (Ibid.) In the case of Indian commercial cinema, for example, Sawney (2009: 104) has argued that it «clearly considers the adivasi to be outside the masses: they represent the ultra-subaltern in all ways». As much as the British had strived to point out how the 'children of the jungle' were in no way «typical of the millions who constitute the rural population of India»,<sup>9</sup> the mainstream Indian cinema has kept relegating the tribals at the level of the 'ultra-subaltern', who inhabits a sort of idyllic – albeit occasionally frightening – heterotopia, where the male/urban/middle-class/educated citizen of independent India can escape when in need of leaving for a while the increasingly dystopian alienating life of the Indian city.<sup>10</sup>

Following Tagore's claim that «Indian civilization has been distinctive in locating the source of regeneration, material and intellectual, in the forest, not

<sup>7</sup> See <<http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/node/1332>>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Also Sanjib Baruah has expressed his concern at the way indigenous people and the complex issues affecting, for example, Northeast India have been portrayed in Bollywood films. Addressing the issue of the 'hegemonic gaze' is a film like *Dil Se*, directed by the Tamil filmmaker Mani Ratnam, (India 1998), Baruah elaborates: «Films like *Dil Se* and pictures in newspapers and magazines enable people to put together a mental picture of the Northeast and its people. The gaze of the Indian army patrol, reinforced by films like *Dil Se*, give meaning to what is fast becoming a racial divide».

See S. Baruah (2005) "India and Its Northeast: A new politics of race", *IIC Quarterly*, vol. xxxii (Winter 2 & 3), New Delhi: India International Centre pp. 165-76.

the city»,<sup>11</sup> and that «out of India's "forest culture" came the "unifying principle of life in diversity, of democratic pluralism, [...] the principle of Indian civilization» (Wenzel 1998: 135), India came to be described as *araṇya saṃskṛti*, a «forest culture» presided by the goddess Aranyāni, a mother deity who supervises wildlife and nurtures her children through forest's products (Wenzel 1998). As the 'modern' Indian man came to identify in the ancient grove where the ascetics had found a space of retreat and meditation an idyllic place of 'escapism', they began to place at the center of such *locus amoenus* the image of the tribal (young) woman. She came to be constructed as a feminine creature, the incarnation of wilderness and sensuality, that was situated outside the threshold of 'civilization', as almost opposed to the nature of the cultured 'new' Indian woman, whose gender role was molded after epical figures like Sita. The reformed/modern Indian woman could be displayed as a trophy of emancipation, but notwithstandingly also as the custodian of the Indian values of motherhood and wifehood: her progressive deification had relegated her 'femaleness' to a lower level, to be kept hidden or even annihilated.

The body of the Indian woman gradually came to occupy the map of the new Indian nation, in modes of representation that Ramaswamy (2001) has named «bodyscapes», transgressive in nature as they seem to overlook, or even dissolve, borders and boundaries. Moreover, «the poetic, the religious and the gendered imaginations» (Ramaswami 2001: 98) that erupt in these bodyscapes are also the fields where the Indian eco-feminists have portrayed the privileged relationship between woman and nature in India, advocating a battle against oppression where women have a 'special' place. In more contemporary times, such representations of the Indian nation as a gendered entity has been projected also in mainstream Hindi cinema. As Viridi (2003) has pointed out, Bollywood films must contain a «benign idea of a unified nation, and the woman as its idealized insignia» (Viridi 2003: 23). However, differences have to be cut off to construct an «imaginary homogeneity», thereby upholding «the interests of one group while marginalizing others» (Ibid.). In this way, Viridi (2003: 33) very appropriately claims that mainstream Hindi cinema can be read just as another form of «internal colonization». As we shall see, this form of internal colonization keeps peeping out, notwithstandingly in less obvious ways, not just in commercial cinema, but also through the literary and cinematographic outputs of Bengali litterateurs and filmmakers. But to understand the nature of the 'encounter' between the Bengali *babu* and the tribal woman, we have to enter the space of the forest, where the forest dwellers are often «dehumanized, described either as supernatural demons or

