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## **Marital Violence, Diaspora and Survival: Cinematic Representations in Jagmohan Mundhra's *Provoked* and Deepa Mehta's *Heaven on Earth***

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### **Abstract:**

Despite the strides made by mankind in various walks of social life, intimate partner violence still remains a crucial human rights issue. Also described as domestic abuse or marital violence, this form of aggression can signify violence between partners living outside the legal structure of marriage and outside the hetero-normative order. But the patriarchal scheme of things puts women at the receiving end and marital abuse today predominantly indicates the abuse of women by their husbands. Such abuse, it has been shown, is on the rise among diasporic populations world over. The paper aims to study the depiction of domestic violence among the diaspora in two films, *Provoked* and *Heaven on Earth*, by placing them in the context of patriarchy and the peculiarities of the diasporic condition.

### **Keywords: Marital Abuse, Diaspora, Cinema, Jagmohan Mundhra, Deepa Mehta**

Of the varied forms of violence that women face in the patriarchal world, marital violence or intimate partner violence is by far the most heinous and debilitating. It is a pointer to women's vulnerability within the confines of the family, the adverse impact of which is difficult to surmount. Though marital violence is prevalent all over the world irrespective of factors like race, class, religion or location, it is normalized and validated more in some communities or ethnic groups "as an inherent part of their cultural repertoire" (Menjivar 901). This is true about a country like India where married life and family relations are strictly determined by the codes of patriarchy and where family hierarchies are conscientiously maintained. Customs are such that the bride enters the family of the husband and becomes part of it after marriage, making it mandatory for her to mould herself to the ways of her husband and his family. The onus of

keeping the family honour rests chiefly on women and hence they are taught to conform to the rules of patriarchy and familial requirements. Men occupy a privileged position within such a framework, thereby enabling them to use their power on their partners. The exertion of power may often end in acts of violence which is passed as normal and part of the culture and system. Women are expected to endure all this in silence, since any attempt to question, counter or rebel against the system would often come with the payment of a heavy price.

The corpus of research on marital violence deals with varied aspects of the problem including the rise in the incidence of such violence among diasporic populations. People in the diaspora, who leave their countries of origin and settle down in alien terrains, have to cope with several problems in the host country. Margaret Abraham, who has done intensive research on this area, points out how there is “some degree of latent and manifest conflict” among immigrant people stemming from the consciousness of their distinct and marginalized position among the natives (“Ethnicity” 452-453). The problems of immigration are more pronounced in the case of women. They undergo what is termed as dual subordination or double marginalization in the host country, firstly on account of their gender and secondly on account of their ethnicity. Their condition of double marginalization often serves as a trigger for marital violence among immigrant women. As Margaret Abraham notes,

As women, immigrant women (unlike immigrant men) have to cope with gender boundaries that define them as subordinate, based on patriarchal norms and values of both immigrant and mainstream cultures.... Rather than emphasizing only sex-gender systems, for ethnic minority women problems of adjustment to the contradictions and conflicts arising out of a binary cultural experience must be included in the analysis of domestic violence. (“Ethnicity” 453)

In addition to the problems arising out of a binary cultural experience, the sense of isolation and the lack of support that immigrant women experience in the host country exacerbate the deeds of violence perpetuated against her by her intimate partner. The abuser’s conviction that he has no social accountability since his wife is “emotionally and socially alone [and] economically constrained and culturally disconnected” further accentuates the situation (Abraham, “Domestic” 439, 440).

Of late, the issue of marital violence has become a matter of serious concern among social scientists, feminists, activists, writers, artists and film makers. There are organizations working in support of victims of marital abuse world over and there have been portrayals of domestic violence in art, literature and cinema. The paper focuses on the portrayal of marital violence among the diasporic Indians in two acclaimed films – *Provoked: A True Story* (2006) by Jagmohan Mundra or Jag Mundhra, the late Indian American film maker known for issue-based films like *Bawandar*, and *Heaven on Earth* or *Videsh* (2008) by Deepa Mehta, the Indo Canadian film maker who courted controversy for her take on certain core Indian values in her *Elements Trilogy*. The first film, *Provoked* is based on the real incidents in the life of Kiranjit

