

Myth and Patriarchy in Deepa Mehta's *Heaven on Earth*

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This article analyses how *Heaven on Earth* (2008) uses Indian mythology to expose the reality of culturally driven violence against Sikh Punjabi women in Canada, occurring as a result of transnational marriages between diaspora-based Non-Resident Indian (hereafter NRI) men and Sikh Punjabi women. Referring to Bruce Lincoln's theory of myth as ideology, I argue that the film explores how some of these women have experienced marginalisation and how a discourse of abuse can be challenged through myth.

My analysis of Deepa Mehta's *Heaven on Earth* (2008) focuses on the fictional depiction of a poor, working-class, first-generation Indian family, living in Brampton, Ontario, which provides a microcosm of the pressures and realities of everyday immigrant life affecting the family from within. The text represents the ancient Indian myth of the *Sheesh Naag*, the King Cobra, with the ability to shape-shift and transform into human form, to raise awareness about the issue of culturally driven violence against women in South Asian Canadian communities, which is on the increase in Canada's immigrant communities (Papp) and, along with the incidence of gang rape,¹ an even more alarming trend in India (Lakhani). Mehta's interpretation of the myth is based on *Naga-Mandala* (1994), a popular play by Girish Karnad, a South Indian dramatist heavily influenced by ancient Indian mythology. Karnad's play is a story about the mythical figure of a cobra, which, in human form, rescues a lonely bride from an abusive husband and empowers her through storytelling. In *Heaven on Earth* Mehta adapts Karnad's South Indian version of the myth to reflect the characteristics of a diasporic Sikh Punjabi community living in Canada, which is predominantly North Indian in terms of its ancestral origin.

Karnad's version of the cobra myth privileges a male representation of the world, which is challenged in Mehta's version with a female worldview. My analysis of Mehta's retelling of the cobra myth will demonstrate that South Asian patriarchy, in its diasporic and twenty-first century context, is critiqued through myth and raises important questions about it becoming part of a feminist discourse. Referring to Bruce Lincoln's theory of myth as ideology and specifically, his examination of how myths are adapted for a specific purpose, I will consider how each variant of the myth has the potential to recalibrate the ideological discourse that is coded in myth. In *Heaven on Earth* the recalibration leads to a myth that is recoded according to a feminist discourse in order to raise awareness about the oppression of some women in

diasporic societies and to promote wider understanding of the phenomenon of Sikh transnational marriages within poor working-class communities. As such, Mehta's revision of an ancient myth indicates its adaptability and continued relevance to contemporary issues and modern diasporic life.

The feminist interpretation of the cobra myth is explored with ambiguity, through storytelling, in order to highlight that the victim in *Heaven on Earth* is not only the abused woman but her NRI husband and his entire family, which is wedded to living by a patriarchal code as a way of responding to the hardships of immigrant life in Canada. In the film Chand, a young middle class woman, leaves the Indian Punjab to marry Rocky, a working class taxi driver. Rocky is the eldest son in a large extended family that lives together and depends upon him as its main breadwinner. Observing religious and traditional customs, Chand and Rocky are married in a Sikh ceremony and Chand joins Rocky's family as its newest member. The ambiguity in marital and familial relationships, between the abused and abuser, is indicated with the mythical figure of the cobra, as an actual living snake and in human form, in the guise and persona of Rocky, as Rocky's *doppelgänger* and as Chand's abusive husband. This brings confusion to Chand and Rocky's family because, up until the point when all the characters become aware of the snake in its physical form, Chand is unclear if the cobra is real or a figment of her imagination. Thus, a feminist interpretation of a popular Indian myth is used to explore gender politics in a fictional depiction of domestic violence.

Academic criticism on *Heaven on Earth* is yet to emerge and much of the existing scholarship on Deepa Mehta has tended to privilege her "Elements" Trilogy: *Fire* (1996), *Earth* (1998) and *Water* (2005), with *Heaven on Earth* somewhat obscured by the success of these films.² Also, criticism on the Trilogy has tended to read the films in postcolonial terms, related to South Asian women's issues and the cultural dimensions of globalisation, and has not been concerned with Mehta's treatment of the Indian diaspora in Canada (Gairola; Datta; Mukherjee). The Sikh Punjabi community is the largest within the Indian diaspora in Canada and *Heaven on Earth* sheds light on issues specifically affecting this community group, such as the incidence of NRI marital abuse. According to Shinder S. Thandi, a discourse of abuse has arisen in the Indian Punjab concerning the abuse of women by NRI men, which tends to feature the NRI husband with negative images, as the "abuser" (233). Examining how Mehta recalibrates a popular Indian myth to challenge a discourse of abuse, my analysis of *Heaven on Earth* offers a nuanced reading of the NRI husband, as an abuser and a victim of abuse himself, and thereby responds to the lack of scholarly work on NRI marital abuse, identified by Thandi. Also, aside from cursory remarks about the use of Indian mythology, Indian and Canadian reviews of *Heaven on Earth* have been mostly concerned with the film's exposure of domestic violence (Malani; Monk). This, too, I would situate in relation to a long tradition of cultural production by South Asian artists, mainly women. For instance, the issue of domestic abuse experienced by South Asian American women is a recurrent theme in Chitra Divakaruni's fiction and, in the Canadian context, similarly explored in short

stories by Shauna Singh Baldwin and Uma Parameswaran. Jag Mundhra's 2006 film, *Provoked*, is based on the true story of a British Indian woman, Kiranjit Ahluwalia, who killed her husband after years of suffering domestic violence and was released from prison in a high profile campaign spearheaded by the Southall Black Sisters, a radical women's group synonymous with black British feminism in the 1990s (Gupta 8-9). Gurinder Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) similarly concerns the storyline of a British Indian woman escaping an abusive husband. In her 2014 collection of plays, most notably *Behsharam* (Shameless) and *Behzti* (Dishonour), the British Indian woman playwright, Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, explores similar issues in the British context as well. Significantly, existing criticism on Mehta's films has not considered how she uses mythology to advance her interest in women's issues, as a specific form of political activism or social commentary. In various ways, then, this article aims to fill a gap in the academic study of *Heaven on Earth* and the wider questions the film has raised.

