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## ECRITURE FEMININE: SUBVERTING SHAKESPEARE IN *THE HUNGRY* BY BORNILLA CHATTERJEE

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**Abstract:** Bornilla Chatterjee's *The Hungry* is a modern retelling of a classical Shakespearean revenge tragedy *Titus Andronicus*. Her canvas invites the magnifying lens on the parts that were lamentable truly in the tragedy, unjust to the female characters, namely of Tamora and Lavinia. In her ecriture feminine, the filmmaker turns the plot on its head and reinvents the drama from a vantage point which is more sympathetic and anachronistic in its understanding of the female. Subversion and resistance have often been the tools to challenge patriarchy in its form and the indie film does just that with its fair treatment of the characters despite their sexes. Thus, it becomes invariably easier and simplistic to envision a Tamora grieving the loss of a beloved son and her wrath when unleashed upon Titus for being sadistically cruel. However, for all its alterations to the original mantle piece of Shakespeare's tragedy, the questions central to the tragedy remain intact in the female practitioners take on it. The futility of the crime done justly or unjustly reaps no benefits and victory is cumbersome for the only surviving Tamora, having no glaringly staring motive to savour it. Ecriture feminine is a strategy employed by the feminist school of theory, first given to us by Helene Cixous to be a disruptive force in the world of male writing and it is thus apt to discuss Chatterjee's attempt as a disruption of the male centric aspects (which can also be called misogynistic to an extent) of the original play by Shakespeare.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, *The Hungry*, feminist reading, ecriture feminine

Bornilla Chatterjee's *The Hungry* is a feminist retelling of Shakespeare's one of the earliest works *Titus Andronicus*, a revenge tragedy. The play has been subject to much critical deliberations and analysis and is often denounced for the gender portrayal narratives in it. Critics have aligned several arguments against the masculine and patriarchal social order of the play, as the play offers little hope for regeneration for the gendered other in its resolution. The male is rewarded, and the female is rendered dead or mute in the aftermath. The stratagem to break the misogynist bounds of the play cannot be through repetition. As Helene Cixous contends in her *The Laugh of the Medusa*, "the future must no longer be determined by the past. I do not deny that the effects of the past are still with us. But I refuse to strengthen them by repeating them, to confer upon them an irremovability the equivalent of destiny, to confuse the biological and the cultural" (Cixous 1976). There is no doubt that Shakespeare's work has become a cultural capital which admonishes the flow and circulation of ideas. While the site for Bard's sympathies remains to be contested by scholars, one can no longer rely on any one authorial voice to constitute meanings. The interpretations of the text through intertextuality can allow for more pluralistic understanding of gender dynamics to emerge. This very impulse of artistic exploration as a means for rectifying the past becomes visible in Chatterjee's ecriture feminine *The Hungry*.

“Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies-for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal”(Cixous 1976). Chatterjee usurps the authorial voice from the Bard and subverts the cognizance it offers about the female characters and their motivations. One radical departure from the play is outlining at the earliest point of action the motivations of Tamora or Tulsi Joshi. Tulsi becomes a more sympathetic character in *The Hungry*, as Chatterjee eliminates the inherent misogyny present in *Titus Andronicus*. The director rewrites her story to present her motivations for revenge arising out of her motherly pain and anguish. It becomes a tale of Tulsi avenging her son’s death while facing diabolical Tathagat or Titus. Her portrayal remains bereft of male gaze and thus, she is not sexually objectified in the film. The human aspect of her character remains more pronounced and we find her repentant instead of joyous while witnessing the violence that erupts due to her desire for revenge. This redeems her and makes her appear as a relatively righteous figure in the narrative of the film.

In *The Hungry* director Bornila Chatterjee updates the dialogue for her Hindi film and modernizes the story to an estate in contemporary-day India, basing the action around a marriage of convenience between two business partners. The union itself turns into an all-consuming battle for the two families. With the Ahuja and Joshi clans set to unite by the means of a marriage featuring corporate implications. The patriarch of the Ahuja family, Tathagat played by the ace Naseeruddin Shah, throws a New Year’s Eve party that poses tragical consequences for the families. The son of the bride-to-be, Tulsi (played by Tisca Chopra), shows up dead in a bathtub, wrists slashed, in an apparent suicide attempt. But the young man’s mother, begins to suspect foul play after watching the staging of the scene, added with peculiarities or clues in the suicide note.