Ahluwalia, an immigrant to Southall in UK from Punjab in India, who killed her husband Deepak Ahluwalia after ten years of physical, psychological and emotional abuse. The second film, *Heaven on Earth* centres around Chand, a young Punjabi woman who goes to Canada to get married to Rocky Singh Dhillon, a cab driver in Ontario and the abuse she has to face in his extended family. An attempt will be made, in the first half of the paper, to understand the problem of domestic violence in the diasporic context, not losing sight of gender issues and other social and cultural factors that perpetuate it. The second half will examine how these films rise above being mere depictions of domestic abuse and become invaluable and inspiring accounts of how women survive such abuse.

Coming from two filmmakers of Indian origin, who settled abroad, the films *Provoked* and *Heaven on Earth*, have to be examined against the backdrop of traditional Indian marriage and family life, the values and praxis of which are reinforced and rigorously observed by most Indians in the diaspora as a means of maintaining their cultural roots abroad. As already mentioned, Indian marriages are truly patriarchal and family-oriented affairs, with the bride moving into the husband's family, leaving behind her kith and kin. In a way, it becomes a kind of exile for the young bride. Patriarchy expects her to mould herself and conform to the ways of her new house, where her position is at the lower rungs of the hierarchy. Moreover, she is under the constant scrutiny of her husband's relatives and society at large as to how far she merges with the new household. Any aspect in her demeanor which goes against the status quo is regarded as a serious breach. The status of a diasporic bride is even worse as she faces a double exile – in the first place, she leaves the home where she was born and brought up and moves on to her nuptial home, in the second place, she starts her life in a new land, the ways of which she is unfamiliar with.

Kiranjit Ahluwalia and Chand, the protagonists of *Provoked* and *Heaven on Earth* respectively, find themselves in such a predicament. Both of them are Punjabi girls who are transplanted to alien lands after marriage – the former to UK and the latter to Canada. The cultural shock is all the more aggravated in the case of Kiranjit who has very little command of English. Chand, who is a graduate, has no problems with the language and appears more confident, but is soon bowed down by the pressures of her married life. Kiranjit's difficulties with the culture and language of the host country haunt her even after ten years of marriage and become a serious impediment to her when she is imprisoned for setting her husband on fire. The separation from home and the homeland hampers the agency of both the women characters and puts them in a state of helplessness when they confront the callousness and cruelty of their abusive husbands. The difficulties faced by these immigrant brides are manifold. To begin with, they have very little idea of their prospective grooms and this is quite normal in India, where arranged marriages are the norm. Chand sees her prospective husband for the first time only when she comes to Canada a few days before the wedding. Kiranjit is assured by a relative that her would-be husband is a friend of her brother-in-law and a good person. The young girls have to be satisfied with mere hearsay about their grooms and take the risk of getting married to men

who are total strangers to them. It takes only a few days into marriage for the young brides to experience a jarring of their dreams and expectations about their partners.

Another major problem most women face as they enter matrimony is that they have to sacrifice their aspirations and dreams about their education and career. Kiranjit, who is the last among nine children and the most loved, loses her father a few days after her birth and her mother, when she is in her teens. As she reminisces in prison, her mother wanted to see her become a lawyer, but when she is of marriageable age, her well-meaning relatives advise the motherless girl to “get married, have children. Be proper Indian woman” (*Provoked*). She soon finds out that any trace of such a dream has to be erased, married as she is to a person like Deepak Ahluwalia. The fate of Chand, the young, ambitious graduate, who comes to Canada is no different. Without any consultation with her, she is made to work in the laundry factory with her sister-in-law, Aman. Chand’s suggestion that she can find a better job since she is a graduate is dismissed with sarcasm by Aman. The extent of her servility and lack of agency dawns on her when she comes to know that it has been arranged with her supervisor to hand over her salary to her husband. In Chand’s example, we have the pathetic condition of a diasporic woman forced to enter a job she is not interested in, to support financially the extended family of her husband.