Myth as Ideology

Myth is political because it carries ideology that determines a particular worldview and how knowledge and power relations are controlled within it. Myth is persuasive because it is presented in the format of a seemingly simple story, which in its ancient form sits within an oral tradition of storytelling. Bruce Lincoln privileges this aspect of myth as narrative and the act of narration in his theory of myth as ideology and this links with how myth is represented in *Heaven on Earth*, as an ordinary folk tale about a shape-shifting snake. The tale is told by Chand, who is both the storyteller and the listener and hence in charge of narrative and the act of narration, too. Lincoln departs from existing myth scholarship to develop an idea of myth as taxonomy. He finds that "taxonomy is hardly a neutral process, since the order established among all that is classified (including items treated only by allusion or implication, and above all human groupings) is hierarchic as well as categoric" (147). Keeping in mind the narrative quality of myth, Lincoln's approach to myth is to examine the relationship between human groups, the status and ranking of certain individuals, their role in the stories, why some are discriminated against and why others are subordinated and, in short, how all aspects of a myth are ordered and classified in the narrative. Pursuing these lines of thought, Lincoln concludes:

When a taxonomy is encoded in mythic form, the narrative packages a specific, contingent system of discrimination in a particularly attractive and memorable form. What is more, it naturalizes and legitimates it. Myth, then, is not just taxonomy, but *ideology* in narrative form (147; emphasis in original).

A myth like the cobra myth is a story built with many characters and elements that are classified and ordered in a specific way to espouse an ideological

position. The ideology of the cobra myth is wrapped up in the format of a simple story about a lonely young woman looking for love, which, like the creation myth of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, is well known and a commonplace belief related to religious worship. When Eve is tricked by the serpent into eating fruit from the forbidden tree there are far-reaching consequences, most obviously, the fall of humanity. So, ideologically speaking, this creation myth determines a patriarchal worldview in which the woman is held responsible for a fundamental shift in the way humankind relates to God. The woman's relationship with God does not exist or it is subsumed within that of the male. The woman is only recognized in terms of sexualized temptation and evil, reflecting a fear of female sexuality. Lincoln is clearly influenced by Roland Barthes' approach to myth when he advances the idea that myth is loaded with a political ideology that makes it incredibly potent and able to command authority over people and their belief systems without any questioning of its legitimacy.

The snake is a highly popular and potent symbol in ancient Indian mythology and appears in many other cultures and religions, too. I have mentioned the Judeo-Christian tradition but snake mythology is also present in many different cultural contexts, including the ancient Mediterranean world, China, Japan and South East Asia, and Native culture in North America, where it is paired with other mythical figures like birds, such as the eagle (Wittkower 293-325). The migration of these myths means they have evolved according to specific circumstances and cultural differences but they have also retained affinities and similarities in meaning, so the pairing of mythical characters is often associated with a cosmic struggle between the sun and moon, light and darkness, good and evil (301). The issue of duality is developed in Mehta's film through Rocky, Chand's NRI husband, whose character is split into two. In her notes to the making of her film Mehta explains that the idea of the split self is borrowed from *Naga-Mandala* and Karnad's skilful use of duality:

In his human form [as the living spouse], he is the coarse and boorish man, who brutalizes his wife Rani during the day, but at night he metamorphoses into a divine lover – a Naga-Raja. Both halves are unaware of each other, both exist in one another, both are each other's divided selves, contradicting and contrasting with each other in a dynamic play of fantasy and illusion (9).

The figure of the *doppelgänger* is at the heart of how the cobra myth is used to explore the intimacy of marital relationships and issues of South Asian patriarchy more generally.

German in its origins, the use of the *doppelgänger* emerged at the end of the eighteenth century, at a time when German Romanticism was nascent and alongside a growing field of psychology, where the theme of the double was linked with studies in narcissism (Rank, xx). The *doppelgänger* is popular in Gothic fiction as an exploration into the darker side of the self and regarded by

Debra Walker King “as the collision between real bodies and an unfriendly informant: a fictional double whose aim is to mask individuality and mute the voice of personal agency” (vii). Other critics, like Dimitris Vardoulakis, argue that the *doppelgänger* is neither good nor bad, but rather the element that structures the subject’s ontology (3). Both of these viewpoints are relevant to how Rocky’s *doppelgänger* is represented in the film, a character that in human form, as the living spouse, crushes Chand’s personal agency and yet, as the cobra, Rocky’s double, awakens her sexual desire and helps her to find freedom. Duality is thus used to feature the NRI husband as both the “abuser” and emancipator, as two halves of the same man, with each unaware of the other. This is Mehta’s way of challenging Indian media representations of the phenomenon of NRI marital abuse, identified by Thandi, where diaspora-based men are often presented as one-dimensional characters and demonised as perpetrators of domestic abuse.³ In contrast, Mehta’s depiction of Rocky as the NRI husband is multi-dimensional and complex. Rocky is caught within a web of familial commitments and expectations, where he wrestles with competing demands on his time and his ability to provide for a large extended family. The pressures upon him are multiplied when he is expected to organise the sponsorship of further relatives from India. Buckling under the pressure, Rocky sees that his only recourse is to exploit his new bride, to ask for her wedding jewellery, which he intends to sell in order to raise the funds for sponsoring the arrival and settlement of his Indian relatives. Mehta’s characterisation of the NRI husband thus draws attention to another form of immigration, related to the migrant trend and an arranged marriage system in which dowry payments are used to sponsor people overseas (Bedi; Pandey; Menski). Significantly, *Heaven on Earth* provides its commentary on these social issues through a recalibration of the cobra myth, with the *doppelgänger* motif used to interrogate the power dynamics of gendered relations in diasporic contexts.

