



The Question of Womanhood: An Analysis of Leena Yadav's *Parched*

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Abstract

My paper is based on the postcolonial perspectives of feminism in the movie “Parched” (2016) which is directed by Leena Yadav which basically intends to analyze the status of rural women in third world countries. Leena Yadav projected the adversities faced by the rural women which I encashed and analysed with the subaltern theory. Women in the hierarchical power structure of the patriarchal society are tagged as low category therefore I wanted to project women as subalterns. As Gayatri Chakroborty Spivak in her work “Can the Subaltern Speak?” mentioned that the subalterns cannot speak but this movie by Leena Yadav, according to me, intends to give voice to the desires for four "subaltern protagonists". Those protagonists are "doubly marginalised" because of their spatial location and also because of their gender. My paper categorises three subheadings which talk of womanhood in the movie “Parched” from the perspective of gender oppression through false male ego and domination and subjugation of women, the intense bond of sisterhood and women empowerment.

Keywords: Postcolonial Feminism, Rural Women, Subaltern, Gender Oppression, Sisterhood, Women Empowerment





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My paper is based on postcolonial perspectives of Feminism in the movie *Parched* (2016) by Leena Yadav which intends to analyse the status of women in third world countries. The postcolonial and the feminist theorists often states that the women are oppressed by both patriarchy and the colonial power which is an ongoing process in many countries even after they had achieved independence. The women are considered as “double colonised” in the post-colonial world. Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her work "*Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*" argues that :

“An analysis of "sexual difference" in the form of a cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogeneous notion of what I call the "third world difference"”

According to the sociologist Sylvia Walby, patriarchy is, “A system of social structure and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women.” When we consider the very construct of patriarchy we can discover a hierarchical system and the women in this hierarchical system take the position of “subaltern”. Gayatri Chakroborty Spivak in her famous work “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*” pointed out that “subalterns” cannot speak but intelligentsia always voice on behalf of them. The third world feminist movement can be divided into movements related to urban places and rural areas. The films like “*Parched*” (2016) are much different than other feminist movies which are setup in urban background. The protagonists for the feminist films setup in urban background might have adversities but they at least have accesses to proper communication facilities, educations. For the films set up in urban areas, the protagonists trying to find the identity is a different idea from what the rural women protagonists have to face. Films like “*Aiyaa*” (2012), “*Queen*” (2013), “*Angry Indian Goddess*” (2015), “*Lipstick Under my*





Burkha (2016), *Lust Stories* (2018) are also designed to give women the voices for their desires but the background is urban. The rural female protagonists of the films like *Parched* (2016) can easily be considered as “doubly marginalised subalterns” because of their spatial location and also because they are women. Therefore, the films like *Parched* portrayed the “subaltern women” who actually needed a voice of their own. Leena Yadav in the movie *Parched* projected the women protagonists who are considered as “subalterns” because they, being located in rural areas, have to fight poverty, lack of proper educational facilities and other social constraints more importantly they don't have a proper voice of their own. Third world feminism does not originate from the first world but originates from the sociocultural background. The term feminism can be defined as political, cultural, and economic movements that aim to establish equal rights and legal protections for women. Leena Yadav in the movie *Parched* gives the protagonists their freedom by claiming the right of their own body and making their own choices which goes somewhat close to the second wave of feminism. The director of the film, *Parched*, Leena Yadav can be considered as the storyteller through the film where the protagonists, the “subaltern” women are given a voice to talk about their oppression in the patriarchal society, an interconnection of sisterhood and a touch of independence for women through Women Empowerment. *Parched* is the narration of the journey of women who could be categorized as “subalterns” or “marginalized” to creation of a new center with their voices.

As per the name suggests *Parched* means “extremely thirsty” or it also means “dried up”. The film justifies both the meanings of the title because in this movie the female characters are objectified through their body as an element for satisfying the extreme thirst of carnal desires of the men. On the other hand, if we look from the feminine perspectives “extremely thirsty” can also signify that the women in the movie are also actually very thirsty for the desire of equal love and respect in the society which they seem to lack in the movie. According to the essay of Laura Mulvey, “*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*”, she stated that women are objectified in films because heterosexual men are in control of the camera. Laura Mulvey said that the audiences are considered to be the “peeping toms”. The dark auditorium gives the spectators an illusion of peeping into the private life and gives him the privilege of being a voyeur.