Two years later when Tathagat comes back from some other prison sentence for suspected financial trickery, the wedding between Tulsi and Tathagat’s son Sunny is being planned. On the surface the film maintains a duality, with scenes featuring celebration and joy are interspersed and contrasted with scenes of violence and death. The specter of Ankur’s (Tulsi’s son) death hangs over the events in the film as Tulsi grapples with her intention to exact revenge from Tathagat instead. Her motivations seem to have darkened considerably. Her other son, Chirag is also in attendance. Tulsi along with her secret confidant, Arun begins carrying out revenge on the Ahuja family, but her schemes are complicated by several miscues and a rising consciousness by Tathagat that she is more cunning than she lets on. He becomes more assured that she knows more than her passive smile suggests. Hence, commences a gruesome battle under the shadows and veils that is juxtaposed sharply with the ornamental magnificence of the wedding and an indulgent feast that Tathagat prepares personally. Tathagat harbors the image of a compassionate patriarch and head of business, but the rottenness at his core surfaces abruptly with little provocation. When he suddenly turns into the villain and disproportionately yells at the staff for their measly display of marigolds, Shah plays the retribution to this minor offense with a distinctly homicidal rage. “*Titus Andronicus*” flourishes on villainy, and Tathagat too seems to relish the occasion to immerse in it. This is all established in the background of Tulsi’s marriage to the younger son of Tathagat, who is shown to be a clumsy, mindless character. Tulsi is set to marry Sunny at the expansive Ahuja estate. The plot becomes markedly darker as the daughter of Tathagat, Loveleen, who seems to be his favorite, decides to fraternize with Tulsi’s other son, Chirag. Intoxicated and with an overriding desire to pursue revenge, Chirag physically abuses Loveleen, harming her face beyond recognition. Loveleen’s escape offers some of the movie’s most distressing and indelible scenes. It is evident from the beginning that Tulsi is inaudibly desperate in a visible contrast to Tathagat’s nonchalant, systematic ways.

The feminist film critics have largely described the task for feminist criticism as one of a process of denaturalization: A questioning of the unity of text; of seeing it as a contradictory inter- play of different codes; of tracing its ‘structuring absences’ and its relationship to the universal problem of symbolic castration. Claire Johnston believes that “the ‘truth’ of our oppression cannot be ‘captured’ on celluloid with the ‘innocence’ of the camera: it has to be constructed” (Johnston 1973). New meanings need to be manufactured by disrupting the fabric of the male bourgeois cinema within the text of the film. Johnston remains in ideological hold when she supplants the desire for collective work by women and embracing the notion of films as both a political tool and as entertainment. Both of these strategies aimed to challenge the “rigid hierarchical structures of male- dominated cinema” (Johnston 1973). The intervention offered

to misogynistic strains of Shakespeare's text becomes more pronounced in that it challenges the work of canonically central male author.

Tulsi's struggle is further visualized in the deeply patriarchal terrain of North India, as Tathagat finds himself emboldened by his corruption and materialistic greed. It is set in the backdrop of lush extravagance of palatial interiors, magnificent banquet halls, which are juxtaposed the lawlessness of nature depicted in misty mornings, vultures preying over heaps of waste and hoards of goats. This duality becomes symbolic of her inner turmoil while projecting a vision of feminine assuredness. The isolation presented by such a backdrop turns it into its own kingdom, a parallel drawn with Shakespeare's realm of Roman reign. The film tries to capture the ethos of the power-hungry world of money driven North India. Yet Tulsi remains unaffected by any such corrosive longings, she is only presented as a mother devoted to getting justice for her son's murder. The film's dialog "I'm fighting the darkness. I'm losing" envisions a woman's tussle to right herself in a world devoted to the patriarchal structures. The subversion reinvents the story from a depth which comes along only with the experience of being a female.

Starting from the stereotypical definition as given by Sharaf Rehman in his article *Portrayal of Women in the Popular Indian Cinema*, the mother in an Indian movie, is "selfless, protective, and devoted to her children. She is capable of making the greatest sacrifices, has strong moral and religious convictions, is honest, and is capable of great acts of courage and bravery." In establishing a redeemed or a more sympathetic figure of Tamora, the Hindi cinema's stereotypical rendition of mother is majorly effective. It is also significant that the mother is regarded to be "innocent, honest, and pure" (Rehman 2017). Laura Mulvey defines male gaze as "a social construct derived from the ideologies and discourses of patriarchy", a social controlling force in cinema's representations of the sexes which is achieved due to "sexual inequality" (Mulvey 1975). Once the male gaze is averted, the plot renders itself more complexity and a nuanced understanding of Tulsi/Tamora. Thus, from the complex interchange between a female filmmaker's vision of a woman and the prevalence of a stereotyped figuration of mothers, Tulsi Joshi is humanized in the film. She is additionally always costumed in either white or black colored clothes (barring the wedding/feasting scene) to communicate her inner state of grief over the loss of her son. Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" claims that film provides visual pleasure through the experience of identification and scopophilia with the male actor who plays the protagonist. She adds that "In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*". She further states that in film a woman is the "bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (Mulvey 1975). Tulsi is presented to us as a woman who has a desire to find meaning in her life by taking vengeance for her son's murder and the audience is made to think of her task as similar to that of Hamlet's instead. She is not fragmented in her portrayal; the scopophilia inherent in male gaze is not achieved. She is not objectified or sexualized which is a stark departure from the bard's representation of Tamora who is shown to be lustful and sexually manipulative.