In Mehta’s film the cobra is gendered male but in Hindu snake iconography and in Hinduism, the snake is often represented in feminine form and associated with goddesses who possess great strength, such as *Kali* and *Shakti Ma. Kundalini* is another important mythological figure, a coiled serpent that represents the residual power of pure desire. The snake is also interpreted in some forms of yoga as an energy and power to be harnessed for spiritual and physical well-being. In some parts of India, snakes are worshipped as carriers of fertility and as a symbol of transformative power because they can shed their skin and begin life anew. *Shiva*, the Destroyer, is the spouse of *Shakti* but worshipped by yogis as a celibate god, who is adorned with snakes as garlands, anklets and armlets. *Vishnu*, the Preserver, reclines on the coils of a multi-hooded King Cobra, while *Lakshmi*, his consort, massages his feet. Seated on the cosmic ocean, he protects the universe from all evil. Hindus worship the *Vasuki Naga* for becoming the rope that churned the ocean and allowed the gods to find immortality but which required *Shiva* to drink the poison in order to avert the destruction of the world. Snakes are thus associated with water and also with hair owing to the story of *Brahma* and his creation of a *Yaksha*, a

nature spirit, the sight of which frightened him so much that his hair was transformed into a mass of serpents (Sahi 161). In *Heaven on Earth* the film links these various images, of snakes, hair, water and female empowerment, in a song that fades in and out across the film's narrative and with the traditional image of an Indian woman who has long dark hair. Indeed, in Karnad's version, when Rani, the lonely child bride, wonders why her head hurts, she discovers the cobra is hiding in her hair (64).

Filmmakers like Mehta appreciate the ideological hold of ancient myths but as interpreters they also seek to fulfil the need for agency in the act of narration, which is denied to them by myth because it is often treated as an anonymous and collective product and where, in the "original version", questions of authorship are irrelevant. This links with notions of purity and authenticity. Lincoln responds to the need for originality with a political theory of narration that recognizes narrators must be allowed "the capacity to modify details of the stories that pass through them, introducing changes in the classificatory order as they do so, most often in ways that reflect their subject position and advance their interests" (149). In her notes to the film and speaking about its genesis, Mehta explains that she first came across the Indian myth of the cobra when she was visiting India and saw performances of Karnad's *Naga-Mandala*, a play "based on an old Indian folk tale about a lonely and unhappy wife who finds comfort when she is visited by a snake who has taken on the form of her husband" (8). Back in Canada, she happened to meet with several Sikh Punjabi women, who had come to Canada for arranged marriages that subsequently disintegrated into abusive relationships. Having watched further performances of *Naga-Mandala* on return visits to India and, in the interim, directing *Let's Talk About It: Domestic Violence* (2006), a documentary about young girls growing up in abusive households within different immigrant communities - Indian, Haitian and Mexican - Mehta discovered that the opportunity "to weave both a personal story of a young immigrant woman and the myth of the Cobra, the nature of duality, seemed like an interesting combination" (9). Clearly, Mehta's subject position as a diasporic Indian filmmaker allows her to move between India and Canada, different cultural and national contexts, with considerable ease. In *Heaven on Earth* she uses this fluidity to "weave" an ancient Indian myth into a contemporary narrative about NRI marital abuse in Canada.

On various levels, weaving myth and reality together allows Mehta to advance her own interests, too. Firstly, born in the Indian Punjab and fluent in Gurmukhi she could translate *Naga-Mandala* for Punjabi-speaking audiences, although it was originally written in the South Indian language of Kannada (Karnad 20). Most of the characters in *Heaven on Earth* speak Punjabi and the script is accompanied with English subtitles. The film was released in India with a Punjabi title, *Videsh*, which in English translation means "foreign land" and plays on the Hindi word *Desh*, often used to mean "home" or as a substitute for India, the homeland. Secondly, aware that Punjabi communities in Canada are predominantly Sikh, Mehta modifies the religious connotations of the cobra myth, changing it from Karnad's Hindu version into a Sikh form.

In the film it is introduced as follows: “Once Saint Gulab Singh was on a pilgrimage to *Hemkund* when along the road he met a *Sheesh Naag*” (*Heaven on Earth*). *Hemkund Sahib* is a Sikh place of worship situated in the Himalayan ranges in northern India and popular with Sikh pilgrims, indicated in the use of the saint’s surname, “Singh”, a common male surname in Sikh Punjabi communities and referred to in the film with Chand’s NRI husband named as Rocky Singh Dhillon. Rocky’s parents, especially his father, a turbaned Sikh, are devout followers of Sikhism. The significance of religion in terms of the process of gender construction is discussed later, when I consider the status of women in the history of Sikhism.

Rocky, in contrast to his father, has short hair and is not a devout Sikh. In the film he is presented as a frustrated young NRI, who works long hours as a taxi driver, trying to support his elderly parents, siblings, nieces and nephews, many of whom are unemployed. Here, Mehta’s representation of everyday NRI family life highlights some of the issues affecting Sikh Punjabi communities in contemporary Toronto. Newly arrived in Canada, Chand is unaware of these issues. For instance, she joins an extended family of eight people sharing a two-bedroom house in a Canadian suburb. This small house is also shared with numerous tenants so that Rocky’s family can supplement its income with rent from these tenants. These tenants are also of Indian extraction and sleep in the house during the day when Rocky’s family is out. Mehta’s version of the cobra myth, unlike Karnad’s, explores domestic abuse with reference to contemporary diasporic class-based issues, highlighting stress factors felt more immediately by first-generation working-class people, such as poverty, a lack of education and illiteracy, unemployment and overcrowding. In an interview with Sukhmani Khorana, Mehta explains:

It’s very difficult for people who come from Ludhiana, or Hoshiarpur, or small towns like the districts of Bhatinda to come here [Toronto] soon after marriage and start working in factories the next day. That’s their life. Spousal abuse is enormous... So I couldn’t have done a film like *Heaven on Earth* unless I was very specific. Once you stop being specific, it dilutes the subject (31-32).