<sup>11</sup> Rabindranath Tagore is quoted in J. Wenzel, (1998) "Epic struggles over India's forests in Mahasweta Devi's short fiction" in *Alif: journal of comparative poetics*, No. xviii (Post-colonial discourse in South Asia, p. 129.

as animals» (Wenzel 1998: 38). We shall see that this last imaginary, of the animal-like *female* creature that «fails to do [her] gender right», as Butler (1990) would say, has gained a certain amount of fortune in contemporary fiction and cinema.

4. FROM *ARANYĒRA DINARĀTRI* TO *MAHULBANĪR SEREṄG*:  
‘DE-MORALIZING’ POCAHONTAS IN BENGALI FICTION

In the novel *Aranyēra Dinarātri* (1968),<sup>12</sup> the late Bengali writer Sunil Gangopadhyay (1934-2012) narrates the story of four middle-class boys from Calcutta who travel to the forests of the Palamau region, in Bihar. They wish to spend some days in the mysterious and alluring forests, venturing far away from the urban claustrophobic dimension of their day-to-day lives in order to look for something ‘wild’. In her introduction to the novel, Rani Ray argues that the «author refrains from presenting the sojourn in the forest as a ‘pastoral retreat’, a kind of nostalgia for the pre-modern – which could, ironically, present itself as a post-modern solution to social ills» (Ray 2010: xi). However, the way indigenous people, and women in particular, are represented in the novel hints to what I would like to call a progressive *pocahontization* of the Indian tribal women. Whilst, as Ray posits, some details indeed suggest «the denial of the rights of indigenous people to their own natural resources (the sound of the continuous felling of trees) [...]» (Ibid.), these remain undeveloped statements and never translate into a more complex representation of the tribals. Obviously the forest is just a blank land, some sort of heterotopian canvas where something – in the process of painting the nation – went terribly wrong. It seems the painter decided to leave some details and some characters out of the otherwise well-outlined frame of the nation. The figure of Duli, the Santal woman, stands for the «child-like creatures of the jungle» that had once amused the British colonizers. The eroticized embodiment of the feminine, a form of sensual pleasure equated with wild Nature, she can almost be consumed as a ‘spontaneous’ fruit of the jungle. Robi, one of the four friends who nurtures a barely suffocated frustration at having being rejected by his beloved Calcutta-based girlfriend Tapati Sanyal, thinks of Duli as just another exotic, cheap commodity which can be bought with a few rupees. In the passage of the novel where Robi and Duli make love in the middle of the dark forest, the thoughts of the two characters are revealed. While Duli fantasizes of going to the city with the Bengali *babu*, in a spatial shift which is also symbolic of a social uplifting of her condition, Robi is totally disconnected from the ‘romance’. Caught in-between the anger that stems out from the memory of the rejection by Tapati, and fired up by the sensuality of

<sup>12</sup> The English quotations are extracted from the English translation edited by Rani Ray (2010) *Days and nights in the forest*, Penguin Books India, New Delhi.

Duli, his considerations are quite unflattering to the indigenous girl, whose body seems to undergo a metamorphosis that transfigures her into some kind of animalesque figure resembling a bone-less snake.

