

Gendered Representations in Eastern Cultural Production: Construct of the Indigenous Woman Gauri in *Lagaan* and the Impacts of Nationalism and Cultural Globalization on South Asian Womanhood

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ABSTRACT

Feminine subjectivity in Bollywood films is constructed by film-makers and by the demand of audience fantasies as a miraculous mixture of contradictions. Is this traditional or transnational? Female constructs such as Gauri (the protagonist of Lagaan) expose traditional dichotomies deeply embedded in Indian culture. Women aspire to be powerless victimized women and powerful goddesses at the same time. Naturally, when a nationalist discourse shapes the images the feminist critic cannot but protest that such iconography degrades women by presenting them in simplistic oppositions. Yet, the feminist Amrita Basu observes that local women of power speak from positions of moral superiority conditioned by their chastity, and they represent no challenge to patriarchal values (Basu 1988). The image of Gauri in Lagaan seems to be the product of a similar schizophrenia, and gendered constructs of Indian vision (like Gauri) tend to be perceived as schematic creations of anticolonial nationalism, yet echoing transnational gender policies. Moreover, the film operates in a Neo-Victorian setting, examining the heritage of colonial pressures in post-colonial times. This setting allows for specific cultural, historical and political conditions to be delineated in the present, including a possible re-evaluation of gender roles in the third world. The cultural production of Bollywood emphasises the notion of reclaiming Indian women, who are constructed to resemble Sita or Radha in Indian mythology (Mishra 2002). Finally, Bollywood imagery supposedly becomes transnational (Thomas 1985). Lagaan shows the problematic accounts of official colonial history, and it allows the rediscovery of suppressed personal histories via constructs of memory, fantasy, narrative and myth.

KEYWORDS

Gendered representations, Lagaan, South Asian womanhood, Indian film, cultural globalization, Amrita Basu, Rosie Thomas

Local women of power in India speak from positions of moral superiority conditioned by their chastity, and they represent no challenge to patriarchal values.¹ The image of Gauri in the film *Lagaan* seems to be the product of a similar schizophrenia. The Neo-Victorian setting allows for specific cultural, historical and political conditions to be delineated in the present, including possible re-evaluation of gender roles in the third world. Yet *Lagaan* operates from mythological positions. In Hindu mythology Gauri is known as the divine mother; she is tediously chaste, obedient and modest. While some of her powers are attributed to her similarity to the canonic Radha, Bollywood productions emphasise the notion of reclaiming Indian women who resemble Sita or Radha in Indian mythology.² I propose that such Bollywood imagery becomes transnational. Though

Gauri is constructed to satisfy a nationalist discourse, she is a plain, complaisant and subservient woman. Nevertheless she seems to show some empowerment and transnational features. From a western point of view the overall impression of Gauri is irritating, since she represents the opposite of the western values of self-reliance and independent thinking over the task persistence. She is perhaps just the opposite of what we would expect of the leading heroine in a western film. The film reflects the subaltern's responsibility for its own subjection.³ A woman's position in these redefining efforts remains uncertain.

The theme of *Lagaan* is said to have been established in the Indian consciousness: beating the westerners/colonizers at their own game -- hitherto the most popular game of Indian presence. The images of women offered here do not challenge notions of traditional patriarchy. For some *Lagaan* clearly is a product of "new" Indian nationalism, for others *Lagaan* is a bildungsroman about the emerging self-awareness of being Indian. The ambivalent indigenous heroine is juxtaposed to the western woman Elizabeth. Yet the hybrid and westernised womanhood is treated with misogyny, since it can pollute the indigenous manhood and womanhood. This paper examines how *Lagaan* portrays traditional as well as modern and partially revised gender roles, even though Gauri at first sight may appear as an un-revised depiction of a traditional woman of the colonial and patriarchal past.

In terms of space, *Lagaan* reaches to South Asian Diaspora and Western audiences worldwide. *Lagaan* signifies the continuity of familiar narratives and the aesthetic traditions of Bollywood, with its spectacular scenes and lavish musical sequences, but it differs from other films by finding transnational and western audiences. Working with the popular Bollywood motif of the defeat of British colonizers, it also reinstates the peasant as a hero, along with specific problems of class.⁴ Chandrima Chakraborty interprets *Lagaan* in terms of the subaltern: efforts of indigenization and interrogation affect prescribed discourses of modernity and history in order to decolonize the imagination of the Indian masses. Rather than validating or reifying the rural or subaltern, such a reading shows how gender, caste and class are interwoven in the construction of the national imagery in *Lagaan*.⁵ Chakraborty focuses on a nationalist interpretation, and his stance poses a question if decolonization of the masses leads to an extent to the empowerment and devictimization of women.