In Mehta’s film Chand is an educated young woman who comes to Canada to marry Rocky and who, soon after marriage, starts working in a factory alongside her sister-in-law, Aman. Aman’s husband, Baldev, also came to Canada for marriage but, unlike Chand, cannot find work and is dependent on his wife and her family. *Heaven on Earth* here highlights some of the socio-economic changes taking place in the Indian Punjab and the diaspora, in which “girls [are] marrying *below* their socio-economic status; male spouses [are] living with the bride’s parents” (Thandi 235; emphasis in original). Despite the harsh reality of immigrant life in Canada, some Punjab-based parents view the NRI marriage as a way of improving the family’s economic future, as “a ticket to a better life” (Aulakh). For first-generation diaspora-based parents the NRI

marriage can be a way of upholding “tradition” and adhering to “Indian” values. The purpose behind holding these values might be a way to demonstrate a relationship with India, the homeland, but it might also be a way to differentiate ethno-religious identity in a diasporic context that is governed with a policy of multiculturalism, where ethnic difference is used to label some communities as “visible minorities”.

In *Heaven on Earth*, the narrative of the film does not explain if Rocky and Chand had any input in the arrangement of their marriage but given the tensions in their married life and Rocky’s tense relationship with his parents, one might assume a satisfactory negotiation process has not taken place. As Nancy S. Netting argues “family negotiations depend on respect between genders and generations, without this base, families are polarized and youths’ choices virtually limited to rebellion or capitulation” (141). Certainly, Rocky’s position in relation to his parents and the larger extended family, as its main breadwinner, leaves him with no veto and no control of his own life choices. His sense of isolation is indicated in the film at significant moments in the narrative with a switch from colour to black and white. In her director’s notes, Mehta justifies why she chose this technique:

I felt that the ‘twilight zone’ quality of these moments [of Rocky’s isolation] needed to be highlighted and using black and white seemed the most organic way of doing it. It wasn’t as simple as ‘intensity is leached of all colour, so let’s go to black and white’. Rather, it was to try and encourage the viewer to see the characters lay bare their most intimate fears and delusions in monochromatic austerity (12-13).

The switch to black and white occurs when Rocky is alone and at his most vulnerable, and visualised in black and white, his fractured existence is seen by the viewer like an x-ray. Earlier, I mentioned that *Heaven on Earth* can be situated within a tradition of South Asian cultural production that has explored issues of domestic abuse. Here, I would similarly argue that Mehta’s use of black and white in a realist-style film can also be situated within a long tradition of popular films that use *cinéma vérité* techniques, such as Victor Fleming’s *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), originally released in the US under the title of *Stairway to Heaven*. These films use techniques of *cinéma vérité*, such as the switch to colour from black and white or vice versa, to achieve particular narrative effects for character or plot development. Somewhat similarly, *Heaven on Earth* switches to black and white from colour to highlight Rocky’s vulnerability. The absence of dialogue and non-diegetic sound gives these scenes an eerie quality, to further emphasise Rocky’s sense of isolation. For instance, in one of these scenes, taking place immediately after Rocky has visited the Citizenship and Immigration Canada centre to lodge a sponsorship application for further relatives from India, the camera closes in on Rocky sitting alone in his car. The slow zoom onto his pained

face, inhaling deeply and slowly, indicates his sense of loneliness and entrapment in family duties.

The black and white scenes are also used to represent Rocky's *doppelgänger*, where Rocky's double is presented as an emancipator, when he liberates Chand's sexual desire. Significantly, as the film is principally concerned with women's issues, the cinematic technique is used for a much greater narrative effect to explore Chand's abuse. It is the specificity of this subject matter, of culturally driven violence against women, and Mehta's own identity as a Punjabi Canadian filmmaker that dictates how and why Mehta modifies some elements of the cobra myth and thereby advances her primary interest of exploring women's issues, which is evident in much of her work and most notably in her Trilogy. In *Fire* (1996) Mehta examines the politics of sexuality with a focus on lesbianism in postcolonial India and in *Earth* (1998) the politics of war and nation, which is depicted in the increasing ethno-religious tensions between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims that surfaced during and after India's Partition. *Water* (2005) critiques the politics of religion from a female point of view with a focus on India's historical mistreatment of widows. Arguably, then, *Heaven on Earth* represents the latest instalment in Mehta's personal and political commitment to raising awareness about the injustices South Asian women suffer, in the diaspora and in India.

Recalibrating Myth in *Heaven on Earth*

Mehta adapts an Indian myth in order to reflect some of the main characteristics of the Indian diaspora in Canada and thereby illustrates that "myths are not snapshot representations of stable taxonomies and hierarchies" (Lincoln 150). Mehta's version highlights that there is an instability between the social order in variants of myth and the stories told about it, which is dynamic and creates possibilities for rival narrators and the act of narration. Lincoln develops a protocol to show what one gains from studying a variant of myth alongside others and against the backdrop of their social and cultural context (150-151). As an example, I will now apply the protocol to my reading of the cobra myth to demonstrate how Mehta's version re-orders the patriarchal worldview presented in an earlier variant of the myth, narrated by Karnad, and re-codes it with a feminist discourse that is politically more subversive.

