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Femme Oriental: Women “Looking Back” in East and Southeast Asian Cinema

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ABSTRACT

In the history of cinematic creations, representation of women in film have been subjected to the gaze of the heteronormative man under the thrall of a deep-rooted male hegemony. This paper argues that in the portrayal of the “oriental” woman in selected East Asian and Southeast Asian films, the identities of the women characters are shaped by the land they inhabit, their bodies, and their minds across time and geographies. This discourse provides us with a stencil to read three such films, *Woman in the Dunes* (1964) by Hiroshi Teshigahara, *Mother* (2009) by Bong Joon-ho, and *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* (2017) by Mouly Surya, from Japan, South Korea and Indonesia, respectively, to explore whether these women are

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able to “look back” at the power or do they remain blindfolded under the oppression of double colonization. Through a deconstruction of the cinematic *mise-en-scène* that each director employs, this article presents a tripartite analysis of the Japanese widow “in the dunes,” the South Korean “Mother,” and the Indonesian Marlina the “murderer,” encompassing the study of the bodyscape, the womb and motherhood, and the psychoanalytical “becoming” and ownership of one’s own identity. This article argues that intersectional feminist representations in the films should be viewed through a theoretical perspective located within the socio-political milieu of the Asian countries in order to fully comprehend the predicament of Asian feminist movements and to explore their Asian identities.

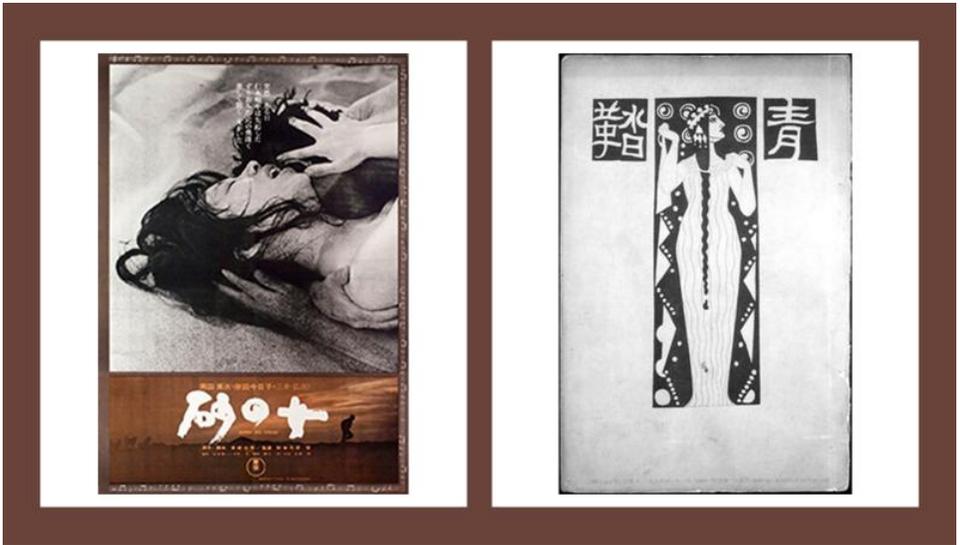
The socio-economic conditions in Japan, South Korea, and Indonesia exhibit a distinction between the private and the public spheres, where the woman is restricted to perform her roles within the threshold of the domestic space. In performing her roles through time and geographies, the Asian woman has been viewed as an accessory to the male dominated society, and defined by the men in their lives. The films under inspection raise the question of women’s autonomy, and underscore the need for “third world feminism,” as propagated by the postcolonial feminist scholar, Chandra Talpade Mohanty.¹ The hegemony over the Asian woman therefore is dual—first the exertion of male control over women, both Western and Asian as the “second sex,” and secondly the absence in the lives of Asian feminists of the privileges enjoyed by the Western feminists—because the Asian woman is always “othered,” and remains doubly complicit as a subject of the Asian man and the Western woman.

¹ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).



The status of women in Japanese culture changed from the *Meiji* era to the twentieth century. Before that, women were expected to stay within their home as opposed to their husbands who were the breadwinners for the family. Society and the state were—and often are—governed by Confucian ideas of the “good wife, wise mother,” or *ryōsai kenbo*, as each home represented a building block for the culture.² The emergence of feminist movements such as the *Meiji*, *Seitōsha* (or the Bluestocking feminist movement), and the *uuman libu* (women’s liberation movement) provided scholars with a vantage point to analyze the predicament of Japanese women who were confined within the patriarchal societal structure and to suggest ways to break free from it. The filmmaker, Hiroshi Teshigahara, explores these themes in *Woman in the Dunes*, narrating the story of a schoolteacher from Tokyo who visits a fishing village where he is trapped with a woman living in a house under constant threat of sinking under shifting sand dunes, with whom he is also to produce children. The woman’s survival and her act of looking back at the man and the villagers who defined her existence under male authority, signposts the feminist response to the political and cultural oppression of Japanese women in the late nineteenth century.

² The phrase translates to the idea of “Good wife” and “Wise mother” which justified the division of labor by gender discrimination in Japanese culture under the dictum “men work while women do housework and raise children.” Tatsuro Sakamoto, “*Ryosai Kenbo*, “The Educational Idea of ‘Good Wife, Wise Mother’ in Modern Japan (The Intimate and the Public in Asian and Global Perspectives,” *Educational Studies in Japan: International Yearbook* 8 (2014): 159–161.



Left: A poster of the film, *Woman in the Dunes*, by the courtesy of Teshigahara Production. Right: The first issue of the magazine, *Seitōsha*, of the Bluestocking feminist movement, released in September 1911.