Other voices such as Grant Farred's argue that Bollywood film productions are made for a global cinema that positions itself against the hegemony of Hollywood, and that in the West it is extremely popular with transnational migrants and diasporic South Asian Communities.⁶ In that case Gauri can be called a transnational heroine. It is interesting that lately Bollywood and Hollywood have learned to cooperate, developing ties between the Indian Homeland, the diaspora, and global markets. Films are made to satisfy a local audience as well as first, second, and third diasporic generations spread out worldwide. Nonetheless, Bollywood production has become more and more successful with western audiences too. Representations from Bollywood appeal to the westernised

1 Amrita Basu, "Appropriating Gender," in *Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia*, ed. Amrita Basu and Patricia Jeffery (New York: Routledge, 1998), 3-14.

2 Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema. Temples of Desire* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 61.

3 Grant Farred, "The Double Temporality of Lagaan. Cultural Struggle and Postcolonialism," in *Visual Economies in Motion*, ed. C. Richard King, and David J. Leonard (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006), 58-59.

4 Chandrima Chakraborty, "History and the 'Other,' The Search for the Subaltern in Indian Popular Cinema," *Representing the Rural: Space, Place and Identity in Films about the Land*, ed. Catherine Fowler and Gillian Helfield (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State UP, 2006), 119-134.

5 Chakraborty, "History and the Other," 123-134.

6 Farred, "Temporality of Lagaan," 57.

viewers as well, reflecting a diasporic transnational formation of identity. *Lagaan* is a blockbuster in the US. Even in this context the gender projections seem to satisfy transnational audiences. Yet the female images seem to succumb to strong patriarchal South Asian vision.

Lagaan, which means "land tax," is set in Central India during the height of the British Raj in 1893. It revolves around poor villagers who are oppressed by high taxes imposed by the colonisers. British Captain Russell, who commands the Champaner cantonment, is presented as an evil figure, since he imposes high lagaan on the local villagers who are unable to pay due to a lengthy drought. Led by Bhuvan, the villagers beg their Raja Puran Singh to help them. He tells them he regrets he can do nothing since he is bound by British law. Ultimately the taxes can be cancelled for three years if the village team beats the British garrison at cricket. When challenged by Russell, Bhuvan accepts the deal on behalf of all the villagers without their consent. When villagers find out about the bet, they are furious with Bhuvan. Playing on anti-British sentiments, Bhuvan argues that it is important for everyone to fight against the British rule and he calls for unity. Eventually Bhuvan persuades some village men to start practising the game; winning would change the village destiny. If the village loses, however, they will have to pay three times the tax amount.

Bhuvan and his men thus begin to practice for the grand match. The village team is helped by Russell's sister Elizabeth, who dislikes the way her brother mistreats the poor villagers. As she trains them, she falls in love with Bhuvan becoming an adversary to Bhuvan's childhood sweetheart Gauri who is also in love him. Another villager Lakha likes Gauri as well. Lakha wishes to harm Bhuvan, so he joins the village team too, becoming a spy for Russell. A subaltern tenor deepens when Bhuvan invites Kachra, an untouchable, as a spinner. Except for Bhuvan and Gauri, the villagers hold a long-standing prejudice against untouchables; they refuse to play if Kachra joins the team. Bhuvan persuades them to accept this half-crippled, disrespected man. On the first day of the match, the British officers have a strong start, and Bhuvan's team a very poor one. Elizabeth learns of Lakha's treachery, and promptly informs Bhuvan. The villagers are angry, and they wish to kill Lakha, but Bhuvan offers him a chance to make up for his disloyalty, giving him a chance for redemption. The next day the British score well again, and Bhuvan's team is losing badly. Fortunately, Lakha takes a good catch which becomes the turning point of the game. Bhuvan and his men start to play well. On the final day the game is even, and the untouchable Kachra bats well, giving Bhuvan's team a close win. At that very moment, the prayed-for rain begins to pour down to end the deadly drought. Even the gods seem to be on the side of Bhuvan's team. The defeat of the British team by the poor villagers results in disbanding of the cantonment. In addition, Russell is forced to pay the taxes for the whole province, and he is transferred. After learning that Bhuvan loves Gauri, Elizabeth returns to London. Heartbroken, she remains unmarried for the rest of her life. Bhuvan marries Gauri.