In the cobra myth the South Asian traditional joint family structure is the main category at issue in the story and contested with the introduction of a new family member. In *Heaven on Earth* Mehta introduces new categories not present in Karnad's version and eliminates others and thereby modifies the hierarchic orders in which these categories are organized. In order to better understand the ideological implications of Mehta's revision it would make sense to firstly outline the pertinent aspects of Karnad's version of the myth. Briefly, *Naga-Mandala* is the story of a child bride called Rani, which in English translation means "Queen" and is a play on her subordinated position in relation to a king and patriarchal family. Rani is pre-pubescent at the time of

her marriage and her virginity indicates an “unsullied” character, whose “purity” remains intact in the marriage because she is untouched by a husband otherwise engaged in extra-marital affairs. Alone and locked in an empty house, a blind old woman, Kurudavva, takes pity on Rani’s position, giving her a magic root with the instruction to feed it to her husband and thereby ensure the marriage is consummated but which results in nightly visits by a cobra, in human form, as the husband’s *doppelgänger*. The climax of the story comes when Rani discovers she is pregnant as a result of her relationship with the snake and her position shifts from virgin bride to that of a woman who, unbeknown to herself, has explored her sexuality outside of marriage. On trial before the Village Elders, a group of laymen, Rani swears an oath of her fidelity in marriage whilst holding a cobra, called the *naagpriksha*. A fatal bite by the snake is proof of guilt but because Rani is unharmed she is proclaimed to be a goddess and her husband is ordered to live in her service, which is her challenge to Indian patriarchy. The *naagpriksha* is a ritual to test for female purity, reminiscent of other rituals and myths in the *Ramayana*, when, for example, Sita takes the *agnipriksha* and walks through fire to prove her innocence in marriage.

Karnad’s version of the cobra story highlights the main concerns of South Asian patriarchy. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, it refers to the basic pattern of hierarchy, with a patriarch at the top. In a typical joint family structure the patriarch is supported by his wife and together they head a family hierarchy that is organized through a male line, with the sons taking precedence over unmarried daughters. Only the males have rights to inheritance and so are expected to remain lifelong members. When a son marries, his wife is expected to leave her natal home with a dowry, which she is expected to give to her husband and his family. Making the move in marriage, she transfers all her goods, her loyalty and her total commitment to her husband’s family. In terms of power dynamics, when this bride joins the established hierarchy in her husband’s family, she is the weakest member of his entire family (Papp 12). Only after producing a son, a male heir, will this newcomer gain some rights but even then her position in the family is premised on the basis of her multiple subordinate statuses as wife, daughter-in-law and sister-in-law (Abraham 22). Some families also observe the cultural practice of renaming the bride to denote her new identity as a wife and a break from an earlier life in terms of changing roles and responsibilities.

The South Asian family hierarchy is maintained by burdening women with tasks that perpetuate anachronistic customs and traditions that privilege men, reflecting systems of androcentrism and husband worship. Respectfulness towards the patriarch is one of the main customs observed and a woman’s worth is measured in terms of her commitment to her husband and the home. For instance, in the ritual of *Karwa Chauth* wives fast and pray for their husband’s prosperity, health and long life. Gayatri Spivak, in her 1988 essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, asserts that when the woman is burdened with a constrictive web of familial commitments, she is part of an “ideological construction of gender [that] keeps the male dominant” (82). The woman is

relegated to the space of the home and in roles that emphasize her usefulness in domesticity and servitude, which supports the construction of her gender as a woman.

Returning to a point indicated earlier, it is important to consider the role of religion in supporting the gender construction process. Rocky's parents are devout Sikhs and family life is dominated by their religious activities. Examining gender construction in the history of Sikhism, Doris Jakobsh argues that in the colonial period, after the annexation of the Sikh Empire by the British in 1849, Sikh ideals of womanhood were influenced by the educational and religious initiatives of the Singh Sabha reformers (1-6). These reformers were the product of the British educational system themselves and hence, could take positions of leadership in a movement that was outwardly a reaction against Christian missionary activities. Key aims of the movement included the revival of the Sikh Gurus' teachings, production of religious literature using the Gurmukhi script and a campaign to increase literacy (Singh 211-218). The process of active gender construction through many of the Singh Sabha initiatives "was based on newly articulated Sikh ideals shaped by Victorian gender ideals, as well as a 'purified' adaptation of Sikh ideology" (Jakobsh 3). Prior to the reform rural Sikh men and women had similar roles, such as fieldwork, that assisted with managing farms and livestock. However, following the reform, these roles were differentiated with a Victorian sensibility, with women confined to the domestic realm and men assuming power and influence in the world outside the home. Thus, it follows that "with this separation came an accentuated understanding of the private subordinated to the public" (8). The designation of these roles and realms was further strengthened by the need for 'purification', which the reformers regarded as a necessary response to a Sikh tradition that was seen to be deteriorating as a result of "the uneducated, uncouth condition of the Sikh masses, which were unable to discern Sikh truths from the degenerate and constantly encroaching Hindu tradition" (3). So, for the Singh Sabha reformers and the new Sikh elite, a major aspect of the gender construction process resulted in a "tendency to present the unparalleled position of Sikh women and Sikh men as a feature of their distinctiveness from other groups" (3). This tendency can be seen in the four principles of silence and negation, accommodation and idealization, which are identified by Jakobsh as guiding contemporary writings on women in the history of Sikhism (1-12). Jakobsh's primary aim in identifying these principles is to consider the discrepancies between Sikh ideology as egalitarian and women's exclusion from history in terms of its recording. However, I would argue that these principles have also assisted in the shaping of societal values, which have been transplanted in successive generations within diasporic settings, as represented in *Heaven on Earth*.