Feminine body has always been an object of “male gaze”. Laura Mulvey, in her work, “*Visual and other Pleasures*”, stated that:

“In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. 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.”

But as the film proceeds it takes several turns and portrays various elements of “female gaze”. It is somewhat different from male gaze, which is basically based on her physical attributes but the female gaze shows the viewers various motifs of womanhood about her choices, talents and skills and is not only composed of her bodily attributes. The story of the film *Parched* revolves around four main characters and their personal problems of oppression as an individual. Their problems and solutions seemed to be connected in a single thread of patriarchy. The backdrop of the film is shot in rural Rajasthan. The film begins with the giggling smiles of Lajjo (Radhika Apte) and Rani (Tanishtha Chatterjee) who were then travelling in local bus to fix marriage of Gulab (Riddhi Sen), Rani’s son. At the very beginning of the film Leena Yadav portrayed the social evil of dowry when Rani and Lajjo went to fix marriage of Gulab but took an amount of dowry from the daughter-in-law’s family. The negotiation for dowry is presented through this very movie. But as the film proceeds it takes a sad turn and each of their pain is slowly revealed. Lajjo has already been stamped as a barren woman by the society as she could not give birth to any child as yet. The question about her physical health comes when she cannot bear the fruit of her husband. On the other hand, she is continuously being physically tortured by her husband who satisfies his ego and his failure to become a father, when he himself actually knows the fact that the problem lies within him. The film has elements like raw sexual desires by the females which was considered taboo for rural Indian society where the situation is much more adverse. Lajjo was unaware of the fact that men too could be infertile but when Bijli (Surveen Chawla) let her know the fact saying that “Mard bhi banj ho sakte hai. Zaroori nahi hai aurat ki hi galti ho hamesha” (*Parched*, 59:01) Lajjo (Radhika Apte) became very much headstrong or determined of the fact that she desired to have what she has in her destiny. She wants to become a mother and enjoy the feeling of motherhood if her fate poses so and is not ready to leave anything that she has in her fate. She has become bold enough to sleep with another man and have a child. The concept of surrogated father is also introduced. The scene of intercourse between Lajjo (Radhika Apte) and the man has been portrayed so pure that it can easily give goosebumps. Maulvey in her work, “*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*,” also mentioned that:

Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the [cinema] auditorium.





But in this movie *Parched*, Leena Yadav negated the taboo behind the intercourse and has replaced it with something pure to obtain motherhood. Each and every female character of the film is in some way or the other is a victim of rural Indian society. At 57:05 of the movie, when the women go out together and have the taste of freedom, they discuss each other's level of oppression. Bijli (Surveen Chawla) while using cuss words in between words realised that all the cuss words are towards subjugating women through sexual gratification. So to make the situation topsy-turvy where Leena Yadav had even made the protagonist use male oriented cuss words making the viewers believe how women oriented cuss words are disgraceful (*Parched*, 1:00:46).

Minor yet important characters like Champa (Sayani Gupta) are examples of the real violence that goes on in the rural Indian society. Some women are also having a patriarchal mindset like that of Champa's mother where in front of the panchayat she claims that society has certain rules which are for certain reasons. Champa who was tolerating everything became desperate enough and said may the supporters (pointing towards the panchayat) go to hell, "Bhad me jaye yeh or samaj" (*Parched*, 11:35) Champa's mother forced her daughter to go back to her in-laws even after knowing the fact that she is being tortured day by day by her brother-in-law and her father-in-law and her husband doesn't care for her and has his own mistress in the neighboring village. The fate of rural women is somewhat similar. The men in the panchayat are even against the television and claim how television is spoiling the society where the blame goes on the shoulders of the females about their change in the dressing styles where they would start wearing "jeans" which is considered to be a male oriented dress. The responsibility of anything so called evil according to the patriarchal society is upon the change in the behavior and the dressing pattern of the women.

On the other hand, characters like Bijli (Surveen Chawla) and characters like Rani (Tanishtha Chatterjee) are among the bold women characters of the film. The story of Rani and Bijli are kind of interrelated. The role played by Surveen Chawla is of a famous prostitute and a strip dancer and Rani's husband, Shankar who was a regular customer to her. No villager knows the actual fact of how Rani and Bijli got connected but actually, in one night, Bijli came to drop drunkard Shankar back to his home. Rani was too innocent to understand the real situation and thanked Bijli and welcomed her for dinner. They had a great talk all night till dawn and since then they are great friends. But for the villagers they are childhood friends. The film represents a kind of sisterhood which goes close to the second wave of feminism concept.





