

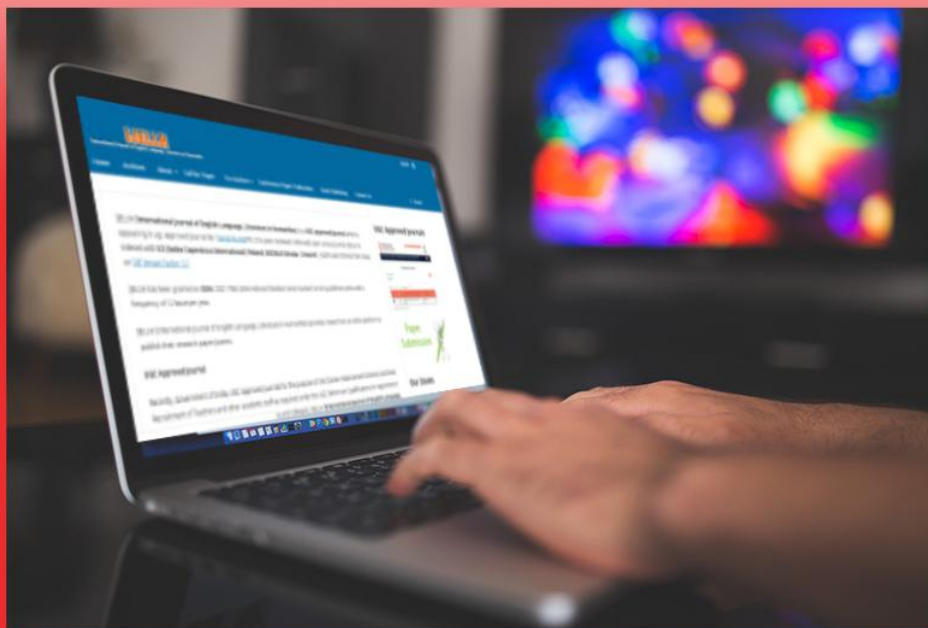
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Shibi. K.P.S.

Assistant Professor

Department of English

M.P.M.M.S.N Trusts College, Shoranur, India.

shibikps@gmail.com

Visual Culture and The Subject Formation in Deepa Mehta's Water

Abstract: Visual culture investigates how the culture is expressed in visual images and analyses the influence it creates among the spectators who watch them. As it has no fixed boundary it generally overlaps with the other academic areas such as film studies, psychoanalysis, gender studies, cultural studies, media studies etc. It is about the formation of the images which often build up complex relationships in the psychological arena of the spectator. The film Water is directed by the Indo-Canadian filmmaker, Deepa Mehta who unfolds the ethnicity of the East in a diasporic perspective and plunges into the cultural significations of the homeland culture.

Being a South Asian Diaspora, Mehta examines the validity of the regressive ideologies of the Hindu laws in the psychoanalytical context of the subject Kalyani who explores the crucial Symbolic order for accomplishing identity. The last film of Mehta's elements trilogy (Fire and Earth are the other two films), Water analyses the articulation of cultural significations in visual culture through the representations of the voiceless widows who inhabit the ashram at Varanasi.

Key Words: Diaspora, Deepa Mehta, Benedict Anderson, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, abject, Symbolic order, unconscious, revolt.

Introduction

Being a diasporic filmmaker, the director Deepa Mehta attempts to highlight the representation of the East in her films and analyses the aftermath of ethnocentricity in a transnational perspective. The notion of diaspora refers to group of individuals or communities who carry an image of their homeland along with the culture of the hostland in which they reside. The diasporic experience foregrounds the homeland culture as nostalgic and perceive it as a realm of unending spiritual resources where the members of the transnational community identify with the ethnic identities of the nation community. Diasporas imagine the homeland space as one and continuous and endure the coalition of both cultures in the transnationalized space of the hostland. Benedict Anderson observes nation as imagined when he states, "In an anthropological spirit, then, I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (5-6). It reiterates the sovereignty of the nation in the context of its delimitation where the individual and collective imaginations of the homeland function through the trappings of culture and underscore the state of being imagined as the operation of the mind. Nevertheless, he believes that the national identity is acquired not through the political systems of power but it is possible through the cultural systems of production which builds up the image of nation.