The difficulties of being exiled in a foreign land and the intricacies of a typical Indian marriage work together to further complicate the tribulations of the Indian brides. Confronted with abusive husbands who torment them physically and emotionally, they have very little chance of seeking external help, firstly because they are away from their own family in foreign lands and secondly because the husband’s family is indifferent to or even complicit in the abuse. Having very little command over English, and having no job or source of income, Kiranjit, the mother of two sons, is entirely at the mercy of her husband, Deepak. Her mother-in-law could not do much to prevent Deepak from torturing her and there is very little scope for external intervention. There is an incident where Deepak takes a badly-injured Kiranjit to a lady doctor. Unconvinced by Deepak’s explanation that the injury has been caused by a fall, the doctor tells him to wait outside so that she may talk privately to Kiran. Deepak quickly prevents this and walks away with his helpless wife. Similarly when Chand’s Jamaican colleague at the laundry, Roja sees her bruises and tells her that she may call the police at 911 for help, Aman, her sister-in-law quickly intervenes saying, “In our community we deal with problems in house” (*Heaven on Earth*). Chand pines for her mother and longs to talk to her over the phone but has very little opportunity to do so in a family that clearly puts her in her place from the very outset. There is a poignant scene in the film where the phone rings in the corridor, while Chand is being beaten up by her husband, Rocky. The receiver is picked up by Rocky’s young niece Loveleen, who is drawn in a loving bond to her aunt, Chand. The call is obviously for Chand, but Loveleen who is shuddering under the impact of her uncle’s cruelty, quickly says, “She’s busy” (*Heaven on Earth*) and hangs the receiver. On the whole, Kiranjit and Chand are victims of a system that normalizes violence against women in marriage and in their case, their immigrant status aggravates their helplessness and oppression.

To comprehend the nature of any act of violence or abuse, it is necessary to analyze the complexities in the life and character of the victimizer or abuser. This can be done in the light of two major theoretical approaches developed by researchers in the study of domestic violence – the family violence approach and the feminist approach. According to the family violence perspective, marital abuse is attributed to the character flaws of either of the spouses or the pressures that affect the family. Stacey and Shupe, in their book, *The Family Secret: Domestic Violence in America*, observe that the character flaws could occur due to factors like violent socialization during childhood, alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness, extra-marital affairs or lack of self control. To the above list, we may add other frustration-inducing factors identified by scholars, factors like unaccomplished goals, financial problems, unemployment and cultural dispossession (Abraham “Ethnicity” 451). The second approach, which is a feminist one, pinpoints the patriarchal values of society and the dominance of men in heterosexual relationships as the main reason for marital abuse. This approach attributes domestic violence to the “very same normative structure that defines women as inferior, reaffirms dominance and aggression as positive attributes in men, and under presents women in all spheres of social, economic and political life” (Abraham, “Ethnicity” 452-453).

Examining the case of the abusive spouses in the films against these two theoretical assumptions, we find that there is an intermingling of most of the factors mentioned above in making the two characters what they are. Patriarchal values and male domination is common and strongly evident in the makeup of both Deepak and Rocky. The women are also schooled and moulded according to these values. As Kiranjit says in the film *Provoked*, “My culture is like my blood, flowing through every vein of my body. It is the culture in which I was born which sees the woman as the honour of the house. In order to uphold this false honour, *izzat*, she stooped to endure many kinds of oppression and pain in silence. A woman is a toy, a plaything, broken at will, stuck together at will” (*Provoked*). Deepak, an alcoholic, who has extramarital affairs with white women, on whom he squanders his money, has no qualms about beating Kiran or pushing her down the stairs when she is pregnant. The brunt of the beatings and torture is so severe that it continues to haunt Kiran as nightmares even in prison. When her cell mate and friend Ronnie consoles her after one such nightmare, she breaks down and sums up her married life thus -- “He beat me, sleeps with other women, raped me” (*Provoked*). Kiranjit is absolved from the crime of burning her husband to death when her case is taken up by the court the second time on the ground that any woman who has experienced “violence and abuse and humiliation of the highest order for ten years” (*Provoked*) would suffer from battered woman’s syndrome and would be “provoked” to such an extent that she would retaliate.

