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The Feminine Principle in *Princess Mononoke*: Prince Ashitaka's Ecofeminist Stance

Tarun Deep Singh

Abstract:

Vandana Shiva, in her essay "Women in Nature," the third chapter of her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Survival in India*, emphasizes upon the importance of the feminine principle in the process of the much needed regeneration and rejuvenation of the debilitating quality of Nature and Environment. "At one level, nature is symbolized as the embodiment of the feminine principle, and at another, she is nurtured by the feminine to produce life and provide sustenance" (Shiva 37). The importance that she sets to the feminine principle in ecofeminist politics is clearly evident and it is the intention of this paper to argue for an acknowledgment of the existence of this principle in the male protagonist, Prince Ashitaka, of Hayao Miyazaki directed film *Princess Mononoke*, a fantasy-anime film released in 1997. Through a recovery of the most revolutionary aspects of Shiva's arguments in the aforementioned essay in the first part of this paper, we will then seek to understand Ashitaka's feminine principle in the contrasting light of the "Maldevelopment" model embodied by Lady Eboshi, and the "Bad Mother Nature" (to use Wendi Sierra and others' terminology) model embodied by San, the original name of the eponymous heroine of the film. Through Ashitaka, Miyazaki is able to present to us the most balanced alternative between the two which respectively showcase the undesirability of the blindingly materialistic, consumerist society on the one hand and the regression into an isolated spiritual association with Nature, completely out of touch with the human world and its requirements on the other hand. The most crucial point that this paper seeks to make is that the feminine principle is not the sole prerogative or the responsibility of women as we will seek to highlight the existence of this principle in the film *Princess Mononoke*'s male protagonist Prince Ashitaka, whereas the exemplar representative of the masculine principle is the "masculinised woman" Lady Eboshi who brings with her not just the destructive Western technology but all the accompanying modes of perception and relationship with one's natural surroundings that this kind of worldview entails.

Keywords:

Ecofeminism, feminine principle – shakti – Prakriti, masculine principle – purusha, Maldevelopment, hierarchical dualisms, ontology of domination, Cartesian binaries.

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Vandana Shiva, in her essay "Women in Nature," the third chapter of her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Survival in India*, emphasizes upon the importance of the feminine principle in the process of the much needed regeneration and rejuvenation of the debilitating quality of Nature and Environment. "At one level, nature is symbolized as the embodiment of the feminine principle, and at another, she is nurtured by the feminine to produce life and provide sustenance" (Shiva 37). The importance that she sets to the feminine principle in ecofeminist politics is clearly evident and it is the intention of this paper to argue for an acknowledgment of the existence of this principle in the male protagonist, Prince Ashitaka, of Hayao Miyazaki directed film *Princess*

Mononoke, a fantasy-anime film released in 1997. Through a recovery of the most revolutionary aspects of Shiva's arguments in the aforementioned essay in the first part of this paper, we will then seek to understand Ashitaka's feminine principle in the contrasting light of the "Maldevelopment" model embodied by Lady Eboshi, and the "Bad Mother Nature" (to use Wendi Sierra and others' terminology) model embodied by San, the original name of the eponymous heroine of the film. Through Ashitaka, Miyazaki is able to present to us the most balanced alternative between the two which respectively showcase the undesirability of the blindingly materialistic, consumerist society on the one hand and the regression into an isolated spiritual association with Nature, completely out of touch with the human world and its requirements on the other hand.