The notions of home and identity are intertwined each other in the films made by the diasporic filmmakers who employ history as memory and highlight their voicelessness/invisibility which are regarded as the features of diasporic films. In a transnational space women function as agents in shaping their cultural and sexual identities. This paper

explores the psychological understanding of the character Kalyani in Deepa Mehta's *Water* which is released in the year 2005 and nominated for Oscar in the best foreign language film category. Being settled in the hostland, the diaspora people experience the cultural clashes in multidimensional ways. In the context of India, there is a great diversity in the sects and beliefs of the expatriates who are disseminated all over the world but they link with the homeland through memory. They are generally labeled as 'Hindus' with a variety of castes, and subcastes, 'Muslims', 'Sikhs', 'Jains' and 'Goans'.

Deepa Mehta's *Water* analyses the voiceless representations who encounter diverse kinds of discomforts in the background of the widow ashram located at Varanasi. The film exposes socio-cultural condition of widows in the pre-independent India through the perspectives of the subaltern subjects like Kalyani, Chuyia, Sakuntala, Madhumati etc. Child marriage and widowhood are foregrounded in the film through the nine years old Chuyia, the youngest widow of the ashram. Mehta contrasts the marginalized subjectivity of Kalyani with her charming presence in the film. Her body is being employed as a realm of conflicts and revolts as she is inflicted to do prostitution which contradicts with her subaltern status. My attempt in this paper is to analyse *Water* in the theoretical contexts of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Julia Kristeva where the latter's key concepts are closely associated with the psychoanalytical studies of Jacques Lacan.

By developing critical tools in creative ways Mehta unfolded the subaltern characters who had a diminished position in society, and were expected to spend their lives in extreme poverty and the worship of God. Even though the widow re-marriages were legalized by the colonial laws, the spokespersons of tradition expressed reluctance in accepting this into practice and thus remained as socio-cultural taboo. Mehta explores a poet's exquisiteness in the execution

of the visuals and the film amalgamates compassion, tragedy and nostalgia in the national context of freedom struggle. Mehta attempts to explore the history of India in the backdrop of tradition and takes a deconstructive turn towards widowhood. I would like to incorporate the notions of Spivak on the dogmatization of Derrida's deconstruction. Spivak observes,

Deconstruction does not say there is no subject, there is no truth, and there is no history. It simply questions the privileging of identity so that someone is believed to have the truth. It is not the exposure of error. It is constantly and persistently looking into how truths are produced. (27)

As an investigator of history, Mehta deconstructs the concept of widowhood through the depiction of Kalyani's prostitution, then the narrative moves towards the discourse on widow re-marriage and finally analyses her act of committing suicide. Spivak remarks, "Fiction-making can become an ally of history when it is understood that history is a very strong fictioning where, to quote Derrida, the possibility of fiction is not derived from anterior truths. Counterfactual histories that exercise imaginative responsibility – is that the limit?" (28). the narratives of marriage and widowhood were executed in the film through the portrayal of Chuyia who had little memory about it and it became clear that her marriage was arranged by her family to cope with the financial difficulties.

Stephen Morton observes, "As Spivak emphasizes, the work of the Subaltern Studies historians has sought to correct the class and gender blindness of elite bourgeois national independence in India by re-writing history from below (6). The Hindu law states that a widow of any age must leave the society and live in complete seclusion by refraining herself from the contacts with the worldly affairs. The battered widow ashram embodies the marginalized

representations who live in destitution and suffer inequalities in terms of gender, class, custom, culture and money. They become the backgrounded figures under the bourgeois socio-political system of the pre-independent India which indicates the rigidity of tradition. The ashram is flung into turmoil by Chuyia who interferes into the life of Kalyani and it consequently leads to the recasting of history by the actions of the latter.

Julia Kristeva's visual cultures are moulded upon linguistics, psycho analysis and literary theories which provide new dimension to the images on the screen in the cultural sphere of production and consumption of meanings. In Powers of Horror, she views the relationship between the subject and the cultural system in the context of the interactions between the spectator and the image. Abjection, one of the theoretical terms postulated by Kristeva refers to the failure of estimation between the binary opposites of other and self and the subject and object. The subject is striving to accomplish an independent identity by removing the horror but encounters difficulties to do it because the subject is positioned in the in-betweenness of the interiority and exteriority of body. Kristeva coordinates the formation of the self in the visual culture with the debasement or degradation of the self. In the very beginning of Powers of Horror, she views, "There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced" (1). It is suggestive of the inability of body to categorize between the two contrary aspects which Kristeva observes particularly in the context of religious discourses.

