

EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE AND RETALIATION:  
THE ISSUE OF KNOWLEDGES IN *MOTHER INDIA*

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This paper looks at the violent interaction of knowledges in the film *Mother India* from a perspective that takes into account both post- and pre-modern Indian system of thought. Using the subaltern project and its Foucauldian inspiration as a stepping stone for looking at power relations, but also pointing to its shortcomings, Birju's retaliation is interpreted as a process of empowerment through oral knowledges. Then, this empowering process is discussed in terms of various Indian pre-modern traditions in which orality and vow-taking were considered important sources of empowerment and inspiration for action. Finally, I offer a reading of the film that does not dwell on the standpoints of gender issues and nation-building from which is most frequently interpreted.

Keywords: Knowledges; Retaliation; Orality; Bollywood; Vows, Empowerment

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VIOLENCIA Y VENGANZA EPISTEMOLÓGICA:  
LA CUESTIÓN DE LAS FORMAS DE CONOCIMIENTO EN *MOTHER INDIA*

*Este ensayo explora la violenta interacción de formas de conocimiento en la película Mother India desde una perspectiva basada en sistemas indios de pensamientos, tanto pre- como post-modernos. Partiendo del proyecto subalterno, de inspiración Foucauldiana, para analizar las relaciones de poder y sin dejar de señalar sus deficiencias en el caso que nos ocupa, la venganza de Birju es vista como un proceso de toma de poder a través de la oralidad. Dicho proceso de toma de poder es analizado desde la óptica de varios paradigmas indios pre-modernos en los que oralidad y la toma de votos se consideran importantes fuentes de poder e inspiración. Finalmente, este ensayo ofrece una lectura de la película que no está basada en los frecuentemente re-visitados ejes de cuestiones de género y de construcción nacional, que vertebran la mayoría de las interpretaciones de Mother India.*

*Palabras clave: formas de conocimiento; venganza; oralidad; Bollywood; votos; toma de poder*

## 1. Introduction

Epistemic violence, that is, violence exerted against or through knowledge, is probably one of the key elements in any process of domination. It is not only through the construction of exploitative economic links or the control of the politico-military apparatuses that domination is accomplished, but also and, I would argue, most importantly through the construction of epistemic frameworks that legitimise and enshrine those practices of domination. This pattern can be found in many colonial establishments which not only perpetrated epistemic violence but also fabricated the relevant legitimising frameworks. An instance of such a framework is discussed, for example, in Said's *Orientalism* (1978), in which the institution of the Orient is exposed not only as an entity that was built upon a "subjugation of knowledges" (Foucault 1980: 84-85) but also as a useful instrument for legitimising domination.

Nonetheless, it would be short-sighted to think that the mechanism described above was exclusively exerted by the colonial establishments, or by the great narratives of Modernity, for that purpose. All sorts of processes of domination have happened before and parallel to the expansive wave of the Enlightenment. However, the fact that post-modernity has provided us with the tools to analyse events retrospectively in this particular way is both useful and dangerous. On the one hand, we can employ notions such as *epistemic violence* or *subjugation of knowledges* in order to look at analogous processes of domination which are unrelated to modernity. On the other hand, the risk of applying any model in a totalising and context-ignoring fashion can lead to the construction of another totalitarian great narrative. This tension will be central to the way I shall be approaching the issue of knowledges in Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957).

The aim of this essay is, thus, to explore and discuss instances of epistemic violence as well as instances of contestation to that violence, that is, epistemic retaliations, in *Mother India*. *Mother India* is an Indian film released in 1957 which provides us with a narrative of epistemic violence and retaliation running parallel to India's decolonisation, but that does not simplistically echo the national narrative. Interestingly enough, the process of domination is perpetrated and suffered by the then (post-) colonial subjects (Indians). Therefore, this is a good example of a process of domination that runs parallel to colonialism but that cannot be regarded as a direct expression of colonial power. In other words, we are faced with a case of epistemic violence that does not fall within a typical post-Enlightenment context. So, can a certain method of analysis be applied to a situation that is *a priori* alien to it? How, if possible, can this gap be closed and the interpretive process accomplished?