Eastern and Western audiences both liked the tale. Perhaps legends similar to *Lagaan* may be embedded in the Indian and Western consciousness, e.g. when Goliath stands for the powerful colonizer and David for the subjugated locals. It was the Indian dream to beat the colonizer in his own game; thereto modern nationalist sentiments are employed to win the match in the most popular game of contemporary India. Significantly, cricket is in fact ascribed to resemble a traditional rural Indian ball game.

Gender Imagery in Indian Popular Cinema

Lagaan received much critical acclaim and international fame, as well as earned several Indian film awards.⁷ Such wide popularity may be surprising since usually films popular in the west seem to be less popular with Indian audiences and vice versa. *Salaam Bombay* and *Monsoon Wedding* by Mira Nair were both spurned by Indian audiences for being too realistic and too critical of conjugality. Much criticism and an actual ban was earned by Deepa Mehta's *Fire*. This film portrayed dysfunctional Indian marriages, leading to lesbian relations between the desperate wives. Yet all three films were extremely popular with world audiences outside of India. *Lagaan*, however, made its fame in east and west equally, reaching enormous world sales for a Bollywood film, proving how marketable a subaltern theme can be.

Many critical voices seem to focus on the leading hero Bhuvan rather than Gauri, considering her perhaps too predictable and schematic. When she is discussed, her indigenization and domesticity are highlighted. Gauri lives in chaste piety, devoted to her father and Bhuvan. She is brought up to serve first her father, later her husband; she is docile, compliant to her father's will, and subservient to Bhuvan's cause. The image of Gauri is discussed in patriarchal and nationalist frames; perhaps she represents the Mother India of which a nation of heroes and winners shall be born. Nevertheless she also represents a modern, subtly empowered transnational woman. Some voices of western academia tend to disagree, claiming that local women choose their fate, so successfully socialized into obedience that they cannot discern gender inequalities.⁸

Furthermore, the transnational frame suggests empowered women as well. According to Rosie Thomas, western critical concepts are premised on "an essentialised Indian cultural tradition" which does not reflect the "hybridity and fluidity within the porous borders of this modern India."⁹ Thomas suggests that there are no set margins and that imagery cannot be examined in purely geographical terms. Instead we must view the traditional Indian woman constructed by Bollywood as both a modern hybrid and a transnational construct. The patriarchy-obedient Gauri serves her family and never speaks back to men, yet she has courage to stand up and help Bhuvan when he is doubted by his village fellows. Gauri helps him to believe in himself and to win the risky game.

Heroines and heroes perform definitive functions in the film, revealing a patriarchal discourse. The film offers a comparison of indigenous and hybrid womanhood: both a local woman and an English lady come to rally behind to a nationalist-male cause. According to Farred, while western women like Elizabeth and local women are not cultural equals, they are, however, well-matched foes in the game of romance. Determined to hang onto her childhood sweetheart, Gauri must be jealous about Elizabeth. The Indian woman exists in contrast to the British woman, who speaks poor Hindi and comes out as a spinster to boot. Elizabeth is to be barren and alone, and Gauri is to produce the sons of the new Indian nation.

Nevertheless, Bollywood is harsh on both women; Gauri is not allowed personal growth, and the western woman is projected with a bit of misogyny. While Elizabeth works hard as the sympathizer and helper of the subaltern cause, she ends up as "a woman-traitor to her own kin," stressing Bhuvan's sexual desirability despite caste,

7 The film was the third from India to be nominated for the American Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, the first two being *Mother India* (1958) and *Salaam Bombay* (1989).

8 Patricia Jeffery, "Agency, Activism, and Agendas," *Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 221.

9 Rosie Thomas, "Indian Cinema: Pleasures and Popularity," *Screen* 26.3-4 (1985): 121.

class and culture divisions. Perhaps, Gauri is shaped by transnational and globalising cultural flows, though the nationalist discourse does not allow Gauri to bond with “a modern woman.” Gauri is an ambivalent heroine who is rather awkward towards other women.