The scene of the 'sexual encounter' between Robi and Duli is particularly telling in this sense. The location where the act is consumed is carefully constructed: the symbolic space of the forest at night, beyond the cultivated fields, is the last metonymic sign of civilization. Robi relies on Duli's expertise, feeling like «an old and blind man being steered by a child towards their destination» (Gangopadhyay 2010: 135). They finally reach a military barrack, another allusion at the intimidating incursions of 'civilized outsiders' who venture in these jungles. The place is far from idyllic. From an allusion to a «blackened pot [resting] on the abandoned smoked-out clay oven» (Ibid.), we understand that this place is used by the tribal girls to cook their meals. At the sight of this place, Duli's thoughts are suddenly stirred back to episodes of recurring violence, recollected with a passive attitude, as inflicted by an ineluctable destiny. The perception of such abysmal acts of violence and exploitation as «natural», or even «legitimate» (Ibid.), unveils a deeply internalized neo-colonial discourse constructed on binary oppositions of superior-inferior, ruler-subject, male-female. Gangopadhyay subtly reminds us that Duli's position as a tribal girl places her at the bottom of the social ladder, as she is not just an 'inferior' citizen because of her class and ethnicity, but also because of her gender. Her «positionality»<sup>13</sup> cannot be easily undue or overcome: as an indigenous woman, she is constantly reminded of her total lack of human and civil rights, which she accepts as a peculiar 'rule of law' enforced at both customary and state levels. Duli is slowly, and almost casually, transformed into a sensual figure that initiates the sexual intercourse and undergoes an almost Kafkaian metamorphosis, from a fragile «captive dove» (Gangopadhyay 2010: 135) to some sort of snake-like entity, sensual and enticing as a kind of Biblical Eve. Duli is «overwhelmed, but not bashful» (Ibid.), a detail that seems to hint at the 'loose' morality of the tribal women, nonchalantly thrown in as to justify the actions of the young *babu*. Robi is allured, seduced, literally pulled down to the ground and requested to perform his masculinity. Duli begins losing her human features: she cannot articulate words anymore, she can only laugh and gaze, producing a «laughter sparkling with unspoken words» (Ibid.) which cannot be understood by Robi. The *babu* keeps silent while fighting the tumultuous emotions unleashed by Duli's sensuality. The memory of Tapati, visualized as a goddess with red lips and petal-like eyes, concurs in defining the rather oppositional nature of the very fem-

<sup>13</sup> I use the term 'positionality' in the way the scholar Floya Anthias employs it, as way «to deploy the notion of narratives of location [...] for addressing the range of issues normally thought to be about collective identity». See F. Anthias (2002) "Where do I belong?: Narrating collective identity and translocational positionality", *Ethnicities*, vol. 11, pp. 491-514.

inine and carnal tribal woman. Whilst Duli thinks of Robi as a prince who is «showering her with love» (Ibid.), Robi perceives Duli as a surreal creature of the jungle, at one with Nature and with the «spangled universe» above his head:

Her body stank of moss, her hair carried the smell of stale water, and her lips tasted salty. None of it was pleasant but to Robi all of this had a special import. So far, the women he had met smelled of soap and talcum powder, shampoos and moisturizers. This was different, *as if belonging to nature itself. Robi had always secretly desired such pure organic pleasure. [...] Perhaps, the original primeval instincts that ran in the blood of humans, though diluted, were not irrecoverably lost. Sniffing Duli's body all over, he lowered his frame to mingle with hers in a rush of mutual ardour. [...] It was as she didn't have bones, only skin set aflame by intensity* (Gangopadhyay 2010: 137-8; emphasis added).