Gender Construction: Idealization, Silence, Negation and Accommodation

In her examination of Sikh history as it relates to women, Jakobsh argues that the dominant need has been "not so much to *reform* tradition as to *idealize*

aspects of history and scripture as they pertain to women” (emphasis in original; 8). To support her understanding of how the principle of idealization has been used in Sikh history and scripture, Jakobsh cites examples of glorified women, mainly warrior figures, who lived exceptional lives as a result of their deep allegiance to the Sikh faith, such as Mata Sundri, the wife of the Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru. Rita Gross, in her feminist study of religion, detects an “androcentric thinking” present in historical scholarship (296). She notes that if women are mentioned in the annals of history it is only to record their extra-ordinariness and how they deviate from the norm as “exceptional” women:

[A]ndrocentric thinking deals with them [exceptional women] only as an object exterior to ‘mankind’, needing to be explained and fitted in somewhere, having the same epistemological and ontological status as trees, unicorns, deities, and other objects that must be discussed to make experience intelligible (296).

Referring to the example of Mata Sundri and her status in Sikhism, one might suggest she is idealized in relation to her husband, who is presented as the religious subject, and then following his death, as the widow in service to the Sikh faith, and finally, her sacrifices as a mother are idealized in relation to the death of her sons. Significantly, the idealization of exceptional women is tied to the family in roles that emphasize servitude. Deniz Kandiyoti argues that burdening women in this way and tying them to the home is related to nation-building projects because it forces women to become “boundary markers for their communities” (388). Such women are left with little agency to become fully-fledged citizens in their own right and this inevitably leads to a practice of “making women emblematic of a nation’s cultural survival” (Das Dasgupta 6). Earlier, I mentioned that a key objective of the Singh Sabha movement was to differentiate Sikhism from the dominant Hindu tradition and the role and status of women in the family and wider community was an important platform used by the reformers to show the purity of the Sikh faith, religious identity, and a way to safeguard cultural survival.

The education of women became a central issue for the Singh Sabha reformers and one of the main ways of enrolling the support of women in the movement. Literacy was encouraged with novels depicting female role models. Bhai Vir Singh, a foremost writer from the reformist movement, wrote a number of Punjabi novels with female figures in central roles. In *Sundri* (1898) the novel narrates the experiences of a young wealthy Hindu girl, Surasti, who is abducted by a Muslim ruler, the Nawab, but then escapes to the forest. Surasti is helped by her brother, a recent convert to the Sikh faith and member of the Khalsa. However, the pair are recaptured by the same Nawab and threatened with conversion to Islam. Sometime later but before their conversion they are rescued by the Khalsa army and given a safe home at a Khalsa camp, whereupon Surasti becomes Sunder Kaur or ‘Sundri’ and where she professes her extreme desire for the Sikh faith. Regarding *Sundri* as a

political novel, C. Christine Fair argues that “Sundri is a model of piety and sacrifice which Sikh women should strive to imitate and she is a tool by which men are incited to heroic behaviour” (115). Fair also notes that “most of the text involves Sundri eluding the lustful Nawab and exhibiting behaviour that Vir Singh believes is the model for contemporary Sikh women” (115). Significantly, Sundri maintains her virginity despite abduction and at times across the text she is idealized as a goddess, whose status as a pure Sikh woman stands in glorified opposition to her Muslim abductor and her Hindu heritage.

Sundri’s survival in the novel is located in a concept of purity that draws considerable strength from her identity as a young virgin and recent convert. Modern South Asian audiences might better understand cultural survival as located in a concept of family honour called *izzat*, which sits at the heart of South Asian patriarchal discourse and effectively polices female behaviour (Das Dasgupta 6). In *Naga-Mandala* and *Heaven on Earth* the two young women protagonists, Rani and Chand respectively, are recently married and expected to uphold the family’s *izzat*. Outwardly, this places them on a pedestal as highly valued members of their husbands’ family, idealized as a sign of the family’s credibility and status. However, in practice, as Bannerji contends, this is a way to subordinate female ranking in the family hierarchy because this position is “mediated and regulated through a patriarchal code... anchored to the moral regulations of honour... Any deviance from the domestic patriarchy of family... is a pathway to shame and punishment” (169). In submission, women are locked in to the patriarchal discourse, where the likelihood of violence against women is increased. Indeed, as Radhika Coomaraswamy asserts, when communities are organized with patriarchal structures that strictly adhere to honour and shame codes there is a higher incidence of violence against women as compared with their Western counterpart (19-23). There is an irony in these codes, however. The said ranking only occurs because if the woman was not the most powerless person in the family, “she could not have been pushed into the mould of a symbol or disembodied into a metaphor” (Bannerji 169). Following this logic, indicated in Karnad’s version of the cobra myth, women are trapped into roles that are binary opposites: either on a pedestal worshipped like goddesses or social outcasts because they bring shame and dishonour to the family, a traditional virgin/whore split.

In Mehta’s adaptation the extended family structure is seemingly headed by an elderly father figure, called Papa-ji, who actually lacks authority and prefers to spend his time in religious worship. His patriarchal authority is devolved to his wife, Ma-ji, and the chief instrument of her power is her eldest son Rocky. So, in a shift from the classification order in *Naga-Mandala*, the family hierarchy in *Heaven on Earth* is ruled by a matriarch not patriarch. However, descent and relationships in the family hierarchy are still determined through the male line, not female. In terms of power relations and family dynamics the patriarchal ideology is implemented and promoted by the women themselves and the women collude in misogynistic practices. This distinction is important

as it reveals that Mehta's retelling of the cobra myth critiques South Asian patriarchy through a feminist discourse that is also critical of women. Audre Lorde makes the point more succinctly when she says that "to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy... is to ignore how those tools are used by women without awareness against each other" (95). I would go further to say that such abuse takes place with awareness too. In bride burnings, still rampant in India and related to dowry payments, female members of a family assist in the crime knowing full well they are culpable (Rew, Gangoli and Gill 155). Mehta's revision of a patriarchal myth exposes the complexities of domestic violence in some Sikh Punjabi communities, where the perpetrator is not always the spouse but can include family members of the same gender, for instance, Chand's mother-in-law and sister-in-law. In this re-organized hierarchy, Chand is expected to please her mother-in-law at all times, whose singular aim in the film's narrative is to establish her control over the newcomer to the family.