Borrowing from the Indian cosmological tradition, Shiva labels the feminine principle as "shakti" which interacts with the masculine principle "purusha" to form the whole of the creative process. Shakti is likened to Prakriti which stands for both the creative force that creates Nature and the nature itself. What might come across as what Rosemary Radford Ruether terms as "leisure-class "spirituality"" actually achieves the aim of pitting the Indian philosophical tradition against the Western view of life on the basis of their respective conceptualizations of and importance accorded to Nature. In Western thought, Nature acts as the background to and a passive recipient of actions of Man, whereas in Indian philosophy, Nature as "Prakriti" was the active source of life. In the worldview arising from the latter philosophy, Nature was accorded the status and qualities of a living organism, whence it was seen as an entity with its own soul. This, according to Shiva, led to the "humanization of nature and naturalization of society" (39), human life being organized around the "feminine as the living principle" (39), placing an emphasis on creation, productivity, conservation, and sustenance as opposed to the Western world-view which organizes itself around the masculine principle and sees "a shift in the concept of activity from creation to destruction, and the concept of power from empowerment to domination" (51). Shiva sees the domination and exploitation of women as intrinsically build into the degradation of the environment and devastation of ecology. To her, the thought processes behind both are the same and, in Bina Agarwal's words, "she sees violence against nature and against women as built into the very mode of perceiving both" (101). This mode is essentially patriarchal which derives a lot from the Western philosophical tradition which is wholly based on binary oppositions and "hierarchical dualisms" (qtd. in Rao 126) which privilege the first term over the second. "These binaries have underscored much of the West's historical development and its hegemonic practices with regard to nature" (Murphy 9). In this scheme of things, Man is seen as closer to Culture and Women closer to Nature and this is how Women and Nature get intertwined. This worldview generates "ontology of domination" (Shiva 40) which leads to and justifies the subjugation and subsequent exploitation of both Women and Nature.

Through a discussion of this worldview, Shiva is able to highlight the adverse effects arising from the West's version of development and the notion of Progress associated with it that arises from the same ideology of domination as discussed above. The wholesale importation and application of these categories in other nations by their respective governments, only in an unsympathetic bid to be global, results in a similar exploitation of Nature throughout the world, as in the West. Shiva calls this askewed version of development, which is based on relations of domination between Man and Nature and correspondingly Man and Woman, as "Maldevelopment," which is an

obvious play on the two words- Male and Development- that are conjoined here to (a) express the sinister and destructive quality of the project of Development undertaken through the mediation of Western mindset, and (b) highlight that this project is male-oriented and as such, arises from the desire to control and subjugate the feminine principle. In contrast to this, Shiva posits and elaborates upon the Indian cosmological philosophy, in order to pit it against the exploitative, exclusionist, and violent Western concepts of Maldevelopment and “duality in existence” (Shiva 46). Western civilization is characterized by the “Cartesian view which has displaced more ecological world-views and created a development paradigm which cripples nature and woman simultaneously” (Shiva 39). To this, Shiva presents an alternative in which Nature and Man (both the male and female considered together) cohabit peacefully. An important aspect of this alternative way of life is the centrality which the feminine principle acquires in it.

It is for her upholding of “production of life” and “providing sustenance to the living” (41) that Shiva is castigated for indulging in essentialization of women in the Third World. However these acts are not necessarily negative in nature and in her arguments, the life-giving qualities of women, in juxtaposition with that of Nature, necessarily become a positive, even an empowering quality. Since the qualities of reproduction and regeneration are being sought to be restored to the gradually depleting Environment, these principles are elevated to the highest point possible. Shiva links, and quite correctly so, the objections to the regenerative forces of life with the reductive gendered-based response of feminists in which “women’s liberation is prescribed as the masculinisation of female...women’s freedom consists in freedom from biology, from ‘bondage to life’s mysterious processes’...The process of liberation is thus a masculinisation of the world defined within the categories created by gender-based ideology” (47). In her worldview, the feminine principle is given precedence for its association with life, creativity, and nurture, but this is not simply limited to the female but extends over to the male as well. “The feminine principle is not exclusively embodied in women, but is the principle of activity and creativity in nature, women, and men” [50 (emphasis mine)]. Rather than being seen as a limiting and a regressive assertion, feminine principle must be acknowledged as one around which life should be constructed now, especially in times of such widespread ecological devastation, because it “stands for ecological recovery and nature’s liberation, for women’s liberation, and for the liberation of men who, in dominating nature and women, have sacrificed their own human-ness” (50). It will be seen through this paper that the feminine principle is not the sole prerogative or the responsibility of the women as we will seek to highlight the existence of this principle in the film *Princess Mononoke*’s male protagonist Prince Ashitaka, whereas the exemplar representative of the masculine principle is the “masculinised woman” Lady Eboshi who brings with her not just the destructive Western technology but all the accompanying modes of perception and relationship with one’s natural surroundings that this kind of worldview entail, as has been discussed above.