In general, the feminist critique of Bollywood productions is concerned with homogenized and problematic Bollywood heroines living in contradiction, being both sensuous and shy, smart and simple, intelligent yet vulnerable, aggressive but malleable. Such criticism is aimed at the limitations and amorphousness of gender roles and their depictions, as well as the subordination of women to nationalist, patriarchal and ideological demands, suggesting that female heroines are created within a certain dual or transnational vision running through contemporary Indian cinema.¹⁰

Thomas reminds the west how Hindi films evolve from a different cultural canon. She discharges general western notions of the marginality of Bollywood production as false. She views Bollywood productions as actually resisting the cultural imperialism of Hollywood. Western producers are unable to produce films which would be successful with the demanding Indian audience. She stresses the reliance on Indian kinship, and the use of emotional archetypes in storylines. Western film theory denies certain meanings (saying that Hindi films have no story) and thus cannot be used as a measurement of content. Thomas stresses that Bollywood films originate as products of South Asian traditions of the mythological and hero epic, relying on balance between narrative development and spectacular or emotional excess.¹¹ The lengthy and spectacular products of Indian cinema are complex, diverse amalgams of melodrama, myth, and music, told through an essentially operatic Indian narrative tradition. In *Lagaan*, the role of Gauri in *Lagaan* is expected to become the proper Hindu wife under “tyranny” of audience on producers. The audience requires the crucial necessity of emotion as well as the skilful integration of communal songs and dances, which help the audience bond together in a celebration of Indian religion and patriotism. Ann Laura Stoler suggests that contemporary historiography significantly suffers from the absence of women at particular historical moments when women are either not heard and they disappear from the records.¹² In *Lagaan* Gauri seems to satisfy the nationalist calls to purify the hero, yet she doesn't write the history. Stoler observes how historical records must employ projects of “gendering” to address tensions between imbalances, whereas contemporary works at least allow women to be seen.¹³

Cultural Hybridity and Misogyny

Gendering is culture-bound; the English woman becomes the target of Eastern retribution. While being the guardian-angel, protector and helper to local villagers, she is also a woman-traitor betraying her own brother. Also, significantly, when leaving for England, she stays single till the very end of her life. Her hybridity does not allow her to procreate, since she violates principles of endogamy. After all, endogamy becomes the usual

10 Thomas, “Indian Cinema,” 116-131.

11 Thomas, “Indian Cinema,” 116-131.

12 Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire. Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (New York: Duke UP, 1995), 50-54.

13 Stoler, *Race and Education*, 1-54.

concealed policy of nationalist, colonial and nativist rules. Her “cultural promiscuity” is condemnable. So, Elizabeth, unlike Gauri, cannot be idealized.

According to Stoler, this is caused by a fear of cultural hybridity,¹⁴ by a fear of power shifts and a fear of new alliances of *metisage* and interracial progeny. These kinds of new associations would mean subversion and challenge to the existing power. Such a shuffling around of the social hierarchy would result in national degeneration and moral decay.¹⁵ Stoler points out that the goal of colonial assimilation, with its bans of interracial conjugality, certainly was not incorporation but rather maintaining class differentiation.

In case of controlled conjugality, and sexuality, there are stereotypes of “bad women” who “violate” the law by entering interracial relations. According to Tanika Sarkar and others, it seems that South Asian nationalist struggles evaluate some women on the same premises (Sarkar 2001, Basu 1998, Yuval-Davis 1997). Women can create the nation if they do not violate principles of moral credibility. “Women-traitors” lose their citizenship or status, are seen as sinners, and are marginalized. Accordingly, South Asian fiction explores the options and fates of the daring individuals who would venture to threaten the conformist laws. Even if viewed as saintly beforehand, they were seen as losing moral purity and made outlaws. Morality seems to be extended to “cultural morality,” and western values should not be reflected in an indigenous woman.

Gauri as Radha

Ancient myths or stories of the past are nation-building. Vijay Mishra notes that in the contemporary Bollywood production there is a very heavy emphasis on the notion of reclaiming Indian women, and that films often make connections to Sita or Radha of Indian Mythology.¹⁶ In *Lagaan*, Gauri as Radha plays her gender role in order to complement Bhuvan, who resembles Krishna, ever surrounded by his sixteen hundred *gopis* (his young admiring cow-herd girls).