In a similar way, the status of women in the early Korean dynasties was determined by neo-Confucian orthodoxy that dictated that a woman’s primary duty was to provide a male heir for the husband’s family within a household where men and women inhabited segregated spheres. While the women of the *yangban* (the highest social class of the *Chosŏn* (yi) dynasty, (1392-1910), were secluded in the women’s chambers, the lower economic classes enjoyed some freedom. The remarrying of widows was prohibited and only men had the agency to divorce a woman until a revision in family law in 1977.³ The obsession with the role of motherhood and the ingrained significance of giving birth and nurturing a male child finds ironic expression in Bong Joon-ho’s film *Mother* (2009). In this film a widow resides with

³ Lee Wha-Sook, “Marriage and Divorce Regulation and Recognition in Korea,” *Family Law Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (1995): 603-12.



her mentally challenged son in a small South Korean town where she scrapes out a living selling medicinal herbs. Mother and son are plunged into a nightmare when the body of a murdered young girl is discovered. Circumstantial evidence indicates the son's involvement, and he becomes the prime suspect during the police investigation. Betrayed by the legal system, the mother takes the law into her own hands, losing her sense of civility and sanity. This film evokes the chief concerns of the *Minjung* feminist movement in Korea that emerged in the 1960s as a response to the Japanese colonization of Korea, with poor and rural women at its core, who were reacting to the double burden of bearing children, keeping the household, and performing physical labor that was the lot of the working class.⁴ The violent outburst of “mother” in this film echoes the struggles of the Korean feminist movement.

A common thread of female oppression and gender inequality—still running through the twenty first century—casts a shadow over the lives of women in Indonesia, with the Indonesian film director, Mouly Surya, exposing several existing patriarchal norms in her movie, *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* (2017). To cite one example, in the culture of the Sumba islanders in the Indonesian province of East Nusa Tenggara, traditional houses have gendered spaces where males and females are segregated, each with their own entrance.⁵ The space separation is intended to demonstrate the dynamics of gender duality where the woman is expected to perform domestic duties. In the film,

⁴ Miriam Ching and Yoon Louie, “Minjung Feminism: Korean Women’s Movement for Gender and Class Liberation,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 18, no. 4 (1995): 417–430.

⁵ Esti Asih Nurdiah, Altrerosje Asri, and Agus Dwi Hariyanto, “Gendered Space in West Sumba Traditional Houses,” *Dimensi, Journal of Architecture and Built Environment* 42, no. 2 (December 2015): 69–76.

the protagonist Marlina, a young widow, is raped and has her cattle robbed. She fights back, kills several of her attackers, and embarks on a journey of redemption and empowerment. Marlina's reclamation of her home in the absence of a male head of the house, and her determination to survive atrocities of extreme violence, makes the film a contemporary projection of looking back at the collective male gaze.

The film, *Marlina*, carries the baton for the Indonesian feminist organizations that were rooted in the idea of state *ibuisism* that exalted the idea of motherhood and the role of a wife as strong feminist forces during the New Order era (1968–1998). The demarcation of gender roles led to an economic gap between the male and female members of society and it was not until the mid-1990s that contemporary feminist thought began to gain traction to, first, deconstruct sexist discourse and promote feminist knowledge through the publication of journals, books, and literature as well as conducting relevant studies, and secondly emphasizing the discourses on pluralism, equality, and transnationalism.⁶ The contemporary feminist movements did not emerge from the universities which were controlled by the state, and feminism was anyway alienated from the politics of the state as feminist discourse was highly critical of patriarchal state politics. The movements were championed by the educated and scholarly classes and emerged from outside the university. Their attempt to introduce feminist discourse was a subversive act. The women's empowerment organizations focused on issues of marginalization in a collaborative effort with feminist scholars, with the assistance of Western feminist organizations that worked closely with Indonesian grassroots movements.

⁶ Gadis Arivia and Nur Iman Subono, *A Hundred Years of Feminism in Indonesia: An Analysis of Actors, Debates, and Strategies* (Jakarta: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2017).



The directors of the three films under scrutiny engineer the mise-en-scène in order to construct mimetic identities of lived experiences by employing significant cinematic apparatus of shot composition, setting, lighting, costume, and the texture of the film. The characters, therefore, become microcosmic representations of their individual cultural and geographic spaces. The Widow, the eponymous *Mother*, and Marlina coalesce into the psychic manifestation of the 'Oriental woman.' Each of them undergoes a physical and psychological invasion by the phallic order, yet they successfully reclaim their identities in spite of being compliant to their assigned gender roles. The mechanics of scene to scene depiction of the three women is stylistically unique in each film. However, an analogous coherence could be found in them by reading their shots through Laura Mulvey's adaptation of Freud's theory of *Scopophilia* or "being looked at ness."⁷ In her essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey argues that mainstream cinema has successfully positioned the audience in the role of a voyeur, or a spectator before whom "a hermetically sealed world . . . unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy."⁸ This grants the spectator the authority to delve into the private world of the characters, alienating themselves behind the darkness of the auditorium, experiencing their repressed desire for exhibitionism. The process of looking is manifest in the binary of the male and the female "gaze." The woman is passive to the active male gaze and is represented to serve the sexual pleasure obtained by the

⁷ Sigmund Freud introduced the idea of *Scopophilia* as the pleasure in looking, in his essay *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality: The 1905 edition* (Verso Books, 2017).

⁸ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 17.

man looking at the woman's body. According to Mulvey the "look" or *skopein* in Scopophilia is either voyeuristic (where the woman is viewed as virtuous or beautiful) or fetishistic (where the woman is presented as a sexual object). The gaze could therefore be incorporated in multiple viewer positions: the spectator's gaze, the male gaze, the female gaze, the intra-diegetic gaze, and the extra-diegetic gaze.

This article not only explores the manipulation of the gaze by the filmmakers to subvert the power dynamics, but also the shifting baton of power from the bearer of the gaze (the heterosexual man) to the subject of the gaze (the woman), thereby providing a space to gaze right back. By doing this, this article questions the perspective of power, and whether the acts of rebellion by the women characters obliterate the phallogocentric codes of representation. I view the depiction of the women from Japan, South Korea, and Indonesia under the light of a ternate structure. First, this article explores the use of the landscape portrayed in each film and its connection to women's anatomy. Secondly, it theorizes the role of motherhood and the politics of the womb in each character which finally provides an esplanade to understand the psychological evolution and acceptance of their metamorphosed identities in the context of Eastern feminist theory. Thirdly, the article examines the shifting identities of the women characters, by exploring how each of them breaks free of the fetters on their identity imposed by the men in order to assert themselves.

Merging the Body and the Landscape into the Bodyscape

J. Douglas Porteous introduces the Renaissance metaphor that the earth could be modeled in relation to the anatomy of the human body,



unilaterally naming “landscape as body.”⁹ The metaphorical use of body imagery was later developed to define its obverse, hence defining the “body as a landscape.” Porteous further claims that “this body in question is essentially female and the culmination of the “body as landscape” metaphor is pornotopia.¹⁰ This suggests the presence and pertinence of the sexual gaze in both perspectives. The gendering of the landscape is, therefore, used by scholars as a tool to establish the power relations between the colonized female body and the colonizing gaze of the male voyeur.