The film opens on an extremely threatening note with disturbingly apocalyptic undertones. The narrator states,

In ancient times, the land lay covered in forests, where, from ages long past, dwelt the spirits of the gods. Back then, man and beast lived in harmony, but as time went by, most of the great forests were destroyed.

Those that remained were guarded by gigantic beasts who owed their allegiance to the Great Forest Spirit, for those were the days of gods and demons. (00:00:30 – 00:01:05)

From the Edenic existence where “dwelt the spirits of the gods” and the harmonious co-existence of “man and beasts,” the landscape has transmogrified into one which is inhabited by demons as well, signifying the morally as well as ecologically corrupt state of current existence of Man on Earth. Man is isolated now in his existence and no longer exists peacefully together with Nature. Susan J. Napier asserts this film “emphasizes loss...Miyazaki’s work deals with the loss of a Japan that existed before the patriarchal system, a Japan in which nature, rather than humans, ruled” (176). By emphasizing this loss, the film is able to make a nostalgic comment upon the lost connection and harmony with Nature in the face of the rising social system that is portrayed through the encroaching mechanization by Lady Eboshi in the midst of the forest, a process that is evidently patriarchal in nature. The approaching polluted spirit of the boar-god Nago, the result of the human greed acted out on Nature, is symbolic of the indiscriminate use of natural resources- “resourcing,” to use Napier’s terminology- which works toward driving away all life, except human, from the face of Earth. Eunjung Kim and Michelle Jarman in their essay “Modernity’s Rescue Mission: Postcolonial Transactions of Disability and Sexuality” assert that “The transformation of the boar into an almost unconquerable force of devastation, then, signals nature’s response to this misuse of power” (55). The film thus begins with a stern warning against human interference in the natural state of things. Whatever the polluted spirit of the boar-god Nago approaches turns dead and rotten, this being symbolic of the destructive reaction of Nature against human greed. In fact most of the agents of Nature, including the eponymous heroine, are shown as reacting angrily towards the encroaching human civilization of Lady Eboshi, and thus the image of Nature that is presented to us here is not one that is nurturing and sacrificing but one demanding a safe space for itself, even being wrathful at not having it. In words of David R. Loy and Linda Goodhew,

Despite human deception...nature is not romanticized as good, humans as evil. Nature can be stupid and wrathful, as we see in the suicidal rage of the Overlord of the boars, and especially at the end when the life-force of the decapitated Didaribotchi becomes a death-force that destroys everything it touches, a powerful symbol for the destructiveness of Nature when damaged by human greed. (70)

The boar-god Nago, consumed by hate and rage, is the foil to Ashitaka, who embodies sense, sensitivity, and a calm demeanor towards it, despite the fatal threat it offers to the prince’s village. He tries to understand the reasons behind the boar-god’s hate and rage without letting himself be overtaken by these emotions, and kills it off only when he is left with no other option. The boar-god’s anger is directed towards the human world itself which is symbolic of the sinister side of Nature that understands only destruction. This episode foreshadows the hatred of San and wolf-clan towards human beings. Gross exploitation of natural world and its resources has turned these species against humans in rage against their unjust treatment at the hands of the increasingly powerful human world. Indiscriminate behavior of humans towards nature results in reciprocity of inconsiderate attitude from the side of Nature as well. World of Nature is pitted directly against the human world from the opening scene itself, a conflict that is played out throughout the film. The fearful aspect of Nature is at exhibition here. In the

end, after the climactic war between the human world and the animal world, in which the boar clan is almost entirely wiped out, the second and more respected boar-god Okkoto is literally driven insane by hatred of mankind. This is a very different image from the nurturing Mother Nature image we are generally used to come across in popular imagination.