Duli is finally sublimated (or downgraded?) into an animal-like creature, which – in the *babu's* mind at least – is more the embodiment of 'femaleness' rather than 'womanhood' – two concepts that stay well apart, as much as the categories of 'sex' and 'gender' do. She is just a 'body', but made of limbs without bones. She is a creature of Nature and, as such, is more at ease with the irrational and emotional display of feelings rather than with the verbalized articulation of them through words, as we have been made aware of. Following her down into a world of «original primeval instincts» (Ibid.) that the city urban life has suppressed but not totally annihilated, Robi consumes his first carnal act with a 'female' who smells of stale water and moss. The role of Duli, then, is reduced to that of the liberating energy of the very feminine, the *Śakti*. However, this is possible only in the heterotopian/dystopian space of the forest, and through the snake-like body of Duli. When they cross back into more 'real' surroundings, his act of defiance is stealthily punished by a group of four Santal men who have witnessed the scene. They castigate Robi because he has touched one of 'their women', but also mistreat Duli, as she has broken the customary laws and has failed to perform her gender in the right way, triggering those «punitive consequences» (Butler 1990) that aim at keeping women under control and make of their bodies «a cultural sign» representative of the whole community. Duli disappears after having absolved her duty in the economy of the whole book: awakening the senses of the angry, virginal, urban man. Once she has acted her role, she is swiftly disposed of and the rest of the novel is dedicated to resolving the very bourgeois, middle-class, issues of the other characters. Rather than being a very isolated example of the depiction of tribal women in Indian literature and cinema, it is important to highlight as some of these characterizations have been identified in the representation of Indian rural women in general. In her book *Images and representation of the rural woman*, Jaiwanti Dimri (2012: 264) maintains:

The proximity to nature and earth that sensitizes them [rural women] to the shades and sounds of nature, the cry of the crow and the cooing of the sparrow, the familiar-

ity with the folk music accompanied by a variety of indigenous instruments [...] verily add an emotionality to the language of rural women as compared to the intellectual diction of the middle class urbanite women.

It was thus disappointing for some critics that the role of Duli was assigned by Satyajit Ray exactly to one of these «middle class urbanite women». Satyajit Ray chose the glamorous Simi Garewal for the role of the tribal girl, molding her into the character of the cooing dove and of the sensual boneless figure that entices Robi. Such choice has been criticized by Ravi Vasudevan (2001: 53) who has defined it as «the most glaring instance of contrivance, of blatantly inadequate representation in Ray's realist trajectory». Whilst acknowledging that this has nothing to do with issues of authenticity, as the tribal is simply used as a signifier to unleash sensual passions which would remain, otherwise, not articulated in the «realm of verbalized language», Vasudevan still finds «the performance of Simi Garewal, in blackface, as a sensual, childlike tribal woman [...] a somewhat off-colour clue» (Ibid.). The characters of Aparna (Sharmila Tagore) and Jaya (Kaberi Bose), Aparna's widowed sister in law, are instead the genuine representations of Indian womanhood: bound by the «normative discourse of the civilized centre» (Ibid.) their sexual energies are kept under control, whilst the sexual encounter and the performance of 'ab-normative' female behavior is attributed to the tribal woman, Duli. Vasudevan, however, does not read this lapse as a failure at authentically representing the tribal. The indigenous people are simply another element of the environment: their function is highlighting the feelings (usually repressed in the urban, civilized, environment of the city) of the *bhadralōka* characters.

None of this has to do with the adequacy or otherwise of the film's representation of the tribals, or, indeed, to a thematics [*sic*] of authenticity. [...] The environment is used to bounce off the characters, as a stylistic vector against which to articulate different forms of urban subjectivity, rather than a properly narrativized entity in itself. Nevertheless, it becomes a crucial resource within the diegetic world, and brings to visibility what urban middle-class forms do not seem to have the wherewithal to relay (Vasudevan 2001: 53).

In 2004, after almost 40 years from the publishing of Gangopadhyay's novel and the making of Ray's film, the Bengali director Sekhar Das shot the film *Mahulbanīr Sereṅg* (*The tribal song of Mohulboni*).<sup>14</sup> The feature film still displays some of the emotionally charged language of rural/tribal women (Dimri 2012), which is exposed through the character of Saheli, a Santal girl

<sup>14</sup> In 2003, another Bengali director, Goutam Ghosh, released a sort of 'sequel' of *Days and nights in the forest*, the film *Abar Aranye* (*In the Forest... Again*). Ghosh's film follows the characters of Gangopadhyay's and Ray's story as they re-enter the space of the forest. Forty years later, such heterotopia could not be treated anymore as a play of mere escapism, but had to be displayed as a representation of the degeneration of India's alleged *aranya-saṃskṛti*, «forest culture».

