

Towards a Female Utopos : Critiquing Futuristic Dystopia in Manish Jha's *Matrubhoomi* (2003)

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Abstract :

Dystopias generally depict futuristic and rotten societies. The places portrayed by dystopian works are defined by having great uncertainty and misery. They reflect chaotic systems where societal norms and gender roles are turned upside down, and which become perfect scenarios for the emergence of female leaders who can take control of the situation as they are no longer necessarily subjected to a patriarchal system.

In connection with this, the present paper is based on the idea that how Manish Jha's debut movie, *Matrubhoomi : A Nation Without Women* (2003) presents futuristic dystopia, offering a view of the near future when the nation would face a grim reality without women as it sanctions almost a selective genocide against women. The study also touches upon the fact that how from a nation without woman, a patriarchal dystopia, Jha's film travels towards a nation of women, without violence, without blood bath, without rape, dowry or foeticide envisioning a feminist utopia as it were, sustained by love, care and compassion for each other.

Keywords: *Utopia, Dystopia, Gender, Infanticide, Patriarchy.*

“I don't know if cinema can actually bring about change in society. But cinema can certainly be a vehicle for creating social awareness. I believe in egalitarianism and every person's awareness of human rights. Through my films I can say, 'here is the world and here are the possibilities we have'. Eventually it is to offer an insight into life, into experience, into a certain kind of emotive/cerebral area”. – Shyam Benegal. This is a very reasonable speech as of all mass media systems, cinema by far is considered the most potent and effective having been equipped with a larger than life capacity to present the message of the maker. Added to this, film makers of Europe, US and India have used the true-to- reality style of presentation to capture society in all its starkness. In fact these film makers use to present the social realities in such a manner that leaves an impact on the coming generations. Therefore, we may say cinema presents an image of the society in which it is born and the hopes, aspirations, frustration and contradictions present in any given social order.

The areas of films are very wide and the patterns or types of films are gradually changing throughout the generation in India. If we look into our very own Hindi film industry or "Bollywood" we can see the gradual change in it. The films of earlier days basically pay attention to the utopic world of romance and family drama. But now-a-days it has changed to a world of reality, new films directors came with new thoughts and stories, and that makes the difference. Now the films are gradually changed into a path to Social Welfare. The new film directors and producers think about the need of these types of films.

Since my essay portrays film version of dystopian futuristic worlds, defining the terms utopia and dystopia are obviously central to my cause. The word "Utopia" is an iterant term in Political Philosophy which claims to evoke a sort of ideal society. Made up of two Greek terms, *ou* (οὐ, a Greek prefix of negation) and *tópos* (τόπος, literally: place), it designates, therefore, a non-place, meaning the excellent society that, because of that very excellence, does not exist in the real world. According to Antônio Houaiss (2001), the term was first used in the Portuguese language in a work published in 1671, in the city of Lisbon, and had the curious title of *School of truths open to the Princes in Italian language, by Father Luiz Juglares, from the Society of Jesus, and translated accessible to all in the Portuguese language by D. Antonio Alvares da Cunha*. In the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie*, from 1798, the term assumes a clear

political-juridical content, since it defines a “*plan de gouvernement imaginaire*” However, long before this definition, the word “utopia” had become famous because of its creator, Thomas Morus, an English humanist who lived at the end of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th century and, in his homonymous work, presented the political project of the isle of Utopia, whose inhabitants enjoyed an egalitarian, liberal and fair juridical system (Morus, 2004).³ Besides Morus, the Italian philosopher Tommaso Campanella, author of *The city of the sun*, from 1623, and the English philosopher Francis Bacon, author of the technical-scientific utopia *The new Atlantis* (posthumously published in 1627), were also great utopians of modernity.

On the contrary the term ‘dystopia’ comes from Greek prefix *dys* (δυσ-) means “sick”, “ill”, “abnormal”. According to a suggestion by François Ost, shown in his analysis of the sources of the legal imagery contained in the works of Franz Kafka (Ost, 2005, p. 373- 382), dystopias would be upside down utopias, that is to say, bad utopias, imaginary societies where the conditions of existence are much worse than those of real societies. It seems that the term “dystopia” was first used in 1868 by Greg Webber and John Stuart Mill in a speech at Britain’s Parliament.⁵

The role played by law in dystopias is always outstanding, presenting itself as an eminently technical order, whose single role consists of guaranteeing the perpetuation of social domination. It’s even unnecessary to explain that dystopic societies are characterized by the lack of rights and fundamental guarantees. They are usually highly authoritarian or totalitarian. The main victim sacrificed on the altar of the still fictitious dystopic States is undoubtedly freedom. In connection with these features of dystopic state, the present paper is based on the idea that how Manish Jha’s debut movie, *Matrubhoomi : A Nation Without Women* (2003) presents futuristic dystopia, offering a view of the near future when the nation would face a grim reality without women as it sanctions almost a selective genocide against women. The study also touches upon the fact that how from a nation without woman, a patriarchal dystopia, Jha’s film travels towards a nation of women, without violence, without blood bath, without rape, dowry or foeticide envisioning a feminist utopia as it were, sustained by love, care and compassion for each other.

