

POSTWOMB APOCALYPSE AND BEYOND: WASTELANDS OF DYSTOPIA IN MAD MAX FURY ROAD

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Received: Jan. 2020 Accepted: Feb. 2020 Published: Feb. 2020

Abstract: The Ecotones in the post-apocalyptic movie *Mad Max Fury Road* give a blurry effect between postnature, postwomb and posthuman. The Mad Max series began in 1979 with *Mad Max* followed by *Mad Max 2* (1981), *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (1985) culminating in *Mad Max Fury Road* in 2015. A brainchild of George Miller and Byron Kennedy, *Mad Max Fury Road* (winning six Oscars) represents a post-apocalyptic society which presents the unimaginable horror that gendered violence can bring to mother nature and women. This film bears ample evidence that popular culture, despite its undeniably commercial aesthetics and its entanglement with corporate imperatives, can function as at least one possible arena where a new mass consciousness can be raised. *Mad Max Fury Road* leaves an uncanny feeling within the audience, a sort of emotional claustrophobia and the horror of a near cyborgian future. The Undead living deads in this wasteland of irreversible degeneration, bring before the audience a previously untold tale of ecoterrorism.

Keywords: Apocalypse, Ecoterrorism, Gendered Violence, Post-Nature, Post-Womb, Undead.

Introduction: Apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic films mostly present a dystopia where the technological/cyborgian civilization is either collapsing or has already collapsed. The location then shapes up in a non-technological future world or a world where only the scattered fragments of civilization or technology remain. As James Berger rightly points out in his seminal work, *After the End*, "the study of post apocalypse is a study of what disappears and what remains, and of how the remainder has been transformed" (8). In such a horror stricken dystopian environ, we have no option left but to go back to the basics- "The post-apocalypse in fiction provides an occasion to go 'back to basics' and to reveal what the writer considers to be truly of value" (*After the End* 8). In the post-apocalyptic world, which is bloody and violent, one would expect that all gender constructs and discriminations would end; that the apocalypse should level the playing field. But what can we expect if the apocalypse itself is gendered? Power structures quickly arise again cruder than ever- "there is an important strand of apocalyptic imagining that seeks to destroy the world expressly in order to eliminate female sexuality. In the post-apocalypse, desire and fear find their true objects; we see what we most want and most abhor. And these objects frequently are the same object-some instrument of universal annihilation" (Berger 11). Women are both desired sexually and feared, lest they should get any form of empowerment. Biological functions of reproduction are denuded of any humanitarian feelings or sentiments. Female bodies only become sites of violence and physical aggrandizement. Though men desire women sexually, yet they fear a world where women would have any sort of power. Gendered violence exposes the ruthless face of the Alpha male; Patriarchy is alive again in flesh and blood though the human race is on the verge of extinction. It once again reinstates the fact that misogyny is a concept defined at least not by time.

Drawing/Writing/Filming landscape also becomes an act of mapping its people. Nature and Culture are interconnected and, in a way, these produce and reproduce each other. These often continuously re-shape and re-form each other leading to extremely dynamic identities in both cases. Ecoterrorism, violence on women and environmental issues have increasingly become popular topics in recent Hollywood films. Hollywood cinema has shaped, and sometimes distorted, the perception of ecoterrorism since the late 1980s. Nonetheless, since movies are, in a way, are "mirror of the prevailing society" (Siegfried Kracauer), they too reveal the environmental crisis of the present times and ignite a

sort of eco-awareness and consciousness among the masses. While discussing about the role of film in society and how it has grown to become such a ubiquitous art, Tom Sherak, rightly argued: "Film is a reflection of society, both present and past... Movies can educate too. They tell us things we never could have known. ...As the frames move and tell a story, it is that movement which emotionally connects you. To me, this is fundamental about why movies have become global". (Interview, Web)

With the predominant presence of War Rigs, huge cars, wheels and huge motor bikes, the film is apparently about speed and wheels but beneath the flashy hues of shining engines and the jarring cacophony of wheelers, it also uncovers what Mary Mellor terms as the connections between exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women ("Ecofeminism and Environmental Ethics"). The Mad Max series began in 1979 with *Mad Max* followed by *Mad Max 2* (1981), *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (1985) culminating in *Mad Max Fury Road* in 2015. A brainchild of George Miller and Byron Kennedy, *Mad Max Fury Road* (winning six Oscars) represents a post-apocalyptic society in Australia (or may be any post-apocalyptic world). With the Nuclear Holocaust, Oil Wars and continuous eco-terrorism, earth has gone sour and all natural resources have become minimal. Drawing/Writing/Filming landscape also becomes an act of mapping its people. Nature and Culture are interconnected and, in a way, these produce and reproduce each other. These often continuously re-shape and re-form each other leading to extremely dynamic identities in both cases. The ecotones in *Mad Max Fury Road* serve as a contrast and a reminder of what has been lost.