Radha, depicted alongside Krishna, is the most chaste woman, an eternal associate of Krishna. In the story of Krishna as told in the Mahabharata, Krishna spends much of his youth in the company of *gopis*. In Krishna's life story, Radha is not mentioned by name. She appears in her own tale as one of the *gopis* whom Krishna plays with during his upbringing as a young boy. Radha's relationship with Krishna is about her devotion.

In *Lagaan* Gauri impersonates Radha, who is devoted to her Krishna, as in the following song. The entire exchange reveals the asymmetrical gender roles of patriarchal India:

Gauri: If Krishna were to meet a lovelorn Gopi in the grove, and smile to all and to her, and even tease her, how can Radha not to be jealous? For her body and heart are on fire.
 Bhuvan: Even if Krishna were to meet a lovelorn Gopi in the grove, it's only the flower of Radha's love that blooms in his heart. Then, why is Radha jealous with no reason?
 Gauri: Faithless Krishna is forever looking hither and thither, then how can Radha believe in herself?

14 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 3-4.

15 Stoler, *Race and Education*, 3-4.

16 Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema*, 19-20.

Radha's existence is determined by Krishna, despite the fact she is one of many (in *Lagaan* Gauri is one of two). Only as the divinity she is allowed to confront the man of her heart, despite his declaration that she is ever jealous and has low self-esteem. Thus Gauri has little self-confidence (comparing her to the rather confident Elizabeth), and her jealousy is justified by her status of only one of many gopies.

Moreover, besides a lover and counterpart, Gauri represents a daughter who is utterly obedient to her father. She respects the ancient Laws of Manu, which prescribe woman's philosophy of life as well as her daily routine: the woman is to be dependent on her father, husband or son, and should serve these. A woman is to be kept busy and to keep her thoughts on the household only. By her dependence on Krishna and her father, she guarantees honour to the imaginary nation of her village. When Bhuvan asks Gauri to pass him the ball in front of the village, knowing of her support, her father orders her to go and heat up some water. As a good daughter, she is not expected to argue, and she quietly follows his orders. To other village women she is as a sister, in an egalitarian kinship. None of these roles expect her to be assertive, but to be only like Radha, who embodies female devotion. It seems that Gauri earns Bhuvan's love by standing by him like Radha by Krishna, and not by any particular other traits or virtues except her supportive revolt against the British. Gauri's femininity and Bhuvan's masculinity are complementary towards the nation. In one song Gauri sings to Bhuvan: Gauri: "Hear, oh my friend, what is in your heart, it is in my heart too, the dreams you have are also my dreams in the life."

Eventually, in her subservience she supports Bhuvan in whatever he stands for. Yet her will to start a romance is suggested too, though she is not allowed to display her sexuality and only submits to Hindu marriage and procreation. For example, when the village learns of Bhuvan's game proposal to the British, Gauri sneaks to Bhuvan's house and with a shaking voice tells him in the forbidden night encounter: "I came to meet you. To tell you I am with you. I have a faith in you and in your courage."

Perhaps these words spoken in the secret of night suggest her love-interest more than anything else. This interpretation is underscored by the fact that in traditional Indian culture young people are not to meet alone, and are taught not to speak of love, since love is too deep to be spoken about. Compassion is the most appreciated Hindu female trait in the end. Therefore her courageous act of leaving her house in the middle of the night to meet a man suggests her awakened sexuality and her courage in revealing her love.

Gauri regularly brings the cricket team food to their practices. She is not particularly interested in the resistance against the British or in the game, but she meets Elizabeth there. Unlike the active Elizabeth, Gauri is a complementary figure of a local resistance movement, one whose prime agenda seems marriage. From the beginning Gauri talks of her anonymous secret love and her wish to marry the man of her dreams. When the blind village clairvoyant notes that the British will leave one day too, Gauri only shakes her head. She asks the clairvoyant not about the bright future of India when the British and high taxes will be gone, but is instead preoccupied with her private issue, inquiring: "Will I get the prince of my dreams?"