In *Heaven on Earth* there are several scenes in which Chand's abuse is orchestrated by the matriarch. The first scene takes place one evening in a hotel room when Rocky and Chand are on their honeymoon. Rocky's mother arrives at the hotel unannounced and claims the reason for her unexpected visit is because she had been worried about Rocky. Confirming the logic of patriarchal discourse, Rocky is a dutiful and obedient son, following his parents' instructions without question. Deferential to his mother's sudden appearance, he invites her to stay in the room with Chand while he spends the night in the car. When Chand tries to intervene, suggesting that they book another room for his mother, Rocky responds by violently slapping her across the face. Shamed and punished, the scene closes with Rocky's mother saying to Chand, "don't cry dear, this [physical violence] happens everywhere, in all homes" (*Heaven on Earth*) and Chand massaging her mother-in-law's feet, indicating her submission to expected levels of subservience, to her husband and his mother. This scene illustrates a discourse of abuse perpetrated by women themselves, in which Chand is expected to accept physical violence, negate her own suffering and accommodate a practice that her mother-in-law insists is commonplace in the wider community.

Chand is a graduate but her interest in seeking employment befitting her qualifications is dismissed by her husband when he arranges for her to work in a laundry factory without her consultation. Chand attempts to assert herself when she asks the factory owner, "What's my salary and when will I get it?" (*Heaven on Earth*). She realises the full extent of her economic exploitation when he replies, "Your salary is directly sent to your husband as per instructions" (*Heaven on Earth*). Chand's facial bruises attract the attention of her co-workers but this is dismissed by Chand's sister-in-law, Aman, with a harsh retort, "in our community we deal with problems in house" (*Heaven on Earth*). This scene illustrates Chand's abuse outside the home by her husband and his sister. Rocky is able to exert his control over Chand outside the home because the factory owner is a member of the diasporic Indian community and a close friend. Furthermore, Aman's reaction to public enquiry reveals a fear

of exposure and a code of silence that is maintained by everyone in her family. Jakobsh notes that “the guiding principle in Sikh history with regard to women is silence” (3). Certainly, as represented in the film, Chand is expected to remain silent and subservient at all times to indicate her status as a newly married woman. The lack of non-diegetic sound in these scenes has the effect of focusing the viewer’s attention on Chand’s face, where the camera is frequently in close-up to register the full extent of her abuse. In her notes to the film, Mehta refers to the case studies she researched in preparation for *Heaven on Earth* and the experience of women struggling to find “the courage to break the code of silence. A silence that is a mandatory requirement as far as marriage in South Asian culture is concerned” (8). Thus, Chand’s abuse is produced, controlled and regulated through principles of idealization, negation, accommodation and silence, which together mark her descent into powerlessness.

Blurring the Boundaries: Myth or Reality?

Chand’s transition from victim to victor is achieved through storytelling and an idea that stories are fluid enough to disturb stable representations. Mehta is attracted to Karnad’s version of the Indian myth because, as she says, it “explores the meaning of creativity by presenting a complex and provocatively ambiguous world where fictional characters and real characters intermingle and the lines between the visible and the invisible are blurred” (9). Chand’s extreme isolation forces her to withdraw into herself and it is in this private space where she tells herself stories and where the lines are blurred. Chand’s storytelling takes place immediately after each episode of physical violence. The viewer is alerted to the significance of these moments in the narrative with a switch from colour to black and white, as discussed earlier with reference to Rocky’s sense of isolation. In the case of Chand the switch to black and white from colour is made to emphasise the reality of Chand’s abuse, which forces her to retreat into her fictions.

The black and white scenes in Mehta’s film are used in an innovative way to disturb Chand’s perception of her life in Canada. The consequences of making innovative adaptations to myth can be far-reaching if, as Lincoln puts it, “audiences come to perceive these innovative representations as reality” (150). In the film, following a few failed attempts at feeding her husband a magic potion and to avoid detection by her spouse’s family, Chand runs outside into the garden to pour the frothing liquid into the base of a tree. A voiceover then explains the snake’s arrival into the film: “when the serpents rise from the earth and when they enter the story they touch the threshold of fantasy and can assume unique forms. I am a serpent but not just a serpent, I am an ocean of love. I am nature, just nature, full of desire” (*Heaven on Earth*). In the next scene, in Chand’s bedroom, a real-life representation of the snake, as Rocky’s double, is seated on the bed. Chand believes she is in amorous conversation with her husband but then happens to look into her dresser mirror and sees the reflection of a hooded cobra, half coiled and resting

on the bed. On the narrative level, the world around Chand, away from the shape-shifting cobra, is regarded as real and the realm of common sense. But the viewer's perception of reality does not remain here for long. The sudden and alternating image of the cobra shifting into human form and then back into cobra, via the reflection in the mirror, signals to the viewer that the world inside the image appears to be mythical or at least unreal and yet simultaneously it is emotionally real.

Frequently abused and frequently visited by the snake, Chand becomes confused and disorientated. She asks the snake, in its human guise, "Either I am going insane or you? I feel like I am dreaming now. How's that possible? How can he change so drastically? One moment so aggressive and then he's so nice now? Who are you?" (*Heaven on Earth*). Rocky's double replies, "Am I not the one you want me to be?" (*Heaven on Earth*). The use of the *doppelgänger* represents a way of questioning the subject's innermost desires and darkest secrets. It is also a way of representing a more realistic image of the NRI husband, to counteract the characteristically negative images featured in Indian media representations, as discussed earlier. Rocky's double pushes Chand to face her fears and reveal her vulnerability and in this respect the NRI husband is represented as an emancipator, someone who helps his wife to take note of her condition and liberate herself.