Exploitation of Nature and women run parallel as covert hyperlinks in this visual text. The desolate wasteland of the post-apocalyptic earth is a cruel place to live in. Even a basic survival needs constant struggle. Both people and nature have been reduced to objects valued only for their utility. Almost every character has been robbed of his/her humanity by a cyborgian hyper-male super-power who hoards water and mother's milk as commodities in the Citadel in which he lives. This man-machine mentioned above, Immortan Joe, disturbs the natural bond between man-woman-nature by commodifying both nature and women. The natural resources have the power to heal both the earth and mankind. From Shiva's perspective, women's liberation cannot be achieved without a simultaneous struggle for the preservation and liberation of all life on this planet from the dominant patriarchal/capitalist worldview (Mies and Shiva, 16). The bio-centric equality is ultimately related to the all-inclusive self realization in the sense that if we harm nature, we harm ourselves also. The earth has enough for us all. Only we need to understand that "with a limited planet, there can be no escape from necessity. To find freedom does not involve subjugating or transcending the 'realm of necessity,' but rather focusing on developing a vision of freedom, happiness, the 'good life' within the limits of necessity, of nature" (Mies and Shiva, 8). Therefore the alternate worldview promoted by the ecofeminists is one of partnership and cooperation because as they say, "the feminine principle is based on inclusiveness and its recovery in men, women, and nature, is the recovery of "creative forms of being and perceiving" (*Staying Alive*, 53). An alternative approach towards life and living devoid of gendered violence and in sync with mother nature may bring about a peaceful cohabitation of human beings with their environment leading towards sustainable eco-friendly existence.

Max Rockatansky explains in a voice-over narration that he was once a cop dedicated to a good cause. But now, as he treks alone in this desolate desert with his huge War vehicle, he is hunted and haunted by his past, by the images of his wife and child and others whom he had failed to save. We see him being pursued by the War Boys driving gigantic engines through the desert. These boys are driven by violence and their only goal is to die in war. Pale and all covered with blisters caused by nuclear radiation, they serve only as war tools for the War Lords. After a mad chase, they take Max captive. In the Citadel his head is shaved, his face is forced into an iron mask and his back is tattooed with the label "O-negative". Max is robbed of his basic human rights and in a moment his world changes again. Labelled as a universal blood donor for all, Max is literally reduced to a commodity to be consumed by the Citadel members in need. We are then introduced to the Patriarch who is the originator of this violence. Immortan Joe has a scary, grotesque facemask made of horse teeth set in a large pair of Jaws. He lives in the Citadel where he becomes the supreme controller of all things including natural resources. Immortan Joe has built a small unnatural universe of his own based on the foundations of war, fear,

gasoline and power games. In his Citadel which is the only green-zone amidst the monotone of the vast desert, Immortan Joe hoards not only water as Aqua Cola but also human milk using women as breeding heifers. Since his lungs are damaged, Joe is kept alive with air hoses. He is himself a man-machine and there is no space for kindness or compassion in his world. As he addresses a crowd standing on the ground below the Citadel, he tries to play the role of both God and Nature (since he has pumped all the water up to his Palace, he now has supreme control over both life and the natural resources). He opens the window of the Citadel and pumps out a little water for only a few minutes to his worshippers standing below. He warns them that they should not get addicted to this water since that would make them go mad at its absence which is bound to happen.

Not only the natural resources, Joe has kept even his women in gigantic safety lockers. Their private parts are chained and locked up too. Their bodies, in a way, are not their own. Immortan Joe controls their sexual functions as well. They are breeders for him and he hoards their milk with the help of suction machines. Their raped and commodified bodies become, in a way, landscapes of terror for these breeders. This reminds us of Ariel Salleh's contention that there is a parallel in men's thinking between their "right" to exploit nature, on the one hand, and the use they make of women, on the other (*Ecofeminism as Politics*, 9). As Furiosa and Max escape with the breeders, they meet a group of elderly ladies in the midst of the desert. They are aged, mal-nourished and haggard and carry guns with them. They are the 'Vuvalini' who defend themselves with guns and live a most difficult life in the wasteland. Instead of living in the legendary Green Place, these women ride motorcycles across the huge sand Dunes because the fabled Green Place has turned into a ghostly bog with its life-sustaining water turning toxic. Furiosa's dream of returning to the homeland gets shattered as they reveal this cruel reality before her. Thus, beneath the flashy engine images highlighted throughout almost all the scenes in the movie, there perhaps surfaces a serious message: when earth goes sour, all else goes sour too. Everything becomes toxic, even human emotions. For once the 'absence' becomes as much prominent as the 'presence' in the film. Gone are their dreams to live a life of oneness with nature by farming lands and by going organic. Instead, the Vuvalini of the Green Place are forced to face everyday challenges for their basic survival in the desert accepting a life of violence and pain. Yet there is hope, they believe. They still dream of a green earth. The senior lady still plants a seed on every chance she gets but till date nothing has sprouted because of the sterile earth. She has even turned the upper part of a skull into a pot for planting the seeds. The scene is deeply touching and it speaks of hope amidst death and destruction. In the midst of violence and chaos, they visualize a better earth for the future; they know nothing is more powerful at the end than love and tender care.