The clairvoyant tells Gauri she is going to get her wedding bangles in a year, but with an obstacle, obviously Elizabeth. Yet her feelings of romance are surpassed by her need to marry. When Bhuvan sings to the villagers he proposes grand revolutionary visions: "The Earth is ours, and so is the sky." Gauri fills in: "Pleasure will pass intoxicating." Obviously Bhuvan is suggesting revolutionary changes to his village and a bright future for India, and Gauri is thinking of romance and marriage only.

Nevertheless, it is essential to be reminded that, although the nationalism embedded in the Eastern Canon has evolved, it primarily operated in opposition to colonialism. In nationalist discourse home became a substitute for the world outside. According to Tanika Sarkar all the work and relations must be established within one sphere of control – at home. Via the nationalist lens, colonialism represents the opposite – it is loveless, purely deprivational, unrequited in its political arrangement, it has no possibility of self-fulfillment. It could equip the man to share of power in the world (or he creates similar paradigm: he is the one in power – the Self, and his wife is the Other, the subordinate). Early nationalists promoted an imaginative concept of marriage as love and a pure connection without necessary subordination; but this promise went unfulfilled. At first nationalists denied the importance of bearing sons but this view changed to one of woman as an absolute and unconditioned jewel of chastity, monogamous, which can produce the nation. Thus a woman's chastity acquired a political value, and cannot be questioned. If the household was the embryonic nation, then the woman was a patriotic subject.

Sarkar argues that in order to meet the demands of nationalist imagery the Hindu wife was constructed as moral, pure, and domestic. Yet the reality was too different, as reflected in traditional poetic discourse, which is filled with confessions of desperate unhappy married women. Eventually, the Hindu home became the antithesis of pleasure. In the late 19th century, women's writing reveals much about the unhappiness of infant brides, the lack of love in marriages, and how women are deprived of knowledge and kept in ignorance. Some women even write how conjugal love disappeared from India. Women who attempted to experience self-fulfilment and pleasure became seen as bad, since this was to signify a lower set of values. Eventually Hindu nationalism appropriated an authoritative voice. Hindu injunctions show how discipline is the prize and glory of chaste women and this prevails only in Hindu society.¹⁷ Gauri thus becomes a product of this nationalist evolution.

Hindu Wife and Mother India

Local audiences are clear about the good and bad traits of womanhood and about the risk of contagious westernisation (represented by western womanhood) to their heroes. Significantly, the Indian woman secures the pure traditions, and impersonates the centennial Hindu wife:

The danger of Western contamination and corruption to the Diasporic male is often staved off by the incorporation of the traditional and culturally authentic Indian woman. Thus, many narratives literally marry an Indian heroine. The heroines often embody Indianessness charged with maintaining the loyalties and connections to nation, family, and culture for the men, who might be separated from these concerns due to the need to make money in capitalistic society.¹⁸

Farred stresses that for nationalist purposes Indian women secure the traditions. The emergence of submerged and subaltern voices in the realm of public discourse eventually creates rather firm gender boundaries and identities, and Hindu nationalism insists on

17 Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation, Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2001), 35-40.

18 Farred, "Temporality of *Lagaan*," 59.

images that are singular, unified and schematic.¹⁹ In *Lagaan* Gauri serves as such a symbol. She is to be the Hindu wife and the mother. In traditional arts the divine mother in her human form is indeed called Gauri.

Gauri as a Product of Subaltern Historiography

In the Subaltern manifesto, Guha explains that historiography has been dominated by colonial elitism, and eventually Indian nationalism was subject to such elitism. He argues that Indian nationalism is still in process of learning, and dealing with historiography's modalities. The cause of the subaltern calls for resistance to elitism, and subaltern "vertical mobilization" stresses diversity, and undermines "horizontal elitists' alliances," linking elitism with colonial oppression.²⁰ Further, Guha suggests, the true history of a people must be traced in a pre-colonial context, in reaching back to indigenous roots, and to an unrecorded history which opposes elitism. In addition he claims that contemporary Indian nationalism must exist within a rejection of the co-existence and interaction of the elite and subaltern domains. Guha proposes a transcendental passage beyond hegemonic narratives, a journey into subaltern consciousness:

Only a peasant rebellion has been assimilated to the career of Raj, the nation or the people (the hegemonic narratives), it becomes easy for the historian to abdicate the responsibility he has of exploring and describing the consciousness specific to that rebellion and be content to ascribe to it a transcendental consciousness representing merely as instruments of some other will.²¹