However, Nature is not entirely violent and antagonistic towards the human world; it does allow for a space of safe and mutually respectable interaction between the two worlds. In the words of Loy and Goodhew, in this film “the natural world is depicted as spiritual, welcoming, and healing those humans who enter it gently with respect” (73). After having a draught of the water from the forest pond, the load of the unconscious man “suddenly doesn't feel heavy at all” (00:28:55) to Ashitaka, which shows the healing quality of Nature. What is fatally dangerous for a man like Jigo, who warns Ashitaka of the “certain death” that awaits anyone who enters the Realm of the Spirit of the Forest, becomes a pretty easy task for the latter because of his link with Nature because of which he is able to navigate through the heart of the forest. Unlike Kohroku, the man from Lady Eboshi's Iron Town, Ashitaka is not at all afraid of the little forest spirits kodama, and he recognizes the benevolence of the spirit world by instilling his faith in the kodama by asking it to guide him through the forest. He is not mistrustful of the kodama, and by extension Nature, unlike Kohroku. “If Yakul is not afraid, then we have nothing to worry about here” (00:24:12 – 00:24:16); he has placed such high faith in the judgment of his deer-like traveling companion and the trust he puts in the non-human world is unmatched by anyone from the human species (if one does not consider Princess Mononoke belonging to the human species, for her close resemblance to the wolf-clan) in the film. At 00:23:11, after Ashitaka has revealed himself to San and the wolf-clan, it is not a coincidence that the wolves and the misanthrope San do not attack and kill him. They instantly recognize the genuine quality of his intentions and that he means no harm. It is he who is able to spot the Forest Spirit, the shishigami, deep into the heart of forest whereas Kohroku sees nothing. It is a glowing tribute to Ashitaka's higher level of connection with the natural world. This is precisely why he is able to find a solution to the approaching doom of the human world at the end.

That Ashitaka is the main character of the film, carrying the major impetus of the moral message of Miyazaki, is made very clear by the fact that it is only after whole twenty minutes have passed that we get to see Lady Eboshi and Princess Mononoke in action in the film. It is not a coincidence that Ashitaka is the one through which we get to see the beginnings of the trouble which is being wrought upon the human world through indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources by science and technology, also of the human world. While the boar-god Nago has been driven to murderous rage, therefore becoming some sort of a demon, by Lady Eboshi and her Iron Town, it attacks Ashitaka's village which is far to the east. It is a very cunning ploy on Miyazaki's part to ensure involvement of the prince Ashitaka, who is literally thrust into the action of the film by this device, as he sets out to seek the cure of the fatal curse which Nago has put on him while the two are engaged in fighting. We come to know through the oracle-like wise woman of the village that the boar-god Nago had come from far to the West, turned into a demon monster because of the “evil at work in the land to the West” (00:09:39 – 00:09:49). The West thus becomes the site of forceful exploitation and devastation of ecology, driving animals out from its forest reserves. Ashitaka is driven to the West to confront the Evil, and this becomes a process of the empire writing back

and telling the colonizer the wrongs it has wrought upon the entire world because of its own greed. The West is seen as the site that engages in what Shiva labels as “Maldevelopment” and is the embodiment of the anthropocentric world-view that originated in the Renaissance ideals of 15th century Europe and found its full articulation in the Enlightenment ideals. As opposed to this centrality of human world in the scheme of things, Ashitaka comes across as one who sees the human and the non-human world as equals. He eats from the same hand that Yakul has just eaten from - this is not the ordinary love one feels for one’s pet; this is mutual respect amongst the inhabitants of the human and the non-human world alike. There is a “double-sided threat (in this film)...the human threat to natural world, and nature’s threat to human society...that horizontal focus between humans and nature must be balanced by another vertical axis, at least as important, between hatred/violence/evil and selfless compassion” (Loy & Goodhew 68). Ashitaka, by possessing this quality of compassion for all, shows that he is in complete sync with the non-human world around him, therefore validating the assertion of an existence of a feminine principle in him. His respect for the principle of life is all-encompassing and he knows he is in the wrong even if he had to kill two of his enemies in self-defense. He is repentant at his involvement in the loss of life, unlike Lady Eboshi whose men fall over the cliff because of the stand-off with the wolf-clan and she refuses to take the responsibility for their loss of life. But she is not an entirely negative character and is shown to be caring towards the prostitutes and lepers with whose help she has been able to build up the Iron Town, although critics Kim and Jarman in the aforementioned essay have raised concerns about the reinforcing of certain stereotypes about these groups in the process of their rehabilitation by Lady Eboshi, but that is not our present concern. Ashitaka must mediate between the exploitative, dominating, Western masculinist ideology of Lady Eboshi on the one hand and San, the raging, hateful, vengeful “bad Mother Nature” on the other, with his feminine principle, a point illustrated too literally through his position as the mediator right in the middle of the two in their stand-off at around the 51-minute mark in the film.