The idea of colonizing the body of the woman for reification and possession has been explicated by Marxist feminists in the context of the West. It is essential, however, to read the films and the issue of the colonized body under the blueprint of the Asian feminist voices which had subsequently developed as response to the dual hegemony of white women and Asian men. For instance, the Japanese feminist movement *uuman libu* or the *uuman ribu* (Woman’s Liberation Movement) emerged in 1970 as a collective voice that claimed recognition of self-made female sexuality, breaking away from the roles of wife and mother designated by the patriarchal society. One of the feminist activists who was responsible for the origin of the movement was Mitsu Tanaka, who stated, “Women’s Liberation should be fought as Liberation of our Eros.”¹¹ For Tanaka, women were physical beings who were, at the

⁹ J. Douglas Porteous, “Bodyscape: The Body-Landscape Metaphor,” in *Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe Canadien* 30, no. 1 (1986): 3.

¹⁰ Pornotopia is a fantasy state dominated by universal sexual activity such as the idealized, imaginative space of pornography. The word pornotopia was coined by the critic Steven Marcus in *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Corgi, 1969).

¹¹ Machiko Matsui, “Evolution of the Feminist Movement in Japan,” *NWSA Journal* 2, no. 3 (1990): 435-449.

same time, alienated from their own female bodies, which were regarded as the property of "others," namely their husbands or children. In the *ribu* movement, some women problematized the alienation and tried to regain their female bodies using practical means such as exploring their sexuality beyond man-woman relationships and using products like tampons that were taboo in society.¹² In the Japanese context, the ontological distinctions and connotations play an important role in establishing the feminist gaze. *Ribu* activists deliberately chose and appropriated *onna*, a term for woman that can be used in a pejorative manner with sexual or lower-class connotations.

Teshigahara's *Woman in the Dunes*, set against the backdrop of the Tottori Sand Dunes located outside the city in Tottori Prefecture in Japan, narrates the story of Niki Junpei, a schoolteacher and an entomologist who visits a desert village in search of the tiger beetle. He is persuaded by the villagers to take refuge in a young widow's home which is buried in the sand dunes. This is later revealed to be a ploy of entrapment by the villagers to snare him into a Sisyphean cycle of shoveling out sand and keeping home with the woman. As the Japanese title of the film, *Suna no Onna*, literally translates to "Sand Woman," the function of the sand emerges as a major character in the narrative. The sand dune is anthropomorphic and acts as the macrocosm of the woman's body, from where the man (Niki) is unable to escape. This creates a need for him to colonize the land and by extension the woman and to assert ownership of the house he is forced to keep. Japanese literary critic Okuno Takeo argues, "The protagonist (*shujinkō*) of the book (*shōsetsu*) is the one-eighth-millimeter sand, but the protagonist of the film is the woman. My gaze was drawn to the close-up of the

¹² Megumi Yanagiwara, "Feminism in Post-War Japan: An Overview Focusing on the *Ūman Ribu* (Women's Lib) Movement in the late 1960s and 1970s," in *Documentos de Trabajo en Estudios Asiáticos* 1, no. 19 (2018): 1-19.



figure of the woman-as-female-prototype (*genshitsuka sareta*); the sand receded far off into the background.”¹³

In the likeness of the bodyscape metaphor, the woman’s body in the film is a holographic representation of the sandy landscape, which strengthens the metaphorical relationship between the two. In the sequence where Niki wakes up the morning after his night-stay at the dunes, he finds the woman asleep, lying naked, envired in sand. This is followed by a montage of shots featuring the woman’s body, Niki, and the sandscape. Nina Cornyetz interprets the montage by commenting that the spectator sees sand flows and patterns dissolve into the ribs of an umbrella that hung over Niki which finally dissolve into the woman’s body, adding that “her body graphically reminds the spectator of the hills and valleys of sand dunes just seen in the montage sequence.”¹⁴

The sand acts as an element to tame man into accepting its power: Its mighty force makes the man’s effort to break away from the home sunk in sand dunes futile. The scene where Niki and the woman wipe sand off each other’s bodies, leads to Niki engaging in sexual intercourse with the woman. The woman’s body and her house buried in the dune emerges as a heterotopia of deviation, where Niki unwillingly gives in. She refuses to leave and detach herself from the landscape when given the offer, declaring, “If not for the sand nobody would bother about me. Not even you.”¹⁵

¹³ Okuno Takeo, “*Suna no onna wa nani o eigaita ka. Teko demo ugokanai nyoboteki reyarizumu: Eiga-Suna no onna san*,” *Eiga Geijutsu* 12, no. 4 (1964): 64.

¹⁴ Nina Cornyetz, “Technologies of Gazing in ‘Woman in the Dunes,’” *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 26 (2004): 30–54.

¹⁵ Teshigahara Hiroshi, director, *Woman in the Dunes*, Teshigahara Production, 1964.

The filmmaker’s use of the term *onna* from the book by Kōbō Abe, *Suna no Onna*, from which the film is adapted, echoes the feminist voice at a time when the sexuality of the widow, which was colonized and controlled by male hegemony, finds liberation through the landscape of shifting sands that grants her identity a meaning.¹⁶ At *ribu*’s first public street demonstration in October 1970, the protesting women chanted “*onna kaihō—zettai shori*,” meaning “liberate *onna*—we will definitely win.”¹⁷ The *ribu* movement, then, constituted a new women’s movement that transformed *onna* into a new politicized subject.

Over in South Korea, *Minjung* feminism emerged as an extension of the larger *Minjung* movement that stood at the forefront of the June 1987 nationwide wave that swept away the military in South Korea and opened up space for relatively democratic politics, a more responsible economy, and new directions in culture. *Minjung* feminism was a response to the unfair division of labor and gender discrimination against working-class women. The oppression worked at a dual level, where not only were women underpaid for their physical labor for the economy, but they were also shamed for not maintaining the neo-Confucian traditional ideals that dictated the need for a good wife and mother to be confined to the domestic space.¹⁸

In Bong Joon-ho’s *Mother*, the landscape that projects the solitary, barren space of the mother’s mind is the wheat field presented

¹⁶ Kōbō Abe, *The Woman in the Dunes (Suna no Onna)*, trans. E. Dale Saunders, illustrator Machi Abe (New York: Vintage, 1991).