Deepak’s flaws are more due to his personal nature than due to the pressure of circumstances. Since we get a picture of Deepak through what Kiranjit reminisces about him in prison, we can say that our idea about him is partial. But we have enough evidence to know that he is a psychopath who attained sadistic pleasure in abusing his wife emotionally, physically and mentally, a person who acted as though he had complete ownership of his wife and thought he

could do whatever he wanted to do with her. His attitude comes out when Kiranjit confronts him about spending money on his white mistresses. Holding a hot iron close to her face, he says, “This is my house, it’s my money. If I want to spend it on another woman, I will. If I want to poke out these pretty eyes, I will do that too. Who’s going to stop me? You? You’re a woman. You’re nothing. You’re a cunt, less than nothing” (*Provoked*). Deepak seems to be free from the financial constraints and familial commitments of the diasporic Indian who has to support his extended family abroad. Deepak and Kiran seem to be better off than the couple in *Heaven on Earth* as they live in their own house unlike Rocky and Chand, who live in a cramped house with Rocky’s relatives. Moreover Deepak’s mother is a more supportive and concerned mother-in-law than Rocky’s mother, who gains pleasure from the pain inflicted by her son on his wife. Deepak’s abusive behavior can thus be attributed more to his individual peculiarities and his patriarchal ways than to external pressures.

In contrast, Chand’s husband Rocky, a cab driver, is plagued by several difficulties as the dutiful son and chief bread-winner of an extended Punjabi family living in Canada. Apart from his old parents, the family consists of his sister, Aman, her husband, Baldev, who is unemployed and their two children. Added to this, there is always the possibility of more relatives arriving from India with the hope of being sponsored by Rocky. The family lives in a cramped residence which is let out on rent in the day time when the family is out at work. The old parents spend their time in the shopping mall while the renters come to their place. This arrangement made with intention of procuring more income points out the dire circumstances in which this diasporic family lives in Canada and it is no wonder that that the situation takes its toll on all the members of the family including the children. But the person who bears the brunt most is Rocky. The film has portrayed him with more understanding and sympathy as a person who is prey to his circumstances. Scenes in the film where Rocky is all alone and ruminating on his problems switch from colour to black and white to emphasize the extent of his entrapment in his circumstances and family duties (Ridon 230).

In such grim state of affairs, there is no scope for romance to blossom in Rocky’s life. Any tenderness that Rocky feels for his bride is nipped very early in their marriage by his sense of family obligation and the other pressures that bow him down. Rocky’s mother has a pivotal role in creating and sustaining a rift between him and his bride. The “traditionally reviled and feared mother-in-law” (Kakar 58) of the Indian family often becomes the chief perpetrator of a patriarchal order that becomes very hostile to younger women and especially to the daughters-in-law of the house. The mother-in-law, who would have experienced her share of denials and difficulties as a young wife reaches a powerful position in the family by the time she is old and exerts control over her daughters-in-law, in her own selfish interests and in the larger interests of the family. In the words of Sudhir Kakar et al,

Given the organizing principle of the traditional Indian family, in which the parent-son and filial bonds are more central than the husband-wife tie (that is considered the fulcrum of the modern Western family), the new bride constitutes a very real threat to the unity of

the larger family....The much-maligned mother-in-law, besides (or even because of) being animated by her own possessiveness in relation to her son, is no more than the family's designated agent preventing the bulid-up of a 'foreign cell in the family body'" (Kakar 59, 60).

Such a strategy is employed by Rocky's mother from the very night of his wedding and her son who has imbibed the values of the patriarchal family reassures her, "For me, you and Pappaji come first" (*Heaven on Earth*). There is little scope for the consummation of nuptial love here as the mother-in-law travels all that distance in the night to meet Rocky when he is on honeymoon, with the excuse that she dreamt that he had met with an accident. She sleeps with Chand in the hotel room, while Rocky spends the night with his brother-in-law in the car. When Chand suggests that they may rent another room for the old lady, she is slapped by Rocky, the devoted son. This first act of violence, which is relished by his mother, is followed by several other acts in the coming days. Chand's hopes of finding love in marriage are dashed and she is frequently subjected to physical torture of the worst kind by her husband at the slightest provocation.