Just before the aforementioned stand-off scene, Lady Eboshi tries to win over Ashitaka to her scheme of things and convince him to kill the Great Forest Spirit, the shishigami:

Lady Eboshi: Stay here. Help me kill the Forest Spirit, Ashitaka.

Ashitaka: You would do that? Kill the very heart of the forest?

E: Without that ancient god the animals here would be nothing but dumb beasts once more. When the forest has been cleared and the wolves wiped out, this desolate place will be the richest land in the world, and Princess Mononoke will become human (00:42:12 – 00:42:31).

She further tries to tempt him on the off-chance that the shishigami’s blood might be able to heal Ashitaka’s curse put on him by the boar-god Nago but he refuses to be drawn in by this logic of selfish isolated existence, removed from all concerns and compunctions regarding the natural world around him, which Eboshi sees only as the means to gain resources for her own purposes and benefits and nothing more. He, on the other hand, acknowledges the existence of the natural world as more than just a means to human ends and accepts its independence from the human world. But it is not

just the natural world he has an intimate understanding of. He can even relate to the hardships of women working the bellows whose shifts are sometimes “four days long”. But his connection with the natural world cannot be overstated. He can even sense San charging on Iron Town at 00:45:23 and he keeps having these flashes throughout the film, for instance when the climactic battle between the boar-clan and Eboshi's men is about to commence, when one of the wolves is trapped under a boar and needs to be saved. He is in perfect harmony with the natural world. At 00:47:19 - 00:47:24, Eboshi cleverly tries to manipulate the anger of the two women whose husbands had died in the first stand-off scene with the wolves. One is forced to think whether all this killing on either side brings any good. Ashitaka chooses to stay out of this circle of vengeance and seeks to bring the two worlds of Nature and humans together in harmony. In a dialogue with Moro, the wolf-god and San's wolf-mother, he asks her,

Ashitaka: Why can't the humans and the forest live together? Why can't we stop this fighting now?... We might find a way to live.

Moro: [Laughing] How? Will you join forces with San and fight the humans?

A: No. All that would do is cause more hatred (01:20:44 – 01:21:49).

His stand is therefore explicitly anti-war and anti-violence, which is one of the main concerns of Shiva's brand of Ecofeminism. He rightly castigates Lady Eboshi for indulging in making of weapons and his right hand, which is under the curse of the boar-god Nago, acts of its own will to reach for the sword but Ashitaka manages to control it and does not allow himself to be engulfed by the hatred surrounding him.

Another interesting scene from the film which makes it almost impossible for us to pass value-judgments on Lady Eboshi's utopian Iron Town happens from 00:34:05 – 00:34:17 when men try to throw their weight around and accord more importance to their own work in front of the women who immediately respond to them in kind by claiming that they work as hard as the men do, if not more, because the rice which men brought to the town was paid for through the iron that women had produced with their hardships at the bellows. In another incident, Toki, the right-hand woman of Eboshi, tells the latter's bodyguard that “Even if you were a woman, you'd still be an idiot” (01:18:42 – 01:18:48), which completely reverses the gender stereotypes and roles and it is almost a female utopia that Lady Eboshi has built out there in Iron Town. One wonders if there could be any other town or village where such equality between men and women exists; this town indeed comes across as a fair and just place, but only if one were to look at things from the point of view of mankind. While having dinner, when the men start to relate to Ashitaka the story of the boar-god Nago and his dethronement, one realizes that all this prosperity has been achieved at huge costs to the Environment and is not in harmony with the natural surroundings. Thus this development is exclusivist and exploitative. At 01:24:03, Ashitaka observes, “It's so quiet. I wonder where our friends little kodama went.” Immediately afterwards he smells the ironworks nearby, the sign of human industry infiltrating into the forest and the natural world. The kodama, which were the sign of the health of the forest, have disappeared, signifying the now-polluted state of the Realm of the Spirit Forest, which has become unhealthy because of human encroachment upon it. Thus even though it has brought work for men and women, Eboshi's model of development has destroyed