¹⁷ Setsu Shigemitsu, *Scream from the Shadows: The Women's Liberation Movement in Japan* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

¹⁸ Ching and Yoon, “*Minjung* Feminism: Korean Women’s Movement for Gender and Class Liberation.”



right at the prologue of the film. The woman is seen in the middle of the wheat field, silent, and eventually breaking into dance. The unsuspecting spectator is presented with an image where the dancing woman is a picture of freedom and joy, in the middle of nowhere. The image then shifts to the title emerging on the screen with a fierce wind gusting behind the figure looking directly into the eyes of the spectator. The color tones shift to darker shades of blue, leaving the audience in a smokescreen until the climax, when the audience recognizes that the dance symbolizes a Dionysian frenzy of murder and freedom at the release of her son's captivity for murdering A-jung, a schoolgirl. The shot shifts to her gazing at her blood smeared hands that have murdered a garbage man who had witnessed her son commit the murder. The hands with which she had nourished, fed, and nursed her son, have "reaped the fruits of violence," to save him from imprisonment.

The empty wheat field returns at the end of the film when the mother is seen travelling in a bus, unable to dance, sunken in despair, and finally applying her own acupuncture needles to herself, to a vein in the inner thigh to release the memory of murder. As the bus glides across the landscape, fading into black, her body releases the thoughts of murder and separation and enters a trance of a metanarrative, leaving the audience to decide "what could have been." The working class South Korean mother's violent psyche, portrayed through the landscape, is symbolized in the empty home and her crisis of keeping a man's home. Her violence, like the *Minjung* feminists, is her way of responding to the confinement and structured oppression of her status as a widow. Mother's violent mindscape becomes a site of the muffled feminist voices that cannot talk back to the duplicity of oppression.

The *Minjung* feminists faced a backlash from the government whose rhetoric about change—equal pay for women—did not match its conservative actions. The *Minjung* feminists failed despite their methods of their focusing energy on the struggles of the grassroots women and their effort to develop unity through discussions, debates, and sharing their struggles in international forums.¹⁹



Left: Poster of the film, *Mother*, by the courtesy of the producers.

Right: Examples of *Minjung* feminist art by Hong Song-dam and Tomiyama Taeko that appeared after the Kwangju massacre.

In *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*, Mouly Surya employs the landscape to not only represent Marlina’s body, but also to structure the setting to assign each space to the layers of the protagonist’s psyche. The film begins with an extreme longshot of a barren land devoid of vegetation, and a house amidst the space. The landscape is the macrocosmic delineation of Marlina’s barren womb, the house she lives in, and her mindscape. The intruder, Markus, enters the deserted house and claims possession of it, in a way colonizing her body and mind. Marlina is ordered to cook for the man who would later rape her,

¹⁹ Ibid.



inside the kitchen space. The designated space for the woman, the kitchen, metaphorically evolves to become the subconscious in her psyche and the only privacy she attains is through the curtain dividing the conscious and the subconscious. Markus, the main perpetrator, is seen to retire through the bedroom door, the most private space inside the house—a foreboding clue of Marlina’s imminent rape by Markus. The violation of the bodyscape reiterates Porteous’ idea: “The correspondence between bodily orifices and the doors and windows of houses is very close. Violation occurs as rape or breaking and entering.”²⁰

The scene where Marlina retires inside the kitchen space to mix poison into the chicken soup, sees the entry of a young boy, Franz, who asks to taste the food being cooked. Here the intruder almost invades her thoughts, and the extreme closeup shot of Marlina tactfully burying the seed of poison into the mud is her effort at concealing her thoughts of revenge that were arising in the presence of the ceremonial kitchen fire. Porteous explains: “In some cultures the head is sacred and cannot be touched as the head organizes the bodily hierarchy of limbs and organs, human organizations are controlled by headmen.”²¹ In the scene where Marlina beheads Markus, she eliminates the metaphorical headman that had assumed control of her household, her body, and her mind.

The gendered spaces in Sumba traditional houses resonate with the setting of the film, as in the culture of the Sumba islanders women and men have separate entrances, where the women were confined to the sleeping chamber for girls, or in the kitchen and the side verandah.

²⁰ Porteous, “Bodyscape: The Body-Landscape Metaphor,” 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Marlina was marginalized by being relegated to the kitchen space in her own house, a space-designation that extended to her body which the men—she was raped by multiple males—had colonized. The harmony of the household that the Sumba tradition suggests is manipulated to rob Marlina of her body and mind. Marlina, however, takes advantage of the segregation to plot her revenge and escape, demonstrating resistance, and destabilizing the power of the men within the boundaries of the designated freedom allowed to her gender.

The Politics of the Womb

On exploring the metaphor of the bodyscape in the physique of the women in the three films, it becomes obvious that the male gaze over the land and the body is destabilized with the elemental force of water. Water becomes an imagistic symbol of the amniotic fluid of the womb and, at the same time, a force of body autonomy. In each film the women progress towards the autonomy of their own bodies through their identity of motherhood. On the ground, too, women in Asia were challenging the traditional conceptions of motherhood.

In Japan, the feminist movement which preceded the *uuman libu* was an emulation of the Blue Stocking Society, an avant-garde salon of British intellectuals in eighteenth century England. It surfaced in Japan in 1911 as *Seitōsha* or the Bluestockings Society of Japan, and soon established the *Seitō* literary magazine, one of whose founders was Haruko Hiratsuka (1886–1971), who went by the penname Raichō, or “Thunderbird.” The magazine and the movement propagated women’s rights on marriage, workspace, abortion, prostitution, motherhood, and the concept of the “New Woman.”²² The issues discussed in the new

²² Pauline C. Reich and Atsuko Fukuda, “Japan’s Literary Feminists: The ‘Seito Group,’” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2, no. 1 (1976): 280–291.



left movement, however, were short-lived as there was a huge upsurge of criticism of the involvement of women in the decision-making process. Tanaka's *Declaration of the Liberation of the Eros*²³ and her manifesto "Benjokara no kaihō," or "Liberation from the Toilet," complained about the position of women in society and were strong voices of resistance against the Eugenics Protection Law (1948) that sought to prevent people with physical and cognitive disabilities from being able to have children. The law was finally revoked in 1996. As expected, the government frequently censored *Seitō* and it suspended publication in 1916.²⁴ But soon afterwards Hiratsuka and a prominent suffragist, Ichikawa Fusae, formed a New Women's Association (Shin Fujin Kyōkai) in 1919 to propagate women's political rights.