Since *Lagaan* is about a peasant rebellion overthrowing the local British rule in times of Raj, it seems to serve as the modern historiography as proposed by Guha. According to Spivak the subaltern projections (focused on the voiceless, the underprivileged or marginalized) are to be employed to revise colonial India. This is done by a shift of a perspective on agency, which is to be located in the insurgent or the subaltern. Such a change resonates with pluralization and confrontations, rather than a simple transition. Spivak points out the problematic causes of the subaltern consciousness, which is to be discovered and then established, since consciousness is the ground that makes all disclosures possible. Perhaps the epistemology of female images is dictated much by the needs of ideologies, as observed by Thomas and Farred. According to them, Bollywood films may be labeled a product of patriarchal and nationalist ideologies.²² Sarkar observes that local criticisms tend to see westernised heroes as "culturally polluted:"

The male body having passed through the grind of Western Education, office, routine, and forced urbanization, having been marked with the loss of traditional sports and marital activities, was supposedly remade in an attenuated, emasculated form of colonialism. The female body on the other hand, was still pure and unmarked, loyal to the rule of the shastras.²³

19 Sarkar, *Hindu Wife*, 27-50.

20 Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988), 37-44.

21 Guha, "Historiography of Colonial India," 38.

22 Thomas, "Indian Cinema," 130-131. See also Farred, "Temporality of Lagaan," 83-84.

23 Sarkar, *Hindu Wife*, 43.

Gauri in *Lagaan* succumbs to the nationalist cause, securing the identity of the male hero. If the male hero but marries the local heroine, he is purged and purified. There is thus much pressure to keep local heroines uncontaminated, since they bear the responsibility of securing tradition and redeeming the man.

The Indigenous Woman as Antithesis of the Imperial Woman

Lagaan focuses on the hero Bhuvan and the village girl Gauri by his side who eventually becomes his wife. Gauri is to Bhuvan a complementary figure. Her existence is conditioned by the existence of the main hero, who eventually needs to get a proper and true Hindu wife, the exemplified ideal Indian woman. Also, Gauri is a love-rival to the English Elizabeth. Bhuvan is not to fall for the English woman, but to make the right choice and marry his village sweetheart despite the fact the prominent Elizabeth has fallen for him too. The film seems to be a great example of awakening Indian nationalism looking to its deep colonial past for ideals, yet also striking against the western privilege offered. Certainly in its subaltern tone the film can be interpreted an act of revivalist nationalism; here the villagers are made the heroes of the rewritten, true national history. Led by the Krishna-like Bhuvan, the villagers out-jockey the British. Gauri's role is to be always at Bhuvan's side, and to vanquish the English rival-in-love Elizabeth.

As mentioned earlier, Gauri seems not directly interested in the resistance movement. On the other hand, Elizabeth takes a very active part in it. Farred questions Elizabeth's pivotal role in the project of resisting colonial injustice, when she necessarily suffers from split consciousness: "the main distinction between the Englishwoman and the Indian one is [the former's] capacity for mobility. Unlike the culturally embedded Gauri, Elizabeth's role is textured by the complicated relationship between the colonizer and the colonized."²⁴ Farred focuses his attention on Elizabeth, yet he seems to have no doubts about the projection of the indigenous woman, one who is not to develop, nor transgress against or surprise the man, but merely stay domestic and local. The western woman is allowed action, yet she is perceived in negative terms and is thus doomed to failure. Farred seems to respect Elizabeth's involvement in the resistance and he seems to give her credit, yet he acknowledges Gauri only in her purgative function.

Nationalism and Colonialism

Regarding the argument of seeing Gauri as a pure product of nationalism, it is essential to confront Tanika Sarkar's research. She evaluates struggles between domesticity and nationalism of pre-partitioned India, the times during which *Lagaan* takes place. Sarkar claims that the nationalist struggle had serious patriarchal influences. Sarkar argues that "colonization didn't simplify the range of questions and problems of the colonized," as do some contemporary postcolonial studies, and she warns against the gender-blind and "conveniently attenuated rump of the epistemological and ontological aspects of colonial mastery."²⁵ She observes that authors of cultural production such as historians often fall for nationalist discourse. Describing the early and later stories of nationalism and the views of subjugality and conjugality, she illustrates the forming powers of power