The idea of *Matrubhoomi* first came to Jha when he read about a village without women in Gujarat in a news magazine. Then one night in Paris while surfing the Net, he came across an article that said that over the years, millions of girl children had fallen victims to gender discrimination in India. “If you are born in Bihar and grow up in Delhi, you witness social prejudices and biases against women at close quarters. Every sensitive man is affected by this discrimination,” Jha says. So when French producer Patrick Sobelman asked him to produce an outline for a script on the subject, he immediately put out a two-page synopsis. Then he wrote down a huge 200-page script but hacked it to 70 pages, all within the space of a week. When he found Pankej Kharabanda to co-produce the movie, the project was on.

Filmed on a tight budget of Rs 2 crore, *Matrubhoomi* was shot in Renai, a remote Madhya Pradesh village, and completed in 29 days. And while filming, Jha realised how fact was really very close to fiction. Even as thousands of men from the neighbouring villages saw the shooting, women merely peeped behind the windows and half-closed doors. “There were at least 10 women in the main house where we shot the film. But we never saw them,” recalls Jha, “It was like life imitating art.” Based on this real life experience Jha concentrates his futuristic dystopic scenario on how men become sex-starved beasts in nation without women.

The story of the movie begins in a rural village in Bihar with the delivery of a baby girl to a village couple. Her disappointed father, who was hoping for a boy, drowns her in vat of milk in a public ceremony. Many years later somewhere around 2050 A.D., this unchecked trend leads to the village being populated solely by males. The now uncouth and aggressive young men of the village are desperate for wives and release their frustration through group screenings of imported pornographic films, cross-dressed dance performances, and even bestiality. They are shown to be willing to go to the lengths of human trafficking and courtship-driven emigration to procure spouses for themselves.

The wealthy father Ramcharan (Sudhir Pandey) of five boys finds out about a single young woman, named Kalki (Tulip Joshi), living some distance from the village and buys her from her father. She is then married to all the five sons. Each night of the week, she is forced to sleep with one of the sons, and even the father gets his weekly night with her. Of all the men in the boorish lot, only the youngest son Sooraj (Sushant Singh) treats her with respect and tenderness.

When the youngest son is killed by his jealous brothers, Kalki asks her father's help for escape. Blinded by the money given to him as dowry, he turns her down. One of the sympathetic domestic servant boys of house helps her to escape but attempt goes lethally awry. The servant boy is brutally murdered while Kalki gets captured by the villagers. The villagers chain her to a post in a cow shed as she becomes a pawn of revenge in an inter-community conflict. The lower caste community of village hold her responsible for the death of the servant-boy, decide to avenge the murder by gang raping her mercilessly night after night. Kalki is then sent back to her husbands.

Kalki becomes pregnant and everybody rejoices. A new servant boy is appointed for her care. As the news spreads, every man in the village claims for the paternity of unborn child which causes violence to break out in the village. The men kill each other off over rights to Kalki and her child. In the meanwhile Kalki goes into labour. The film ends on a violent but hopeful note, as she bears a baby girl.

The story indicates the age-old patriarchal belief in India that the birth of the girl child is the outcome of a *shraap* or curse from the gods. The dominant religions as well as the kinship structure prevalent here lays great value on reproduction in general and sons in particular; girls are considered a lifelong liability as they carry off a large part of the family's assets as dowry at the time of their marriage gnawing at the family's economic well being. The condition of women in India, where some parts of it notorious for rampant female foeticide and infanticide when newly born girls are smothered in a tub of milk to evade the associated sin or *paap* and resultantly a terribly skewed sex ratio, can be well gauged through the countless reports of gender discriminations that make the headlines daily. Fighting gender disparity is a big challenge in India with its socially sanctioned traditions of dowry and dowry-deaths, its complacent permissiveness of wife beating and domestic abuse in the form of wife swapping, forced polygamy/polyandry and child marriage in some communities.