In her seminal work *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human*, Kate Soper talks about Nature as first, a Metaphysical Concept through which humanity thinks of its difference and specificity, second as a Realist Concept that refers to the structures, processes and casual powers that are constantly operative within the environment and third as a Lay or Surface concept used in relation to ordinarily observable features of the world. Max Horkheimer, and Theodor Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Cultural Memory in the Present*, talk about "After Nature" and argue that *END OF NATURE ≠ END OF THE WORLD* and demonstrates how the scientific methodologies are used to manipulate nature. The Film in a way contextualizes these arguments as well. Mention may be made of a few more epoch making works in this field. While Carolyn Merchant in *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World*, published in 1992 argues that "nature, suitably retooled to match the latest global-corporate interests, is rendered inarticulate and inanimate even as 'dead' money is endowed with vital life" (58), N. Katherine Hayles talks about how we Became Posthuman through the Virtual Bodies in *Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* in the 1999 publication. Another step ahead, in his 2002 publication, Elaine Graham discussed about the Monsters, Aliens and Others and the representation of Posthuman in the Popular Culture.

War and Violence are also related to rape and exploitation of women on a large scale. Most ecofeminists, like Vandana Shiva, are explicitly anti-war and anti-capitalist, because both war and capitalism, in a way, are seen as patriarchal structures. For Shiva, there is connection between "the escalation of war", "musclemen" culture, and rape and other violence against women: "It is no coincidence that the

gruesome game of war-in which the greater part of the male sex seems to delight- passes through the same stages as the traditional sexual relationship: aggression, conquest, possession, control. Of a woman or a land, it makes little difference" (Mies and Shiva, 15). The women characters in the film rightly point out that generations of men have selfishly exploited mother Earth- they have ripped open her entrails for personal profits and gains. Earth also has taken her ultimate revenge- she has turned herself into a wasteland. Earth's greenness and fertility being constantly endangered and challenged through decades, in the post-apocalyptic period she has turned completely sterile. Furiosa has a dream still left with her. She longs to go back home, to the fabled Green Place of the Mothers and Grandmothers- a land where there is love, affection, green earth and enough of natural resources for all. As Earth becomes sterile because of constant exploitation, women also are deprived of their motherhood and they become just sex machines meant for propagating human race in the hands of Patriarchy. Thus, throughout the movie we can feel the presence of the absent fertile earth and the emotions related to motherhood. No doubt, we agree with Shiva and Maria Mies when they say that both exploitation of earth and women are feminist concerns: "We see the devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors, as feminist concerns. It is the same masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies and our own sexuality, and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its way" (14).

For a few ecofeminists, the regenerative power of women "in bringing forth a child and being devoted to its care and nurturing gives an analogy that the same nurturing quality inheres in women with regard to nature" (Dattar, Foreword, ix). As science and technology progresses patriarchy takes a new face. In a cyborgian world devoid of basic humanitarian principles, what is left with us is only a handful of Warlords and wasteland. Until and unless we understand that man, woman and nature are related and must work in unison, we will have only the sterile deserts with us (symbolizing both the mental and physical degeneration). As argued by Graham, this film too gives evidence that popular culture, despite its undeniably commercial aesthetics and its entanglement with corporate imperatives, can function as at least one possible arena where, to use the term employed by Michael Miles, 'a new mass consciousness' can be raised.

Mad Max Fury Road leaves an uncanny feeling within the audience, a sort of emotional claustrophobia and the horror of a near cyborgian future - posthuman, postwomb and postnature. *Mad Max Fury Road*, no doubt, is a post-apocalyptic film with a difference. While most films of this genre continue with the same sort of gender roles, Miller brings about a refreshing change in this film. While Furiosa is behind the wheel (symbol of ultimate power), Max is riding Shotgun. They complement each other well and it forms an equal partnership. Thus, in assigning Furiosa the role of saviour, Miller undoes the gender construct. As Furiosa lays down the lifeless body of Immortan Joe, we see a new Emperor (Imperator) in her whose rule would perhaps be based on harmony, balance and on a realization that the exploitation of nature is intimately linked to man's attitude towards women and no attempt to liberate either will be possible unless man understands that.

Acknowledgment: Acknowledgement is due to *The Critical Endeavour* 2019.

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