

Roja Revisited

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VENKATESH CHAKRAVARTHY and M S S Pandian's response ('More on *Roja*', *EPW*, March 12) to my article ('Integrating Whose Nation? Tourists and Terrorists in *Roja*', *EPW*, January 15) helps open out the debate on contemporary popular cinema in important directions. As both our interventions make evident, the debate is not just about one film but about how to characterise dominant representations of the nation, the state and the Indian middle class today. Chakravarty and Pandian argue that "the entire narrative of the film is keyed to the disavowal of the state and the proclivities of female subjectivity" and that "the apparent inability of the state" therefore "actually masks its silent and powerful ability", making the "ultimate victors" in the film "the state and the Hindu-patriarchal culture".

Although I admire the finesse with which Chakravarty and Pandian delineate the elaborate masking in *Roja* of what they call "silences, evasions and erasures", I would like to take issue both with their presentation of my own argument and with their analysis of the film, without necessarily engaging directly with their theoretical procedures which are somewhat different from mine. I did not suggest that the state in *Roja* is "defeated"; I was trying to point out that it is "rejected" (by a newly articulate middle class). In making this argument, I had in mind the post-colonial Nehruvian state and its welfarism, which, it seems to me, is being significantly challenged—and undermined—by the creation of new middle class/upper caste spaces. I would contend that the rejection of *this* form of the state is being repeatedly enacted in a host of TV serials and commercial films and in popular fiction. These cultural practices, among others, are engaged in the fabrication of new subjectivities and the production of new symbolic orders. After Mandal, and after GATT, new 'Indian' selves/subjects, and the new worlds predicated onto these selves, are coming into being. I emphasise the *newness* in order to indicate that a different kind of *nation* is now being imagined, a nation not necessarily congruent with the sovereign state of the 1950s, a nation in which the assertion of true Indianness is not at odds with the erosion of economic/political autonomy.

The anti-colonial nationalism of the earlier part of this century has given way to a nationalism that is not uncomfortable with the aggressive westernisation of our everyday life. We watch Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* and Disney's *Jungle Book*, but now in Hindi (in our own sweet language, as one newspaper advertisement put it). If, as Partha Chatterjee

has argued in *The Nation and Its Fragments*, Indian nationalism comes into being through the assertion of *difference* from the coloniser, we need to reflect on what difference means today, or what it means to live *as an Indian*. As I have tried to show in my analysis of *Roja*, certain kinds of ethnic markers (Rishi and Roja's wedding rituals, Roja going to the temple in Kashmir) are presented as normative, while others (the militants' clothes, Liaquat's constant praying) are signs of illegitimate otherness. So while there is an ethnicity that is seamless with modernity, there are other ethnicities that are seen to subvert the project of the modern and must therefore be rendered powerless or invisible. This is what I was getting at in asserting that Rishi's nationalism is not anti-western but anti-Muslim. Perhaps I should put it differently: the new nationalism is *pro-western* and is thus, by definition, anti-Muslim.

In my article, I tried to show how Roja and Rishi's Hindu-ness is represented as an integral part both of their modernity and their (authentic) Indianness. Two other terms that should be addressed here are 'secular' and 'human'. I had said in my paper that "the burden of the film [is] to create the convergences between the *human*, the *secular* and the *nationalist*". To this end, *Roja* represents Islamic militancy not only as anti-national and anti-secular but as lacking in humanity. Liaquat's transformation by Rishi at the end of the film is presented as a return to the human that also brings him back into the nation.

In 1990, the word 'secular' was often used in the mainstream press to characterise the participants in the anti-Mandal agitation, who—being interested only in 'merit'—were represented as having transcended caste. In the famous sequence where he throws his body onto a burning Indian flag and stands up all aflame, Rishi Kumar in *Roja* is the very image of the upper-caste anti-Mandalite prepared to die for secularism. The 'secular' is defined against those who declare caste-identity to claim reservations (who thus become the real casteists), just as in *Roja* it is defined against those who assert their Muslim identity (and thereby become fundamentalists).

I have not referred to Chakravarty and Pandian's argument about *Roja*'s disavowal of female subjectivity and the overlap between state and Hindu patriarchy. I shall only suggest that Roja the protagonist is complicit with the production of Hindu as Indian, and occupies a position structurally dissimilar to that of the militants Wasim Khan and Liaquat. To investigate the contemporary reformulation of patriarchies, and the lineaments of the state which is coming into being, is beyond the scope of this brief response.

If we are to be alert to the myriad ways in which subjectivities are being fashioned today, we need to attend to the practices of everyday life, to the politics of civil society. To argue, as Chakravarty and Pandian do, that the burden of *Roja* is ultimately to assert the strength of the state is to de-emphasise, or so it seems to me, its other, far more powerful seductions, which offer us glamour as well as righteousness, cosmopolitan modernity as well as national pride.

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