Feeding off these concerns, *Woman in the Dunes* employs the image of the sea and the parched survival of Niki and the woman, to gesture toward a symbolic need for nourishment which the woman could provide in the barren desert. Throughout the film the struggle for water and the need to get near the sea drives Niki to the point of desperation. In a scene followed by the sexual union of Niki and the woman, where a bucket of water is suspended, the need to quench the thirst becomes a premonition for the seed that Niki had planted in the womb of the woman. The depiction of the moistness of the desert, and Niki's sinking into the quicksand in trying to escape the dune, is symbolically read as the seed of the father trapped inside the womb. A part of his identity had found a home in the dune. This leads to his monumental discovery of the desert pump and the accumulation of

²³ Setsu Shigematsu, *Scream from the Shadows: The Women's Liberation Movement in Japan* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

²⁴ Susan J. Pharr, *Political Women in Japan: The Search for a Place in Political Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

water under the sand, which happens right at the moment when the woman is in labor and is taken by the villagers, giving him a chance to escape. It was, however, the desire to share the news of his discovery and the desire to claim ownership of his child that ultimately makes Niki accept the dune as his new home. The woman, through her ability to conceive and produce an heir to Niki, asserts her bodily autonomy. The child growing in her womb, like the suppressed grassroots Japanese feminist movements, represents her lack of reproductive freedom. She asserts her reproductive freedom through her silence until she gives birth, refusing any forceful abortion or further appropriation of her body and her identity.

In Bong Joon-ho's *Mother*, the idea of motherhood is fixated on the pre-Oedipal stage where the mother-son relationship is represented in the postpartum period, a time when the mother suffers from anxiety of detachment from her child soon after giving birth, when her child is no longer a part of her body and is a separate individual being. At the beginning of the narrative the mother is seen cutting medicinal herbs in her shop as she looks at her son, Doo Joon, standing across the street. The mother's gaze is intra-diegetic as she views him playing with a dog like a distracted voyeur. She witnesses a speeding car almost hitting her son, and in a fear of losing her child she accidentally cuts her finger and rushes towards her son. The scene shifts to a two second closeup shot of a drop of blood trickling down under the blade, which makes her hysterical, mistaking her own blood to be her son's. The son gets into a taxi with his friend in order to chase after the car which had almost hit them. This is when a neighbor woman identifies the cut on the mother's finger. Ontologically, her hysterics are defined by the Greek origin of the word *hysteria*, which means the uterus. In ancient Egypt the abnormalities in women with



regard to menopause, menstruation, and miscarriage were related to the diagnosis of the “disease” of hysteria. The pejorative connotation is demonstrated in the criticism that Asian feminist movements faced, of their being hysterical or crazy, for pressing their demand of liberating themselves from patriarchal control over their bodies. The image of blood in the film represents a psychological miscarriage that the mother faces, when the son is taken away from her vision, like a forced detachment of the fetus from the womb.

The insecurity developed in the psyche of the mother on being detached from her son aligns with the internalized need to identify herself with the idealized Korean family system that had developed from the *Meiji* ideals of Japanese cultural traditions. During the 1960s, the idea of nuclear families emerged alongside rapid economic growth, and women became a part of the “sandwich generation” in Korea with divided loyalties between the role of wife and mother. In the film, the absence of Doo Joon’s father, makes his mother build her identity through her son, and to perceive the family as “matrifocal, or ‘uterine,’ composed exclusively of mothers and children.”²⁵ The *Minjung* feminists, aware of the challenges faced by mothers, aimed at providing shelter for working-class women who had to leave their children at home which often resulted in tragic accidents. In the film, mother is unable to identify her son as a grown man, and she fears losing her “child” because the extreme working conditions made it impossible for her to be present as a caregiver at all times with her “child.”

²⁵ Cho Haejoang, “Living with Conflicting Subjectivities: Mother, Motherly Wife, and Sexy Woman in the Transition from Colonial-Modern to Postmodern Korea,” in *Under Construction: The Gendering of Modernity, Class, and Consumption in the Republic of Korea*, ed. Laurel Kendall (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2021), 175.

Over in Indonesia, gender ideology of “state *ibuism*,” developed by President Suharto during the New Order era, demanded the complete devotion and commitment of Indonesian women in their roles as mothers (*ibu*) and wives. This was done through the women’s organizations Dharma Wanita founded in 1974 and the Family Welfare Guidance Programme (*Organisasi Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga*) founded in 1972 for mothers and wives living in rural areas.²⁶ Confronted by the circumscribed identity of Indonesian women, the role of motherhood in *Marlina* is twofold. First, we see Marlina, the widow, who has her husband embalmed into a mummy, being raped by seven men who invade her home and, by extension, her body. In the very first scene the intruder inquires, “Who’s Topan?” and Marlina retaliates, “That’s my business not yours.”²⁷ Marlina’s act of mass murdering her rapists in the first act, “The Robbery,” is followed by her meeting with Novi, a pregnant woman, who first utters her name, recognizes her act of revenge, and sympathizes with her condition of being both a widow and a mother who lost her son, who was now a “murderer.” Novi’s character is appropriately introduced in the second act of the film, “The Journey,” where both the representations of motherhood—the mother and the mother to be—meet at a crossroads. Marlina’s motherhood is re-lived through her encounter with the girl at a restaurant near the police station. Her name was Topan, the same as Marlina’s dead son. The girl says, “My mother named me Topan, so that I would grow up as strong as a boy.”²⁸ The name Topan in Bahasa

²⁶ Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, “Motherhood Identity in the 2019 Indonesian Presidential Elections: Populism and Political Division in the National Women’s Movement,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 42, no. 2 (2020): 224–250.