Initially, Kiranjit and Chand are seen to have very little agency to counter the abuse and torture inflicted on them. It seems impossible for these women in the diaspora, cut off from their dear and near ones in a far away land, to resist the violence of their spouses in their personal capacity. Yet, the films *Provoked* and *Heaven on Earth* stand out not for their appalling depiction of domestic abuse, but for the remarkable rendering of the resilience and endurance of the victims. As the films progress, we see the protagonists freeing themselves from the trauma, albeit in different ways and to different degrees. Kiranjit gets empowered only after Deepak's death, consequent to her setting him on fire in his sleep after ten years of marriage, whereas Chand uses her own unique survival strategies from the very beginning of her married life. In fact, she resorts to her means of survival every time Rocky abuses her, though it is towards the end of the movie that she is able to liberate herself. In his film *Provoked*, Jag Mundhra drew on the life story of a real victim and survivor of domestic violence, Kiranjit Ahluwalia. Rather than probing the extent of his fidelity to the real life story, we have to verify how far he creates a film that speaks against domestic violence and how far he invests on the quality of resilience in abused women.

It is significant that Mundhra begins the film at the point where Kiran is taken on remand for burning her husband. Here is a woman who is transferred from the confines of home and family to the most unpalatable of places, a women's prison; but here begins her journey of resilience, confidence building and survival. This is a journey in which helping hands are extended to her by many other people, be it her fellow prisoners or voluntary organizations upholding the cause of battered women. What Kiranjit reminisces about her unhappy married life is shown as flashbacks that intersperse her life in prison. She gains her strength from the realities of prison life, the harshness of the legal system and life in general. On the other hand, in *Heaven on Earth*, Deepa Mehta, the filmmaker weaves a tale of fantasy and myth that juxtaposes the bleak world of Indian immigrants in Canada. She draws from India's rich repertoire of myths and

stories to work out an escape route for the young battered wife. Chand, who is a highly imaginative girl, is seen retreating into the world of fantasies and stories she had grown up with in Punjab, whenever she is confronted with loveless-ness and abuse in her husband's house. The ancient Indian myth of the Sheesh Naag or the King Cobra that can undergo metamorphosis and become a human being comes in handy for Mehta. The Sheesh Naag, here, comes to Chand in the form of her husband to soothe her and give her the love she so much craves for.

Unlike *Heaven on Earth*, *Provoked* is devoid of any trappings of fantasy and tries to be true to the details of the Kiranjit Ahluwalia case. The legal proceedings occupy a central part in the film and are crucial as far as battered women are concerned. The real Kiranjit Ahluwalia was convicted to life imprisonment in 1989 for murdering her husband by setting him ablaze after pouring a mixture of caustic soda and gasoline on his legs while he was asleep. Initially the court was against her on the ground that though her husband had abused her on the said night, the fact that she had waited till he was asleep and had prepared an inflammable concoction pointed to premeditated and purposeful assault rather than instant provocation. Later her cause was taken up by Southall Black Sisters, an organization working among abused women and it gained public attention and support. A new appeal was made upon the intervention of the Southall Black Sisters (abbreviated as SBS), in which it was found that Kiranjit had suffered from battered woman's syndrome which had caused severe depression and diminished responsibility in her at the time of the crime. This caused the attenuation of her crime from murder to manslaughter followed by her release from prison in 1992. Her case became a landmark in the legal history of England, entering British legal textbooks and redefining the word 'provocation' in the case of marital abuse victims. The Kiranjit Ahluwalia case helped to create awareness about domestic violence among immigrants and was instrumental in the release of other women convicted of murdering their abusive partners. Kiranjit was awarded the first ever Asian Woman Award in 2001 in honour of her personal strength and commitment.