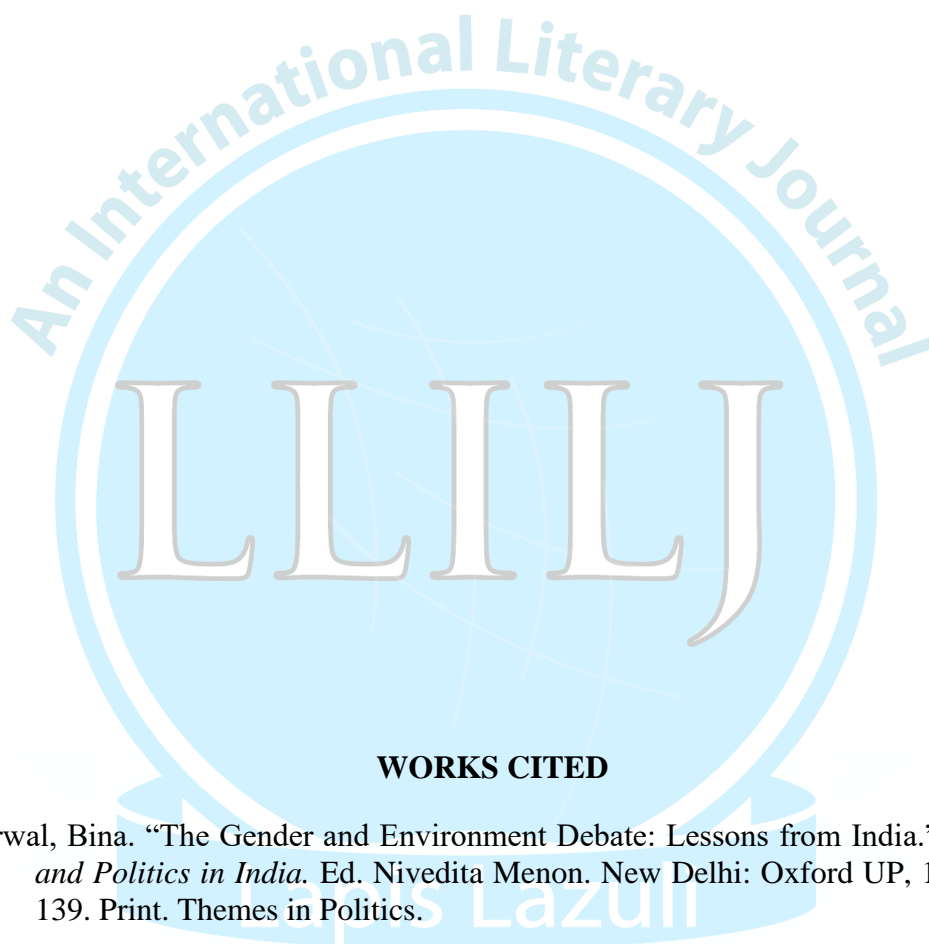
the natural world surrounding the Iron Town, which then has to be seen as a morally gray area. In a conversation with Jigo, the monk-henchman of the Emperor, Eboshi observes that, “Every day that we cut trees and dig for iron, the forest and its creatures grow weaker. My way, there is no loss of life, Jigo” (01:16:40 – 01:16:47). Sadly for her, she considers as living and understands the importance of lives of only her fellow human beings and pays no heed to the loss of life in the natural world that is brought about by her. This shows that she is not completely evil but that she is only blind to the importance of the natural world around herself. She is mindful of only her own people and their safety, which makes her a benevolent leader. But this does not prevent her from becoming a morally irresponsible character, inasmuch as her callous attitude towards Nature is considered.