In Mehta's Water the character Kalyani is designated as a divided subject who is strangled by the undeterminable territory between the interior and the exterior of the body and

fails to distinguish them in their own ways. Being a marginalized subject, Kalyani is submissive to prostitution as well as widow re-marriage. In a critical moment she encounters difficulty to differentiate between them and in that sense she becomes an embodiment of dissociated subject where abjection starts to function upon her body by transforming her as a troubled or psychologically disturbed subject in the light of religious discourses. Kalyani understands her loss, deficiency, privation and separation of the body and tries to expel the horrors in connection with the personal and sexual desires which themselves constitute the others of the body in the socio-cultural scenario of the formation of subjects. In one occasion Kristeva states, "There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded" (5). Kalyani's thoughts on committing suicide results from the complications of abjections and this leads to another concept developed by Kristeva called revolt which functions as closest to abjection in visual culture.

Kristevan thoughts explore the theoretical background of Lacan in the formation of the subject. The term Symbolic order appears in the psychoanalytic writing of Lacan which is considered as the most critical order in the psychoanalytic studies in comparison with the other two orders. Lacan uses the Symbolic to refer to the other which it is the study of the unconscious whereas the real and the imaginary orders are opposed to the Symbolic order. The Symbolic order is the domain of 'absence', 'death' and 'lack'. 'Death drive' advances ahead the 'pleasure principle' and is considered as 'the mask of the Symbolic order' (204). The symbolic order is sovereign, contingent and appears as a macrocosm. When the Symbolic order comes into being there will arise a cosmos of symbols. If it is occurred once, it makes the feeling that it has constantly been present there. In Water Kalyani explores the Symbolic order as the realm of

privation and absence and makes use of her 'death drive' as a visor of the Symbolic order whereby expel the horror in association with the subject formation.

Patrick Fuery and Kelli Fuery observe on the Kristevan notion of revolt as, "Any form of metaphoric illustration or representation that would stem from a subject's unconscious is concerned with establishing an identity this form of imagination. The desire to establish an identity and to represent the unnameable (which in this context necessarily emerges via the unconscious) threatens the Symbolic cultural and social order" (48). The unnameable, is a crucial psychological construction because it can never be articulated or expressed in the Symbolic order but at the same time it is capable to intimidate the Symbolic in the context of the accomplishment of identity. Kalyani struggles to acquire identity via the functioning of the unconscious and admonishes the Symbolic order by becoming a transgressor. This infraction emerges from her strict adherence to the socio-cultural codes of the Symbolic order whereby reciprocates on the restrained unconscious wishes. But her revolt is ambiguous in the sense that the controls of the unconscious are continually rushing outside or exterior of the subject. Being a subject of regulation, Kalyani undergoes transition and denies the superstructure of the Hindu religious laws which are formulated as a language in her unconscious in a Lacanian context.

Water analyses the unconscious of Kalyani in the light of the religious dogmas and reflects her other which is portrayed as engaged in social struggle. The language of the unconscious is unfolded through the linguistic utterances of Kalyani and it functions as a discourse in her unconscious. This Lacanian perspective reiterates the prioritization of the Symbolic order over the other orders. The unconscious become powerful through the Symbolic order where the subject acts as persistent. It can be interpreted as memory which is located in the exterior and thereby unveils the desire through words and speeches. In Kristevan context, the

unnameable in Kalyani attempts to negotiate with her unconscious. By exploring the Symbolic order Kalyani wishes to represent herself beyond the representativity of the culture. This is suggestive of the castration fear of Kalyani as well as it demarcates the identity of the subject in the backdrop of abjection. Kristeva advocates that the consciousness is being strangled by horror and revolt but the abject perceives that it is the lynchpin of language, meaning and wish. Abjection contributes to the Symbolic order through language and social order. Kristeva considers it as a pre-verbal process which can be analysed as the sector of the subject's establishment of identity before its entry into the Symbolic order.

Conclusion

The subject formation of Kalyani is made possible through the articulation of the systems of significations which operate as appliances for determining the cultural positioning in visual culture. Mehta utilizes the body of Kalyani to manifest the function of language, culture, meaning, being and longing. Regardless of its adherence to the Symbolic order, Kalyani's body is effectively being executed in the film and in that sense it exemplifies the subject formation in visual culture. Being located in the Symbolic order, Kalyani investigates its autonomy through self-destruction and thereby allows abjection to set in via the exploration of rules and regulations of the social order.

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