²⁷ Mouly Surya, director, *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*, Cinesurya, Kaninga Pictures, Purin Pictures, Shasha & Co Production, Astro Shaw, Hooq, 2017.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

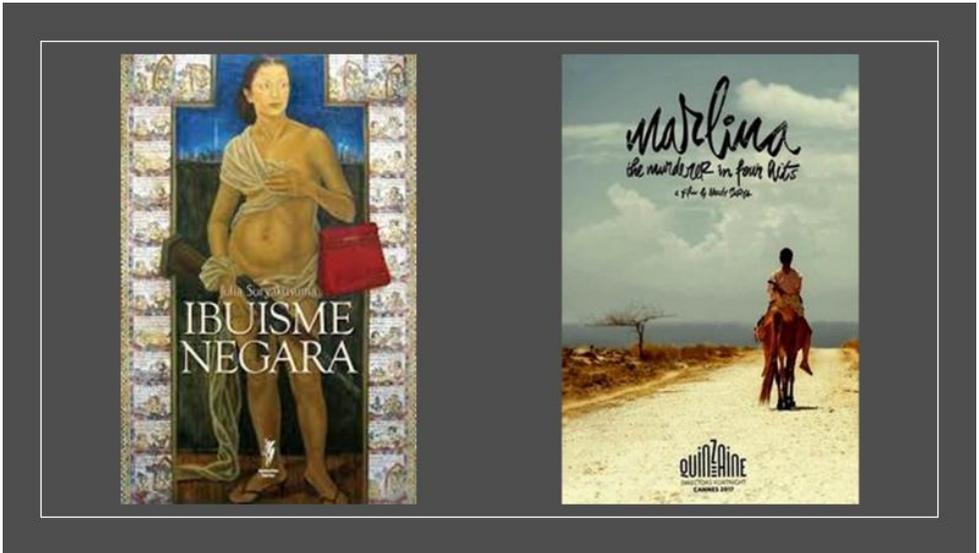


Indonesia translates to a tempest or a hurricane. The naming problematizes the mother's gaze toward the girl. The "male" name was given to the girl in the hope of decentering the lustful male gaze toward the female.

When Novi's pregnancy is prolonged, she keeps complaining about how her husband, Umbu, is suspicious of her delayed pregnancy and doubts the child she's carrying in her womb is a "breach baby."²⁹ Novi's womb becomes a place to be invaded, and Umbu's words raise suspicion that there might be some other man's sperm that had impregnated his wife, making the baby she is carrying an act of invasion or breach of territory. Such denunciation subjects her womb to a reification where Umbu believes that his possession and property is being trespassed by another man. Novi is faulted and demeaned due to her inability to go into labor. Umbu's growing suspicion fuels his detestation of his wife for being unable to return to him the product of his seed, which arises from the concept of "womb envy," coined by psychologist Karen D. Horney. According to her, womb envy is the obverse of the Freudian penis envy, where the man feels envious of the reproductive capacity of women, and as a result denigrates the efforts of the woman in the process of child bearing.³⁰

²⁹ Surya, *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*.

³⁰ Karen Horney, "The Flight from Womanhood," *The Psychoanalytic Review* (1913-1957), 19 (1932): 80-96.



Left: Cover of the book, *Ibuisme Negara*, by Julia Suryakusuma on the issues confronting Indonesian women under state control. Right: A poster of the film, *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*, by the courtesy of the film producers.

In the fourth act, “The Birth,” Marlina and Novi come together in her house where the latter is used as bait for the former by Franz, the last of the seven intruders, who wants to avenge the death of the other six men. Novi, left by her husband, cooks the same recipe of soup that Marlina had earlier used to murder the six men, however without the poison. The closeup shot of the boiling water in the pot, while Marlina is being raped by Franz, brings within Novi the strength to murder Franz, thereby eliminating the male gaze before giving birth to her baby. Both Marlina and Novi hold each other while Novi gives birth, the latter reclaiming the autonomy of her child and womb, the former re-living the joy of bringing a child into the world.

The film’s concluding scene is liberating to the extent that it allows women to experience the joy of motherhood, which is linked to the state sanctioned *ibuism* that mandated and glorified the idea of the woman’s role as a mother in the garb of feminist movements. Yet, *ibuism* was window-dressing. While women comprised half of the

Indonesian population during Suharto's New Order regime, women—including poor women—were depoliticized and mobilized to support the New Order's developmentalist goals through a series of highly interventionist state institutions.³¹ The scholar Julia Suryakusuma explains that “while women were not taken into account in formal politics, the social and political engineering of women was, in fact, an integral part of the New Order State's stranglehold on Indonesian society.” Although Suharto's New Order has fallen, women are still objects socially constructed to fit within a certain hierarchical and patriarchal order.

The choice of the filmmaker, Surya, to have Marlina graphically kill and eradicate any male perpetrator or guardian wishing to exercise authority, or claim ownership, over the women and the child is an echo—in *extremis*—of the ideals of the MAMPU program (2012–2020) commissioned by an Australian aid agency in partnership with grassroots women's organizations in Indonesia in an attempt to repoliticize women's empowerment, focusing on strategic interests by critically challenging the existing power structure that disadvantages women in asserting their autonomous identities.³² The repoliticization occurs by networking and trying to regulate government policies in favor of the poor and marginalized women in Indonesia. At the grassroots level, the program improved services via two pathways: MAMPU partners facilitated direct engagement between village women and local governments, and MAMPU partners worked directly with local

³¹ Julia Suryakusuma, “Is State *Ibuism* Still Relevant?” *Inside Indonesia* 109 (July–September 2012), <https://www.insideindonesia.org/is-state-ibuism-still-relevant-2>.

³² Vinny Flaviana Hyunanda, José Palacios Ramírez, Gabriel López-Martínez, and Víctor Meseguer-Sánchez, “State *Ibuism* and Women's Empowerment in Indonesia: Governmentality and Political *Subjectification* of Chinese *Benteng* Women,” *Sustainability* 13, no. 6 (2021): 3559.

governments. A caveat must be introduced: Unless the feminist alliances succeed in securing the necessary resources, the projects that aim to empower women—such as MAMPU’s effort to repoliticize women’s empowerment by challenging the existing power structure that is anyway stacked against women—will struggle to bring about real change.