San, or Princess Mononoke, on the other hand, is the complete opposite of Lady Eboshi in that her loyalties lie firmly on the side of the natural world and she is completely unmindful of the requirements of the human world. In the words of Kim and Jarman, “Mononoke signifies the inevitable resistance to modernity’s rejection of groups who refuse to or cannot be assimilated into its violent logic” (58). Despite her diametrically opposite concerns as compared to those of Lady Eboshi, she pretty much takes the same path as the latter in that she is aggressive, violent, and unsympathetic towards the opposing world-view, unable to look at the limitations of her own. Ashitaka is the only one who is able to understand the importance as well as the limitations of these opposing worldviews and is able to win over both the enemy camps with his sole battle cry of “What I want is for the humans and the forest to live in peace” (01:45:24 – 01:45:28), but not until a glimpse of the terrible fate that awaits human world if they exceed the limits is shown to them. When Eboshi shoots down the shishigami’s head, it transforms into a blind creature oozing life-sucking liquid, which kills anyone that comes in contact with it. However, when Ashitaka and San return it its head, the shishigami restores life and the green environs, but not before it completely wipes out every trace of the Iron Town. Unlike the boar-gods Nago and Okkoto who were eaten up by rage and hatred towards mankind, the Great Forest Spirit does accept the apology proffered by humans and their attempts at making amends for their mistakes. Even till the last then, there is a hope in the forgiving quality of Mother Nature, but the film does not end without emphasizing the destructive potential of the natural world that could wreak havoc all over the human world. In the end the feminine principle of Ashitaka saves the day; he is able to present himself as the embodiment and manifestation of the feminine principle since he is characterized by almost all the qualities which Shiva sees as informing the feminine principle:

- (a) Creativity, activity, and productivity;
- (b) Diversity in form and aspect;
- (c) *Connectedness and inter-relationship of all beings, including man;*
- (d) *Continuity between the human and natural; and*
- (e) *Sanctity of life in nature* [39 (emphasis mine)].

Recognizing the independence of the natural world from human considerations, he does not allow himself to become some sort of spiritualist who gives up the material world for proximity with the natural world. The film rather ends with him and San parting ways, although on a hopeful note. “I’ll always be near. Yakul and I will come and visit you whenever we can, all right?” (02:07:48 – 02:07:55), Ashitaka tells San, who is unable to reconcile herself with the human world for all the destruction it has caused to

the natural world. In this truce-like situation we see the real protagonist emerging in Ashitaka who acknowledges his destiny in helping the human beings, himself belonging to the human species. He is intent upon assisting in building Eboshi's "better town" with sustainable technology and thoughtful use of the natural resources. As Murphy asserts, "categorizing the Enlightenment in only negative terms is to forget that it was also responsible for the notion of inalienable human rights. Likewise, it is a mistake to consider the Romantic return-to-nature movement of Rousseau as solely benevolent" (16). Ashitaka is able to strike the perfect balance between the two worldviews and tries to bring about a mutual understanding between the two worlds that cannot be brought together yet can co-exist independently and peacefully.



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BIO-NOTE

Tarun Deep Singh is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Sri Guru Tegh Bahadur Khalsa College, University of Delhi and pursuing M.Phil degree at the Department of English & Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh. He holds a B.A.(Hons.) degree in English Literature from S.G.T.B. Khalsa College, University of Delhi and an M.A. English degree from Sri Venkateswara College, University of Delhi. His academic interest revolves around the Poetics and Politics of Realism, Freud-Marxism and Consumerist Culture, Propaganda in Totalitarian Nazi and Soviet Regimes. His recently submitted MPhil dissertation is on the points of convergence and divergence of seminal Marxist philosophers and thinkers like Georg Lukacs, Bertolt Brecht, and Theodor Adorno on the question of the literary style of Realism and is currently awaiting viva-voce for the same.

E-mail: tarunalltheway@gmail.com