married to a good, but 'emasculated/impotent', Santal man. Desperate for they cannot conceive a child, the couple befriends Dr Alaktak Roy, who has just arrived from Kolkata. The relationship between Saheli – who has been born to a tribal woman and an educated Bengali *babu* – and the doctor takes a dangerous twist when she seduces him, one night, in the forest. Again, as in *Aranyera Dinaratri*, the setting of the scene is carefully staged inside the symbolic space of the alluring grove. The Bengali doctor, according to his middle-class values, is shown as reticent and intimidated by the overt flirtatious attitude of Saheli. He tries to resist her sensuality, until he is completely subdued and pulled down to the ground by a slightly tipsy and explicitly passionate tribal woman. Hidden only by the complicity of darkness and nature, outside the socially constructed and cultured space of the house, the 'sexual encounter' once again takes place in the middle of the forest and in the middle of the night: like the scene in *Aranyera Dinaratri*, also this one lacks any form of emotional involvement, as love seems to be reserved to other kinds of 'legitimate' relationships. Saheli becomes pregnant: her husband, albeit portrayed as a naïve tribal – seems aware of what really happened. In the film, tribal society is represented as 'weakened' by widespread bad habits as heavy drinking and smoking, and 'burdened' by customary laws and social praxis, which seem to condone infidelity – if committed by a tribal 'female' very keen to conceive a baby in order to save her husband's face and spare him the shame of being a childless man. Saheli, in fact, tells to the doctor: «If the God doesn't offer you, how'll you conceive?», hinting at the fact that she knows perfectly well how 'Nature' works. Saheli represents the hybridized woman, born from a tribal girl and an educated middle class man. As such, she is not totally unsophisticated like Duli, neither that simple-minded. She is also quite 'cultured', as she can write and paint. However, she is inclined to drinking and smoking, and her behavior puts her outside the normative gender roles of the 'good Indian woman', as she allows her 'femaleness' to prevail on her domesticated womanhood. Being a tribal woman, her Nature 'must' prevail on her Culture. Even if the doctor tries to resist her, she literally pulls him down and, sheltered by the forest's bushes, amidst the rolling of drums and the inebriating fumes of alcohol, persuades him to have sex with her. The pregnancy that derives from the encounter with the Bengali *babu* seemingly reaffirms the superiority of the male/middle class/urban man against the emasculated/tribal/ rural male. Albeit there may be more nuanced readings of the story, the film maintains certain striking similarities with *Aranyera Dinaratri* in the way the plot is constructed, reminding us of a certain trend in the politics of representation of tribal women in Indian cinema that has not been overcome as yet. As the drama unfolds, Saheli is caught in the net of the patriarchal customary laws of her tribe: despite her husband taking her defense, she eventually commits suicide on the day the village *pañcāyat* is supposed to gather to decide upon her fate. As in *Aranyera Dinaratri*, here as well the trib-

al girl is 'disposed of', with the tribal men deciding upon her fate. But whilst Saheli dies, killing herself in an extreme act of defiance of patriarchal laws, the doctor is rescued by the intervention of the cultured Bengali woman, the *bhadramahilā* Damyanti (played by Rupa Ganguly) who helps him to run away to the city. The film was presented at the *Filmfest DC* in Washington in 2005 as a work which is «[...] set against the backdrop of a forest where the rift between the rural and urban comes to the fore». <sup>15</sup> And such rift seems to remain unbridgeable even after ten years, when Damyanti travels back to the village and narrates the story of Saheli and Dr Alaktak.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In the previous passages from Bengali novels and films, we have seen how the artists, caught in the predicament of the modern men at odds with their bourgeois reality, have often chosen the forest as the ultimate Other's Land. When the wild has exhausted his power – channelized through the sexual encounter with the feminine, 'natural' energy of a tribal woman – then the man can travel back to his own environment, the rational urban space of the city. Although more blatantly showcased in relation to tribal women, the 'emotionality' that Duli and Saheli manifest is considered as an intrinsic characteristic of the woman in general, as part of the dichotomist polarization with the rational side of man. This aspect of the female human being is what – allegedly – brings women to be closely linked to nature, as opposed to men, whose rational mind relates them to the spheres of the intellect and of culture. Woman, the eco-feminists have argued, may indeed be more closely associated with Nature, but in a symbiotic and dialogic manner, rather than on an oppositional or vertical axis of power. They thus advocated a rebalancing of the power structures, failing to acknowledge the implicit risk of further essentializing the position of women as 'by nature' more close to the sphere of emotionality and irrationality. Discussing the theories put forward by Mies and Shiva (1993) about the necessity of recovering the feminine principle of *prakṛti* to counter the destructive effects of the Western model of development (the *maldevelopment*), Kaur (2012: 385) has underlined that