Discounting the fact that a harsh Canadian winter is not a realistic habitat for King Cobras, Rocky's family is clearly predisposed to believing in the possibility of an Indian cobra myth entering their "real world" in Canada and as such, they see nothing wrong with observing it as another of their traditional Indian practices. Equipped with a myth that is her tool for resistance and self-preservation, Chand, too, is a believer. The blind belief justifies why these people see the *naagpriksha* as a ritual and physical complement to the cobra myth and a way of resolving the confusion between myth and reality. Rocky arrives at his allegation of Chand's adultery when he receives a telephone call from his tenants, asking after Chand's health. They refer to the time when she was home alone and sick, and when, behind her bedroom door, they overheard Chand speaking with a man that she had said was her husband. Rocky remembers he was working on the date in question and so with an alibi to confirm his own whereabouts, he judges Chand to be guilty of adultery and starts hitting her. In Karnad's version of the myth the Village Elders organise Rani's trial but in *Heaven on Earth* it is the matriarch who challenges Chand to perform the ritual before the whole family in the garden by saying "It's our ancestral tradition that to prove their innocence the guilty party has to hold a burning iron in their hand and swear on it. But Chand says she will swear on the cobra. The cobra will bite her and that will be the end of the story" (*Heaven on Earth*). Aside from Rocky, his mother is particularly eager for Chand to perform the ritual as she fears losing control over Chand even though it may result in Chand's death.

At some distance in front of the family, shivering in a wintery Canadian landscape, Chand is standing on trial, beside the tree and undergrowth in which the cobra is apparently hiding. In a long slow zoom the camera fixes on

Chand's highly distressed face as she looks to Rocky for help. Aman, Rocky's sister, advises Chand to admit her adultery so as to avoid taking this test. Her complicity in Chand's abuse, like that of her mother, is thus maintained to the end of the film's narrative. Tentatively, Chand reaches into the undergrowth to pull out a six-foot long cobra. Holding it in one hand she swears, "since I came to Canada I have touched only two, firstly my husband and secondly this cobra. If I am lying then the cobra will bite me" (*Heaven on Earth*). Karnad's version and Mehta's align together for a moment with the image of Chand wearing a docile-looking half-hooded cobra around her shoulders like a garland of flowers. The lighting behind Chand suddenly brightens to give her face a warm glow in a halo effect. Undoubtedly, this symbolises that Chand, like Rani, has been transformed into a goddess. The radiance can also be seen in the translation of Chand's name, which in English means "moon". Chand's transformation is a representation of divine truth and it contrasts sharply with the next image, when the camera cuts across to the faces of Rocky and his family, in shock and transfixed by the vision of Chand elegantly dressed with a large snake. Chand uses the discourse of her abusers in a ritual that they respect as *the* way to validate her own innocence and to free herself from an oppressive patriarchal structure. Recalling Spivak, here is the case of a "muted" woman forced to seek a radical avenue for political persuasion and to speak the unspeakable truth, a truth that is so important it could not be spoken until the subaltern woman found her "voice-consciousness". This is a cobra myth that is accepted as a patriarchal myth by her abusers but recoded with a feminist discourse it becomes the instrument through which this subaltern woman "speaks". The poignancy of her speech is noted in her final conversation with Rocky's double, when the scene once again cuts to black and white. She asks the cobra, "Can our desire be so powerful that it can assume human form and enter our lives? Is it possible?" (*Heaven on Earth*). The *doppelgänger* replies, "Only if you want" (*Heaven on Earth*). Significantly, this response confirms that it has been Chand's desire that has driven her participation in the myth but Chand's liberation has been facilitated by her husband as an emancipator. The film ends abruptly when Chand walks out of the door.

Conclusion

In Karnad's version of the cobra myth the hierarchical order is reversed at the end of the story, with Rani worshipped as a goddess and her husband in servitude. Ultimately though, Rani's story is a cautionary tale, reminding women of their place in the family, imprisoned in roles that allow them little freedom to express their own needs. Against the backdrop of how social norms and gender roles are explored in other Indian myths Karnad's version confirms an ideological position that advocates a traditional patriarchal structure. By comparison, Mehta's retelling of *Naga-Mandala* is politically more subversive, not least because Chand actually leaves her husband holding her passport, suggesting she is leaving him and Canada too. She legitimates her

actions by using the very discourse that has been used against her. Performing the ritual she confronts a belief system in which a woman's purity and fidelity in marriage are regarded to be the touchstones for cultural survival. Transplanted into a Canadian context, Mehta's version of the myth is much more understanding of the pressures facing working-class diasporic communities, especially NRI men. The adaptation of myth is also empowering of women and their roles within the community: a woman can free herself from domestic violence and choose the life she wants. Chand disrupts a patriarchal family order and unlike Rani, abandons her position in it altogether. Mehta's film is an enunciation of the Indian cobra myth, illuminating a feminist struggle that can be pursued by audiences and in the process raises awareness about NRI marital abuse, as it affects men and women.

Notes

¹ The issue of violence against women in India attracted international media attention in March 2015 when the BBC broadcast Leslee Udwin's *India's Daughter* (2014), a damning account of the 2012 Delhi gang rape incident, involving the brutal murder of a young medical student. This documentary was banned in India because it lifted the lid on cultural taboos about South Asian patriarchy, which continue to dog mainstream perceptions of women, their roles in the home and wider society.

² *Earth* was India's official entry for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1998 and *Water* was Canada's official entry for the same award in 2005 and the first film by a diasporic Indian Canadian artist to receive an Oscar nomination. Journals like the *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* and *South Asian Review* are yet to publish articles on *Heaven on Earth*.

³ The phenomenon of NRI marital abuse continues to be well noted in the Indian press, with headlines like "NRI bride & prejudice: one in three women in the US is a victim of domestic violence or abuse in her lifetime" (*Tribune*, 2014), "Over 12,000 women from Punjab duped by NRI grooms: Ramoowalia" (*Indian Express*, 2010), and "Case against NRI husband for dowry, domestic abuse" (*Times of India*, 2011).

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