24 Farred, "Temporality of Lagaan," 62.

25 Sarkar, *Hindu Wife*, 23.

structures, even though the nationalist requirements of domestic women and their chastity have changed. According to Sarkar, nationalist discourses opposed the archetypal evil woman inspired by modern and western Christian education who exchanges sacred ritual objects for ones of foreign luxury. Such a female image is through national lenses promoted as wicked and undesirable. Thus Gauri is to stay in the household; she has no aspirations to be educated or to learn English (the language of her adversary Elizabeth), or to acquire any other western manners. She is merely to be married and to produce sons for a new rising nation of new Bhuvans. Certainly, Gauri has no wish to bond and "get polluted" by Elizabeth.

Feminism and Hindu Women

Amrita Basu examines women roles in the national discourse; she analyses three major women nationalist movement leaders in contemporary India: Vijayraje Scindia, Uma Bahrati and Sadhvi Rithambara.²⁶ All three of these women have used their religious aura to achieve their political ambitions, all three women speak from positions of moral superiority conditioned by their chastity, and they represent no challenge to patriarchal values:

They convey the message that women can assume activist roles without violating norms of Hindu womanhood. While Hinduism and Hindu nationalism may have provided them the opportunity to pursue their ambitions and develop their capabilities as women, showing deep devotion to the motherland and they have not gained a deep understanding of gender asymmetry or the limits of their won power because they are women.²⁷

Importantly, Basu concludes that these national heroines do not fight against the deep misogyny and patriarchy, but transgress their roles to advocate for Hindu men only. She seeks to explain their strategies since "as women they seem to have particular license to speak from emotion rather than from reason."²⁸ Since *Lagaan* has taken on the nationalist cause, the construct of Gauri resonates with Basu's research on respectful yet powerful Hindu women; Gauri is a chaste, religious proper Hindu woman-leader who doesn't challenge the patriarchal social rules as western women-leaders might do.

Conclusion

Lagaan, while highlighting some problematic accounts of official colonial history, allows the viewer to rediscover the gendered suppressed histories via constructs of memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. In the film an ancient South Asian culture coexists and indeed blends together with traditions of western culture (here cricket). Such a mix creates a space for the confrontation of western and South Asian cultural norms, traditions and heritage. In other words, traditions are confronted with modernity, the colonized confronts the colonizer, whiteness is confronted with orientality and colour, and the

²⁶ Amrita Basu, "Hindu Women's Activism in India, and Questions it Raises," in *Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia*, ed. Amrita Basu and Patricia Jeffery (New York: Routledge, 1998), 167-184.

²⁷ Basu, "Hindu Women's Activism in India," 169.

²⁸ Basu, "Hindu Women's Activism in India," 183-184.

nation is confronted with globalism and universality. Hollywood's proclivity towards "whiteness" is substituted by Bollywood's proclivity to "indigenoussness." In such a scenario Gauri becomes the Hindu eternal feminine. Perhaps Gauri represents a concept of an ideal female indigenous peasant who has captured a place in the centre of the Indian popular imaginary. Some voices argue that such a female representation is an artificial filming construct reflecting the tendency of Hindu culture towards a "West Asian code of female honour," presenting "a new syncretic Indian Woman" who might resemble the positive and unproblematic Mother India figure. Though Gauri earns some sympathy, she is rather rigid and unexciting. Gauri is not a sexualized, exciting, or striking heroine. Her depiction seems to comply with nationalist gender norms and lack of a social critique, since this is not desirable in Bollywood imagery. On the other hand one could argue that *Lagaan* offers new definitions of modernity and welfare, of the body as a nation, as well as offers new definitions of race and ethnicity. It contests new discourses and practices of inclusion and exclusion; it presents the study of "the colonized" and "underprivileged" in an account of a shifting transnational political terrain. Yet the gendered depictions seem to comply with traditional Hindu codes such as the Laws of Manu. The gendered projections are only developed subtly, since the nationalist discourse seems to be very patriarchal and gender-rigid. Though often overlooked, Gauri offers an interesting image for the exploration of the indigenous gendered ethnicized sexed bodily construct; Gauri serves as an interface for intersecting gender, class and ethnic identities emerging in South Asian transnationalist representations.

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