Kiranjit's example is commendable in that it epitomizes women's ability to survive difficulties and steer life forward in the best possible way. Jag Mundhra weaves an endearing tale of human endurance, fellow feeling and compassion in tracing the transformation of Kiranjit from a timid and passive Punjabi immigrant in UK, who puts up with her husband's abuse, to a strong woman who overcomes the trauma and is ready to face the challenges of life. Her first step towards liberation comes when she sets her husband on fire. Her explanation is that she did it to make him understand the pain she had endured at his hands, and that she wanted to prevent him from running after her to inflict pain on her. When arrested soon after the act, we find that she is in a dazed state -- "neither lucid nor aware of her surroundings" (*Provoked*). This, coupled with her poor comprehension of English, prevents her from making any move of self-defence at the police inquest. When her lawyer visits her in prison and tells her that she has to speak out in court and narrate her story of abuse to gain the court's sympathy and have the verdict in her favour, she refuses by saying that her English is too poor and that she is ashamed. Moreover, she

believes that she has “sinned” and therefore deserves to be punished. Since she makes no self-defense or plea of provocation, she is condemned to life imprisonment.

In the prison too, she is in a state of daze and cultural shock, but gradually things start changing. When Radha, the fiery activist working for Southall Black Sisters evinces a special interest in her case inquires about her wellbeing in prison, she says, “I feel free” (*Provoked*). She repeats the same sentiment at a rally organized to garner public support for her – “I came out of my husband’s prison and entered the jail of the law. It is here, at last that I have found a kind of freedom” (*Provoked*). The influence of her cell mate, Veronica Scott, better known as Ronnie, is instrumental in drawing her out and making her more forthcoming and confident. Ronnie, who is in prison for having stabbed her husband, becomes her protector, mentor, confidant and friend. She takes pains to improve her command over English, by making her read books from the library. But more important, Ronnie persuades her brother, the illustrious lawyer Lord Foster, to act as Queen’s Counsel for Kiranjit at the retrial. This is a gesture that Ronnie does as a special favour for her friend, given that she had a tumultuous relationship with her brother and would not let him interfere in her own legal matters. The friendship of Ronnie and the other women prisoners acts as a balm on Kiranjit and there is a change in her perspective as well as appearance. Her friends cut off her long locks of hair and as she gets ready to face the world to tell her story of abuse at a public rally, she dons pants and suit instead of her traditional Punjabi attire. It is clear that she has changed much from the shy Punjabi woman who was reluctant to part with her ‘mangal sutra’ when she first arrived at the prison. The moral support of Radha Dalal of SBS is also substantial. It is Radha who takes the initiative to make Kiran appeal for a retrial. With the backing of Southall Black Sisters, Radha is able to gather public attention and overwhelming support for Kiranjit’s case. By the end of the film when we know that Kiranjit has come a long way from the silent, frightened and abused woman she once was.

If Westernization is a key aspect in Kiranjit’s survival, Chand’s liberation is made possible by her embracing of ancient Indian myths and stories. Kiranjit, in the movie, like her real-life counterpart, lives the rest of her life in England as a more self-assured woman, whereas Chand leaves Canada and returns to India, her homeland. All her fantasies focus on her reunion with her mother, who is a source of comfort and love as against her mother-in-law. The ‘mother’ referred to in Chand’s fantasies could also stand for her homeland, India, which promises more comfort and happiness than Canada. After every episode of abuse, Chand retreats to herself and whispers poetic lines describing her rescue and reunion with her mother. In one such reverie, she envisages a girl being carried across seven seas to a magical garden, where her mother waits for her below a tree guarded by a serpent. This yearning for the mother is typical of an Indian girl who has to put up with hardships in her husband’s house. Such reveries and fantasies, which significantly switch to black and white, are her means of preserving her sanity and poise in the face of the worst possible intimidation and confinement. As Manjeet Ridon observes, “Chand’s transition from victim to victor is achieved through storytelling and an idea that stories are fluid enough disturb stable representations” (237).