Willis claims Shakespeare's Titus to be a commanding presence who appears in most scenes (Willis 2002). To critics he is almost too flawed to be considered a tragic hero in the opening scene he embodies classic Roman virtues of patriotism, military courage, honor, and piety. He is a loyal servant of Rome and an astonishingly prolific father who has sired twenty-five sons and raised them all to be soldiers. By the time the play starts he has lost twenty-one of them in wars with the Goths. But very quickly our view of him is complicated by his faulty judgment, lack of compassion, and rigid view of honor. His refusal to be swayed by Tamora's moving appeal to spare her son shows dedication but also cruelty. In choosing Saturninus to be emperor instead of his younger but worthier brother, Titus adheres blindly to the right of the eldest son to succeed his father. He is inflexibly patriarchal, insisting on his right to marry off his daughter to Saturninus despite her preexisting betrothal to Bassianus, and expecting absolute loyalty and obedience from his sons. When he kills his son Mutius and refuses to bury him in the family tomb, he twists the notion of honor into something even his brother Marcus views as "impiety" and "barbarous" behavior (1.1.355, 378). Titus's own actions are what first bring barbarity into Rome and set the revenge plot in motion. "Woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man" Cixous lays down the female subject in her stance of being pitted against the patriarchal male in a hostile microcosm of world.

Chatterjee's Tathagat is an identical presence in *The Hungry*. His mania resounds Titus' character with a capitalist patriarchal rendition. His hunger for absolute power and control, and little regard for life attune the events of the play. He displays little mercy and seems to be gaining a sadistic pleasure in the chaos that ensues from the death and violence that abounds the play. The only marked difference is that while the bard's Titus had a pious garb to account for his actions, Chatterjee's Tathagat seems to be motivated by materialistic gains. He also is able to appreciate the cunning of Tulsi in silently deceiving the characters into believing her innocence. However, the final blow is offered by Chatterjee's Tulsi where she becomes the only character standing alive. She attains her revenge while quashing Tathagat's final stint with death.

"The new breaks away from the old, and, more precisely, the (feminine) new from the old. Thus, as there are no grounds for establishing a discourse, but rather an arid millennial ground to break, what I say has at least two sides and two aims: to break up, to destroy; and to foresee the unforeseeable, to project" (Cixous 1976). Chatterjee engages with the Shakespearean text in a similar way, undertaking a breakage from the supplanted view of Tamora. The play clearly polarized women's roles in the assertions made by Deborah Willis. While Lavinia is virtuous, chaste, and obedient, Tamora is at the opposite extreme: lustful, villainous, and outside the control of the Roman males. Though at the beginning of the play she claims our sympathies as a prisoner of war and as a mother who movingly appeals for her son's life, after his sacrifice her villainy is unleashed. She quickly becomes a stark embodiment of misogynist stereotypes about women, as her desire for revenge takes hold and her amorous attachment to Aaron the Moor becomes apparent. A Goth outsider who marries the Roman Emperor Saturninus while keeping Aaron as her lover, she has been linked to such exotic, sexualized, and treacherous figures as Semiramis and to the stereotype of the lusty widow. Tamora's volatile combination of eroticism and aggression comes to seem almost a family trait when, under Aaron's influence, she coaxes her sons into becoming rapists and murderers. By the end of the play she is punished not only for her vengeful excesses but also for her ungovernable sexuality, which has produced such offspring as Chiron and Demetrius: Titus wants to make that "strumpet," that "unhallowed dam / Like to the earth swallow her own increase" (5.2.190-191).

Titus's daughter, Lavinia, is at first not much more than the embodiment of the ideal Roman daughter: chaste, virtuous, beautiful, and obedient. After being raped, she becomes a personification of suffering. The play provides us with little direct access to her thoughts and feelings, and her choices are sharply circumscribed by Rome's patriarchal codes. In act 1, she is treated as a trophy bride, to be given or withheld as her father determines, with no regard for her own desires. To her father's enemies, she is a symbol of his family's honor, to be violated and despoiled as a way of getting back at him. In later acts, she becomes a more powerfully moving character, if not more multidimensional. Ironically, we come to know her better when she no longer is able to speak. Without a tongue or hands, she struggles to communicate through bodily gestures and the written word, finally writing out the names of her rapists in the dirt and assisting her father in butchering them. As the critic Mary Laughlin Fawcett has shown, in acts 3 and 4 father and daughter collaborate in making meaning and become increasingly inseparable. Hence her death at her father's hand in 5.3 can seem particularly shocking. Yet Titus appeals to the tradition of honor killing. All the female characters are silenced, their fragile power is neglected. That they ever had any power in this play is questionable. They are only seen in relation to male characters that have misogynistic power to describe, define and eventually kill them.