[while] capitalism, progress and development have problems, it is not productive to use the development paradigm as a scapegoat for all of society's ills or to dismiss it completely [...].

The hazard that may derive from such an approach by post-developmentalists like Shiva and Mies is that such rejection of modernity and globalization

<sup>15</sup> See "Screen on and off", *The Telegraph*, Calcutta, India (19/04/2005). Accessed at <[http://www.telegraphindia.com/1050419/asp/calcutta/story\\_4633958.asp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1050419/asp/calcutta/story_4633958.asp)>

may actually end up commodifying some sort of exotic specimens which adhere to the concocted idea of an «imagined authentic form».<sup>16</sup> As Cecile Jackson (1993: 1950) has argued, the relationship between woman and environment is obviously tinted by variables such as gender relations and «the dynamics of political economies and agroecosystems». Arguing against an essentialist representation of the tribal women and a cannibalization of Nature, Dimri (2012: 14) has also maintained that, given the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual variations in India, there is no scope for «the homogenising of any construct of a woman – rural, urban, dalit or tribal [...]».

Such commodified image of the tribal woman as naturally more inclined to casual sexual intercourse is among the images that have been rectified not just by other Indian writers as Mahasweta Devi or Ambai – whose poetics aim at undermining the homogenizing narratives of the nation and at exposing the violent, patriarchal, exploitative apparatus through which it enforces his dominion on the subaltern groups<sup>17</sup> – but also by tribal writers and filmmakers. Indigenous literatures and cinemas are positing themselves in this wave of demystification and *depocahontization* of the tribal women, staging them in a more carefully analyzed reality that cannot be reduced neither to a simplistic polarization between Man/Mind/Culture and Woman/Emotion/Nature, nor to a Foucauldian heterotopic space conceived to appease and satisfy (and thus reconfirm) the dominant and oppressive élites. They are constructing a counter-hegemonic discourse, to reject the ‘womanizing’ attitude of the patriarchal power, and to project a new way of thinking woman and nature not simply as mothers to be worshipped, but as humanized figures that can charm you, but also rebel against you. As the poem *Plea* by the Mizo writer Cherrie L. Chhangte (2011: 75) lyrically puts it,

Demistify me.  
I would rather be woman  
Than shadow or idol.

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<sup>16</sup> Meera Nanda has aptly argued: «This kind of assertion of difference, however, is not very incompatible with the cultural logic of global capitalism, which can easily sell any such cultural difference as ethnic chic or cannibalize it in order to better market commodities.»

M. Nanda, (1997) “History is what hurts: a materialist feminist perspective on the green revolution and its ecofeminist critics”, *Materialist feminism: a reader in class, difference and women’s lives*, Routledge, New York; London, pp. 366-7.

<sup>17</sup> See for example the article by Rekha and A. Beniwal, (2008) “Confronting patriarchal violence: a comparative reading of Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Draupadi’ and Ambai’s ‘Black Horse Square’”, *ICFAI journal of English studies*, Vol. III, No. 1, pp. 34-45.

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