The portions in the film where the Sheesh Naag appears also switch to black and white, like the scenes of Rocky's isolation and frustration. The Sheesh Naag myth introduced by Deepa Mehta in the film is inspired by the cobra myth used in *Naga-Mandala* (1994), a play by Girish Karnad, the Indian dramatist. *Naga-Mandala* narrates the story of Rani, the child bride who is neglected by her husband. A blind old woman takes pity on Rani and advises her to make him consume a love root mixed in his food. Rani throws the mixture on an anthill, thereby causing it to be drunk by a Naga or a serpent. The Naga falls in love with her and comes to her every night, in the guise of her husband. When she gets pregnant, her husband accuses her of adultery and she is made to prove her fidelity before the village elders by holding a cobra in her hand, in a test called the 'nagapariksha'. Since the cobra does not bite her, her fidelity is proved and her husband is forced to accept and serve her as a goddess. In Mehta's film, we have a reworking of this Indian myth in the diasporic context in Canada. The South Indian myth used by Karnad is also adapted to suit the Punjabi context. In the movie, it is Roja, Chand's Jamaican colleague at the laundry who gives her the magical root that is to be powdered and mixed in the drink of her husband to cause "instant love" (*Heaven on Earth*). Chand, who would do anything to win over her husband, is seen mixing the root in his milk and making him drink it on several occasions without avail. During one such attempt the mixture starts frothing in the tumbler and she runs with it to the yard and pours it underneath a tree. The serpent or the Sheesh Naag, which shape-shifts and becomes Rocky's doppelganger rises from this mixture. The Naag starts visiting her as Rocky's double and imparting the much-needed love and warmth in her life. When the tenants report to Rocky that Chand had told them her husband was in the bedroom with her in her day off, he starts suspecting her and torturing her. The matriarch insists on the Naag Pariksha, which is undertaken in the garden of their Canadian house on a wintery day. Chand emerges victorious as the cobra does not sting her. She stands with the cobra round her neck and a halo around her head to the amazement of the family.

Manjeet Ridon who has made a comparative study of the approaches of Girish Karnad and Deepa Mehta in their use of the cobra myth is of the opinion that the former employs a male-centred view in his play, whereas Mehta reworks it with a feminist worldview in the film. In Karnad's version of the cobra myth, women fit into moulds that are binary opposites – they are "either on a pedestal worshipped like goddesses or social outcasts because they bring shame and dishonor to the family, a traditional virgin/whore split" (Ridon 235). By this token, Rani in *Naga-Mandala* is saved from being branded as a whore and is bestowed the status of a goddess. The status quo is maintained, albeit in an altered way. On the other hand, in *Heaven on Earth*, Chand is truly emancipated by the end of the film. The shape-shifting cobra is as much a figment of her imagination as it is a living entity. Her realization that "our desire [could] be so powerful that it can assume human form and enter our lives" (*Heaven on Earth*) is confirmed by the cobra when it visits her one last time before she leaves for India. Chand's gesture of leaving her husband and Canada are sure signs of the empowerment and agency she gains. As Ridon rightly says, "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...."

Chand disrupts a patriarchal family order and unlike Rani, abandons her position in it altogether” (239, 240). Such a political subversion happens in Mundhra’s *Provoked* too, wherein the practice of bride burning is subverted by the wife’s act of burning the husband. Furthermore, her empowerment happens only after she moves out of the domestic space to live in the all-women’s space of the prison. The sisterhood and female bonds nurtured there prove to be more effective ways of overcoming the travails faced by women than any hetero-normative relation could afford. Similarly, Chand “confronts a belief system in which a woman’s purity and fidelity in marriage are regarded to be the touchstones for cultural survival” (Ridon 240), and subverts the institution of marriage in itself, by walking out of it without any remorse. Both the films counter the evil of marital abuse by renouncing the very institution of marriage. Chand and Kiranjit emerge as survivors of unhappy marriages and victorious women who break free from the codes prescribed by patriarchy.

Jag Mundhra and Deepa Mehta have exploited the medium of cinema in the best possible way to draw attention to the evil of marital violence among the Indian diaspora and to show how it is circumvented. Their choice of an illustrious array of cast and crew from India and abroad has done much to win popular support for the films. Aishwarya Rai, the iconic Indian heroine enacts the poignant role of Kiranjit and Preity Zinta, another flourishing Bollywood star captures the nuances of Chand’s character. A musician of the stature of A.R. Rahman has done the title song and music in Mundhra’s film. Whether it is in selection of cast and crew or in the use of techniques like flashback or chromatic switches or in the blending of reality with fantasy and myth, the filmmakers have left no stone unturned in presenting domestic violence in its most gruesome shade and in creating moving stories of women’s power to endure and survive the worst forms of abuse.

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