Meenakshi Mukherjee asserts in her *Gender and Nation* that "the figure of woman" which has "the most emotional potency was that of the mother" (Mukherjee 1992). Indianizing *Titus Andronicus* allows for a more redeemed image of Tamora to emerge. Tulsi's prime motivations never cross her role of the mother who also comes close to Cixous' mother conception as "the mother who makes everything all right, who nourishes, and who stands up against separation; a force that will not be cut off but will knock the wind out of the codes." Chatterjee's delving and interpretation of Tamora's motherhood canvases depicting the anxieties of a mother. At the outset of the film, the flashback into a past which forms a pinnacle of her life as a mother and her battered mother figuration in coming to terms with her loss, all serves to extend her need for revenge. We enter her psychological realm, her anima when she echoes her struggle to triumph against the patriarchal evils.

The first glimpse into Tathagat's Machiavellian depravity occurs in the partially lit close-up of Shah. His male terror becomes objectified in the scene and is the polemical entity to Tulsi's silent and dejected images persistent through the film. Visually the film makes it possible to establish and accept a more nuanced image of Tamora. The bleak view of the world of revenge and death is foreshadowed in the opening sequence with predatory birds flying aimlessly over the wasteful black mass and the fog shrouding the landscape leave the effect of an unsustainable world. Willis remarks on Shakespeare's representation of Rome as a deeply patriarchal culture. He provides a shrewd and detailed analysis of patriarchal attitudes. But though the play questions other Roman values, it does not particularly question its gender ideology. This distinct variation between the filmmaker's visual inscriptions of the setting echoes a woman's struggle in the conventional man's world. The play tells how a misogynistic idea and male terror can destroy the female power, primarily in sexual terms.

Honor is inscribed in the female body as Lavinia is violated and ravaged, her family's and father's paternal authority is challenged. Being Roman is also closely associated with a gender ideology and a patriarchal social order, as Coppélia Kahn in *Roman Shakespeare* dissects in detail. Women must be chaste wives in order to produce legitimate sons, and their wombs are an important signifier of family honor. It is therefore necessary to protect those wombs from violation by rape or by illicit sexual relations; Roman order breaks down if either one occurs (Kahn 1997). Through the "good" female, Lavinia, the play explores the horrific consequences of rape not only for herself but also for Titus and the other Andronici: violating Lavinia violates the whole family and, in a sense, Rome itself. Honor also finds its central presence in the Indian adaptation as Tathagat begins a witch hunt to purge his ravaged honor. Loveleen though is cast as a muted woman, not being able to speak due to her physical dysmorphia at the hands of Tulsi's son; yet her relative freedom to engage and form sexual ties with mates of her own choice demarcate her relatively empowered position as Chatterjee's subject. She is sexually liberated and is able to pursue relationships of her own accord. The loss of Loveleen and the injury to Tathagat's honor, both become his motivation to kill Chirag and also Arun, after making him accept his role in the violence. Arun (Shakespeare's Aaron) is also motivated by his self interest of procuring 'shares' in the business. He yields no loyalty to either of the clans and is shown to be driven by capitalist greed himself.

The film deconstructs the Shakespearean play and uncovers the possibility of reinventing the story to be more humanistic in its portrayal of the female characters. Women in Chatterjee's text emerge to be key participants in engaging with their own stories and do not subsume either a passive or a stereotypical portrayal in it. Tulsi becomes a mother, who is devoted and brave, willing to risk her identity and survival for enacting justice for her son's death. She is seeking justice, but she is not able to foresee the corrupting effects of violence. She loses more in the process and her being the only surviving character makes the pointless destruction of revenge more palpable. Her act of killing Tathagat, after he kills Sunny to win over Tulsi's desire for revenge and claims that they both are the same, depicts her final rejection of the patriarch's unprompted violence. Her dehumanized portrayal from Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* is averted. Tamora is salvaged as the mother who braves unimaginable hardships and derision in a patriarchal world to assert her grief as a mother and to create a semblance of justice in a world which often goes on to serve patriarchal interests. The focus of the film is thus on turning Shakespeare's villain Tamora into a heroine and his hero Titus into her nemesis.

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