Shifting Identities: From “Being” Other to “Becoming” Self

The issue of identity is contested in all the three characters because of the adjectives assigned to them: Widow, mother, murderer. They are essentially nameless, except for Mouly Surya’s Marlina, and are usually defined by the gender roles they need to conform to in order to survive in the social hierarchy of their times.

The widow in *Woman in the Dunes* was institutionalized and held captive in her own home by the villagers who observed her, while they hunted for “a man” to run her household. She was considered worthy of receiving the basic needs of food and ration only under the condition of keeping home with a *male* authority in the house. The only purpose in life allowed to her, given her social condition, is to excavate her house by shoveling the shifting sand under which it lay buried. Detested and overpowered both by Niki and the villagers, she had no choice but to accept physical and verbal abuse by both the parties gazing at her. In the scene where Niki is lured into her home, the villagers address her as an “old hag,” but she is complicit in accepting a stranger into her home, serving him, and deceiving him into sharing a home. When Niki realizes that he is held captive, the woman becomes the nearest object of hatred.³³ Later, the woman is bartered in exchange

³³ Teshigahara, *Woman in the Dunes*.



for his plea to be nearer to the sea. The intra-diegetic gaze is fully realized when the villagers gather around the sunken dune to view Niki having sex with the woman. Niki gets ready to sacrifice his morals and forcefully rapes her uttering, “We are living like animals anyway.” The woman’s consent is redundant and the use of chants and fire during the ordeal of the rape make the spectator gaze at them like a prison guard watching a prisoner lodged within Michel Foucault’s *Panopticon*.³⁴ The woman resists, Niki gives up, and he gradually begins adhering to the manners of the household. At the end of the film, the widow eventually “becomes” a nuptial partner to Niki when her going into labor, in a way, makes Niki stay back with her in spite of his chance to escape.

The trajectory of identities in Bong Joon-ho’s *Mother* is essentially a crisis on a rollercoaster. Having to raise a mentally challenged child, Doo Joon, and to survive in a society without a father to raise her child, she herself develops psychological attachment with him to the level of eccentricity. She lives a dual life, where in her own mind her identity is limited to being Doo Joon’s mother, and the rest of her life is a distant memory. The mother-son relationship is viewed, first, through a gaze of sympathy and then through a gaze of hatred. Her desperate attempt to save her son from persecution makes her to resort to stalking, persuading, and finally performing the violent act of murdering a garbage man in cold blood because he was the only living witness to her son’s criminal act and she needed to remove any possibility that might lead to her son’s separation from herself. She

³⁴ The French philosopher Michel Foucault revitalized interest in the panopticon in his 1975 book, *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault used the panopticon to illustrate the proclivity of disciplinary societies to subjugate its citizens. He describes the prisoner of a panopticon as being at the receiving end of asymmetrical surveillance: “He is seen, but he does not see; he is an object of information, never a subject in communication.”

commits the heinous act, uttering, "No, you scumbag, you piece of trash, worse than the dirt under my son's toenails."

The blood spilling over her face is a trope for Julia Kristeva's theory of "abjection" in *Powers of Horror*, where the abject refers to the human reaction (horror, vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object, or between self and other.³⁵ Mother represents the abject in every man and woman who tries to participate in the forceful separation of her son from herself. Mother's violent act shatters the idealized image of the self-sacrificing mother. At the end of the film when Doo Joon returns the blood smeared acupuncture box to his mother, there is a suggestion that her son was aware of the act of murder she had committed for his sake. She assumes a new identity, "becoming" a criminal in order to maintain her original role of motherhood. The act of violence, according to Ann Meejung Kim, "shows the egoism of motherhood at its worst ... believing of her son's absolute goodness, willing to even murder for her son's benefit. Violence is also something, perhaps the only thing, she can take into her own hands in the absence of other accessible powers."³⁶

The filmmaker has represented the violence of the mother in a highly exaggerated form that resonates with the idea of "compulsory motherhood" that the *Minjung* feminists opposed in order to propagate the self-actualization of women.³⁷ The role of motherhood, itself a

³⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, Vol. 98 (Columbia and Princeton: University Presses of California, 1982).

³⁶ Ann Meejung Kim, "Alienating the Maternal Instinct in Bong Joon-ho's *Mother*," *International Journal of Literature and Arts* 4, no. 5 (2016): 66.

³⁷ Ching and Yoon, "Minjung Feminism: Korean Women's Movement for Gender and Class Liberation."



product of cultural hegemony, therefore, becomes a site of violent resistance for the struggle for autonomy.

The identity of Mouly Surya's *Marlina* metamorphoses in the four-act structure, changing from widow to murderer to mother, and finally to her individual self, *Marlina*. In the very first act, the intruder asks, "Is your husband home?" The inquiry for the presence of the male authority reinforces the fact that *Marlina*'s individual identity is defined by her marital status. Next, the frame is set in a mid-shot, where a body is hidden behind the spotlight on the right side of the frame, and the spectator's gaze does not shift until the dialogue is spoken: "Then whose body is that."³⁸ The preserved body of *Marlina*'s deceased husband allows the audience to understand that she was now a widow, and that gave the intruder the authority to treat *Marlina* as a commodity, thereby inviting men to loot her home, livestock, and money, and then have sex with her "if they have time."³⁹ When she keeps a steady voice, declaring that her life will be miserable, Markus says, "Women, you all love playing the victim,"⁴⁰ demonstrating how the words "women," "playing," and "victim" coalesce into the othering of the lesser beings. The gaze directed toward *Marlina*'s identity is one of disgust and oppression. She is, then, ordered to cook chicken soup for the men who would later rape her. She is sent into the kitchen into the boundary charted by male hegemony. She uses her assigned job of cooking to take revenge on the robbers. She sits in front of the mirror, pretending to put powder on herself, to make herself "pretty" for the man's gaze. She takes the poisoned fruit out of a drawer and tucks it

³⁸ Mouly, *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

into her bosom, all the while looking at herself. Facing herself, Marlina dissociates her own identity of being looked at, from being the one who looks. When she serves the men, they compliment her, and the scene shifts to Marlina at the center of the screen. The men fall like flies to their death. She lifts her face up and smiles subtly at the camera, looking directly at the spectator in an extra diegetic gaze, asserting her identity, and creating a universal relatability.