Rani's son, Gulab is a typical example of cheap rural boys who have a false male ego. Much like his father he also beats his wife, Janaki, and sexually abuses her each day which can be summed as marital rape. Hearing the abusive sounds from Gulab's room, Rani gets flashbacks of the situation and relates it with her own life while she was also a victim of physical abuse by Shankar. Among many important speeches of womanhood, one of the most important speeches of Rani that shows real empathy of a woman towards another is when she asks her son to become a proper human before becoming a man. "Marad banna chor .Pehle insan banna sikhile" (*Parched*, 1:06:18) Gulab (Ridhi Sen) has even gone to Bijli (Surveen Chawla) to satisfy his hunger for lust from her who he very well knows is similar to his mother who was there at the time of his birth holding Rani's hand (*"Parched"* (2016), Scene when Bijli narrates to Lajjo, (1:04:14 about the event) Leena Yadav portrayed the character of Gulab (Ridhi Sen) as a goon, who many a times attacked Kishan (Sumit Vyas) who runs a cooperative for making designer blouses where he employs local women giving them their economic independence. Gulab (Ridhi Sen) shows his macho nature by ruining Kishan's work and eve teasing his wife Niaobi (Nancy Nisha Besbo). Gulab (Ridhi Sen) did not even think twice before stealing money from his own mother and beating his wife while she questioned him. Gulab didn't even leave a chance of abusing his own mother. During a fight while Gulab was leaving the house he challenged both his mother and wife out of his false male ego of how they would run the household without a man "Mane bhi dekhna se ki bina marad k kaisa chalta se yeh ghar." (*Parched* 1:39:05) Bijli being a prostitute has to constantly fight for her position so that she is not replaced by some other girl so therefore she has to sell her body even without her actual inner consent. In this film we can find how she is absorbing the pain, keeping it within herself. The person who apparently used to love Bijli, her co-dancer, wants to take her away to somewhere near Delhi and start his own business by becoming her pimp, "accha to tu mera dalla banna chahta hai" (*Parched*, 1:31:18) Janaki (Lehar Khan) , the daughter in law of Rani might be much younger than Lajjo, Rani or Bijli but took a bold step of cutting her beautiful long hair in hope that her marriage would be cancelled because it was against her will. At the end part of the film we find Rani taking a bold step and freeing her daughter-in-law with the true lover of hers and letting her elope with him. Rani takes a bold turn against her son and saves her daughter in law. Leena Yadav herself belonging from the backward background which we understand from her surname can project the lowly society so well and being a woman, herself is making it easy for her to hear the voice of the "subaltern" and giving the characters their prominence.

Proper women empowerment is fruitful only when there is financial independence. An element of economic independence and skill development has been shown in this film where the





women are preparing designer blouses and are earning. Characters like Naobi(Nancy Nisha Besbo) and Kishan(Sumit Vyas) promotes social upliftment by running a cooperative for the women by giving them a chance to show their talents as well as stand in their own feet. The motif of women empowerment through the importance of developing a skill and standing on their own feet is also presented in this film. Each woman in this film is bold enough to hold their position and stand headstrong even in adverse situations. None of them seemed to fear anything while taking any bold decisions in life. Each woman is strong in their own way. At the very end of the film we find that the women are portrayed as the picture of goddesses within them when Lajjo hurts her husband and leaves him behind in the burning house as if Durga herself is gaining victory over the vices. The scene overlaps with the scene of dussera while the idol of Ravan is burnt. Family itself is a structure of violence in a conjugal home. The burning house therefore also stands as a metaphor here in this film that is the end of an apparent family structure. Even in the very last scene Leena Yadav didnot forget to put the feminist theme where the three women break the shackles and goes in search of freedom. The film shows that the women had cut their hair off which also symbolizes them as real rebel not caring about the looks which is also façade of patriarchy. Rani's dialog again proves that women with skill are strong enough to be a single mother and would not have to be dependent upon father, brother or son for their livelihood rather the women can serve their own need and the needs of their child while she mentions that "are bap, bhai aur bete ko chor, kishan ne kam sikhaise na kuch na kuch karhi legi."(Parched 1:53:12)

Therefore, I would like to conclude by saying that the film Parched is a classic example of empowerment of rural women and of creating the voice of their own so that they can fight against age old taboos and oppressions against them and give a chance to meet their own desires once again.

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