The social crisis faced by the eleven states in India with an alarmingly adverse sex ratio that has created a terrible scarcity of girls, resulting in the revival of some traditional evil social customs, like inbreeding, wife swapping, bride bazaar, wife renting/buying, prostitution to name only a few, points to the grim reality facing Indian women. Inspired by a magazine report about a village in Gujarat, which had no women, Manish Jha's debut feature, *Matrubhoomi: A Nation Without Women* (2003), portrays one of the grimmest realities of present day India, rampant female foeticide, an atrocious crime that has been complacently sanctioned, even actively condoned as part of traditional Indian ethos since time immemorial. Manish Jha's grim futuristic tale, *Matrubhoomi* explores a future where female infanticide has tilted the gender balance, and turned men into savage predators. "The first emotion that hits anybody watching *Matrubhoomi* is shock," writes a reviewer from a leading Indian daily. "Shame follows. And, ultimately, one feels drained. It is a numbing experience. Jha's vision of a nation without women is bleak. It is a world where a father sells off his daughter, where a father-in-law sleeps with his daughter-in-law and where brothers conspire to kill the sibling who is closest to their collective wife." Set in a nondescript village somewhere in a futuristic rural northern India, *Matrubhoomi* explores in a brutal and hard hitting manner, an age when the patriarchal set-up has forced women to become nearly extinct as a result of the gory practice of female infanticide. Populated exclusively by brutish men, the dark world of the small village reduces to a violent barbaric state and the near extinction of women results in the dehumanisation of the sex-starved men, young and old, who indulge in group pornographic sleaze, bestiality, homosexuality and violence. I should mention here one shocking scene regarding this pornography. In the movie we see, after the porn screening one of the men gets up and enters a nearby barnyard to expend his lust on a cow. This metaphor - a holy animal, a supposed object of veneration, becoming a vent for frustrated sexuality - resurfaces

through the film, and is particularly relevant in a story where a woman is subjected to repeated abuse in a household where the garlanded portrait of another woman (the deceased mother) occupies pride of place. It's an old motif - the woman as Mother vs the woman as Whore.

Without women, the society degenerates, emotionally and psychologically, grows gross and debilitates cluttered as it is with horrendous and grotesque perversions like cross dressing and lewd dance performances. The frightening visions that the Jogia Kuya throws up in Tarpan gets a grimmer dimension as it is invested with a chilling black humour in Jha's film through the depiction of gut-wrenching violence, repeated rapes and utter barbarianism. Rooted in reality, Jha's *Matrubhoomi* is created intentionally as an exaggerated, horrifying fantasy to promote awareness among the people of this horrendous social malady and the plight of the girl-child in India. It reads almost like a parody, a dark, mocking re-enactment of the great Indian epic Mahabharata, where a father buys a wife for his five sons by paying five lacs and five cows as bride price from the father of the bride and demands his conjugal rights over her body to get his money's worth, where a father gets rich by the monetary compensation given for the father-in-law's sexual rights over his daughter-in-law and all vestiges of normalcy and ethics vanish into thin air as brothers kill brothers, the wife is chained to a post in the cowshed without food and water just to be used as an object of sexual release for her five husbands and the village men alike and men kill each other over the rights of the body of the last surviving woman and the paternity of her 'son'.

"This is the vision of India's future woman: The tale of Kalki, a metaphoric Draupadi who inhabits a rural India somewhere around 2050... A caste-war ensues, killing nearly all as Kalki gives birth to a girl. The Mahabharata reference gives way to the forecast of Vishnu's incarnation, Kalki, bringing an end to Kalyug." writes another reviewer in an article in the Times of India. In the spectral village, after the carnage when all men kill each other for the possession of one woman and the supposed paternity of her yet-to-be born 'son', the last surviving woman Kalki frees herself from bondage and gives birth to a girl in a deserted house and acknowledges her birth with a smile as the newly born daughter thrashes her tiny legs up in the air and makes her presence felt through her lusty cries.

Though critics have allegedly labelled Jha's vision as 'bleak', a feminist reading would envision a positive ending to the film, signifying the birth of a new nation—a nation born out of strife, pain and humiliation, built on the bodies of the brutish men, a nation cleansed as it were by the blood of the warring, armed, degenerate men. The only 'man' alive, so to say is the young boy, a servant and presumably lower class and lower caste, a sympathetic soul to the hardships of Kalki, and a prospective mate for Kalki's new born daughter in a nation where women would be free from patriarchal atrocities. The birth of Kalki's daughter, a triumphant girl-child, is literally the beginning of an indigenous matriarchal world, a *Matrubhoomi*, the utopic land of mothers, in the true sense. From a nation without woman, a patriarchal dystopia, the narrative of Jha's film travels towards a nation of women, without violence, without blood bath, without rape, dowry or foeticide envisioning a feminist utopia as it were, sustained by love, care and compassion for each other. We can conclude with Manish Jha's dream that the nationwide release of *Matrubhoomi* will bring about a change in the situation - "First, there has to be collective awareness. Next, an intellectual debate. And that is to be followed by action. Hopefully, girls in patriarchal societies will also get a chance to live."

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