The use of breaking the fourth wall—an imaginary wall separating the audience from the action of a stage play or film breaks when an actor talks directly to the audience, or starts talking as themselves rather than as their character—blurs the voyeuristic gaze of the audience and the character becomes confrontational.⁴¹ Next, she beholds Markus when he rapes her. The scene echoes the gambling scene of the Indian epic, *The Mahabharata*, or the Javanese version, *Bharatayuddha*, where Marlina's character, like Draupadi, seeks help from Yama, the God of Death and Justice, and Draupadi wears the liver of her tormentor, Dussasana, after her husband Bhima kills him. Here, Marlina kills her perpetrators and carries the severed head of her rapist onto the road, like a personification of Goddess Kali carrying the heads of the Asuras, or like the Indonesian demon, Goddess Rangda. Etymologically, Rangda means widow, and stands for the wrathful forms of Durga, Shiva (Bhairava), and Vishnu in Balinese theater.⁴² She is the model of untamed fertility and her wrath, like Marlina's, destroys everything evil.

⁴¹ Tom Brown, *Breaking the Fourth Wall: Direct Address in the Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

⁴² Kathleen Nadeau, "Aswang and Other Kinds of Witches: A Comparative Analysis," *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 39, no. 3/4 (2011): 250–266.



The male and the female gaze in the film represent the duality of identity. While all the men view Marlina as a “murderer,” the women understand her situation, look at her with respect, and try to help her. Her influence is so strong that in the final act, once captured by Franz and again attempted to be raped, it was Novi who assumes the identity of the avenger and kills him. As a trope, the director not only skillfully uses the same clothes that Marlina wore in the first act while killing the men, but Novi also wears the same clothes and becomes a feminist force of vengeance.

The male-imposed fetters on the identities of the three women are broken in all the three films through a recurrent frame construction of creating a symbolic prison and making the women breakout. In *Woman in the Dunes*, the scene when Niki successfully finds a way to build an anchor using scissors and a fly catching net, he views the woman from the window, for what he believed was the last time. He was aware that with his escape she would be left a prisoner, a woman without a man in the house, unworthy of receiving food and water, and yet he chose to leave in the first attempt to escape. In an ironical contrast, however, the film ends with the woman leaving the dune to give birth, and Niki staying back as a prisoner by choice to keep home in the dune.

Similarly, in *Mother*, when the mother insists on visiting the boy from the sanatorium who was in prison for a crime he did not commit, there is an extreme longshot with multiple frames, putting the mother in a metaphorical prison for the violent crime she commits to save her son. She breaks away from the gaze; and even though she is guilty, she does not admit that her son is a criminal. She further breaks away from the prison of guilt, ironically justifying her actions as maternal protection. In *Marlina*, too, there is a closeup shot of Marlina gazing at

the room from behind the barred door, where she halts before entering the bedroom to serve Markus the poisoned soup. The barred room serves as a metaphorical prison that she would break out of, killing the rapist, and carrying his head to the police station. "This is my prisoner," she asserts when asked why she was carrying the head around. The interconnected images through three different timelines, and geographical and cultural spaces, suggest the universality of "becoming" independent of gendered constructs of identity.⁴³

Conclusion

In the beginning woman was the sun.

She was a true person.

Now woman is the moon.

She depends on others for her life

And reflects the light of others ...

We, completely hidden Sun, must restore ourselves ...

We must reveal the hidden sun - our concealed genius.⁴⁴

- Hiratsuka Raichō, *In the Beginning, Woman was the Sun*.

The idea of Hiratsuka Raichō to liberate the spirit and the sun's light within women raises the hope of Asian feminism represented in the films analyzed above. Widow, Mother, and Marlina find moments of self-recognition after being in exile from their own personalities, expelled by male dominated society. The fragmented chronicles that

⁴³ The concept that cultural identity is a continuous process of "becoming" rather than "being" was introduced by Stuart Hall in "Thirteen Cultural Identity and Diaspora [1990]," in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference* (Duke University Press, 2021), 257-271.

⁴⁴ Hiratsuka Raichō, *In the Beginning, Woman was the Sun: The Autobiography of a Japanese Feminist* (Columbia University Press, 2010).



the three films bring together present the gaze in two sections. On one hand, the masculine gaze that Mulvey had originally explicated and, on the other, the feminine agency to gaze back at the gazes thrown at her. The woman looks back at both the man and the spectator, forcing them to confront their own images and actions, and “become” the representation of their own lived experiences.

The Japanese, Korean, and Indonesian feminist voices that sought articulation but failed to gain national recognition—unlike the American feminist movements—appropriately theorize and establish their controlled resistance in the three films. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s observation—“the Subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with woman as a ‘pious’ item”—emphasizes the cross-cultural reification of the Asian identities.⁴⁵ Moreover, the very fluidity of women’s identities finds fitting explication in Julie Mehta’s analysis of Luce Irigaray in her dissertation “‘Unchaste’ Goddesses, Turbulent Waters,” where she argues that Irigaray’s use of the title “*Mère de Glace*” in *Speculum of The Other Woman* “deploys the French homonyms *mer* (sea) and *mère* (mother), as well as *glace* which could mean both ice and mirror.” Mehta adds that “the title, therefore, has embedded in its very nomenclature an oxymoron: the fluidity of water and the immovability of ice.” “*Mère*,” Mehta explains, “crucially, represents the fluid feminine, and registers its transformability from water to ice, and vice versa. The hybridity is encrypted in the transformative potential of water to become ice, and for ice, in turn, to serve as a mirror for self-reflection.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the subaltern speak?” *Die Philosophin* 14, no. 27 (2003): 42–58.

Although the marginalized women in the films under study were perhaps unaware of the etymology of the word "feminism," their actions in the limited space assigned by the prevailing cultural hegemony become a collective feminist voice, muted yet effective. It is befitting to conclude that Widow and Mother remained complicit to societal segregations, yet found a way to survive and look back, exercising suppressed feminist voices. Marlina, however, uses her authority, transcending all societal norms and confinement to essentially become a femme oriental "looking back" at the hegemony of the man-made gaze.

Note on the Author

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⁴⁶ Bijalpita Julie Banerjee Mehta, "'Unchaste' Goddesses, Turbulent Waters: Postcolonial Constructions of the Divine Feminine in South Asian Fiction," (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2010), 71.



feminism and gender studies, publish academic papers, and write fictional books.