In the same way that Guha (2000: 1) criticises the appropriation of instances of peasant insurgency by teleological projects (such as Marxist or nationalist historiography), I refuse to look at Birju's (Sunil Dutt) story of epistemic violence and retaliation as an allegory or metaphor of other (inter)national (hi)stories. My main aim is not to place the narrative of *Mother India* in the larger frameworks of greater narratives, but to analyse its power/knowledge dynamics, that is, to take a close look at the knowledges present in the film and to discuss their violent interaction. However, we cannot forget that *Mother India* is not a first-hand peasant narrative but a narrative

made about peasants by non-peasants. Thus, by focusing on epistemic violence I do not claim to voice the subaltern, real or fictional, but simply to read the film from a perspective that seems very relevant to its narrative.

It is also important to notice that *Mother India* is a fairly complex and multilayered film that can be read in a number of ways. Nevertheless, in this paper I will discuss it just in terms of epistemic violence, setting aside any other possible readings. This is due not only to the constraints on length of this paper but also to the already existing substantial body of literature interpreting *Mother India* in terms of gender (e.g. Gokulsing and Dissanayake 2004; Ganti 2004; Viridi 2003). Since such aspects of the film have been thoroughly analysed before, I shall concentrate on those which have received little or no attention, such as the issue of knowledge(s). Thus, by using epistemic violence as a means of exegesis, I will hopefully show how the issue of knowledges is central to Birju's story of empowerment.

## 2. 'Vande Mataram': Paying salutations

*Mother India* can be regarded as one of those Indian movies that acted as "a catalyst of Nehru's politics" (Schulze 28). However, and despite the movie's proletarian aesthetics, which link Mehboob Khan's work to that of Aleksandr Dovzhenko (Schulze 73), and its Nehruvian agenda, the beginning of *Mother India* draws heavily on traditional formulae. The first scene of the movie shows us in close up a wrinkled 'Mother India' taking a lump of earth and respectfully placing it on her forehead, while the patriotic song 'Vande Mataram' is heard in the background. Placing objects on one's forehead is a way of paying homage, respect or salutations to that very object (or to what the object stands for).<sup>1</sup> Interestingly enough, every South Asian philosophical or religious text begins with that customary salutation (*namaskar*), which is meant to summon the inspiration of a particular teacher (*guru*) or deity, who in turn has inspired the writer to write.

What we find in *Mother India* is that the role of the inspirer has been taken over by the earth, the 'motherland', which will hopefully inspire Radha (Nargis) to tell her story. It is worth noting the importance given to this gesture, since it appears as the very first scene of the movie and in close up. This is just one illuminating example of how post-Independence Indian cinema draws on traditional formulae and, consequently, of how useful it can be to look through those formulae in order to understand movies like *Mother India*. The preliminary salutation to the motherland is by no means the only traditional element in the movie. The way the main narrative is framed reminds us very much of how stories are introduced and concluded in the so-called epic genre (*Itihasa*) and also in the *Puranas*.<sup>2</sup> Radha is first transported by the smell of flowers, which brings her straight back to her wedding, its images fading in as her older face fades out. She is then wakened from her reverie by the sight of blood-tainted waters, which slowly fade

<sup>1</sup> The Hindi song's title and refrain, *Vande Mataram*, could roughly be translated into English as 'paying homage, obeisance or salutations to the mother'.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the way the *Itihasa* shapes Indian popular cinema, see Gokulsing and Dissanayake (2004: 19-20).

in again as the close-up of her bloody hands (stained by her son's blood) fades out, suggesting that the latter might have tainted the former.<sup>3</sup>

This particular way of telling stories, apart from following the pattern of *Itihasa* narratives, relates also to a particular *episteme*.<sup>4</sup> This way of knowing, remembering and articulating the narrative will become the overarching framework through and within which the story will be told. However, and like the Russian dolls that contain inside a smaller version of themselves, the overarching episteme of Radha contains a clash of epistemes, the narrative of epistemic violence and retaliation, to the discussion of which I now turn.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. "I believe in spoken words": Making statements

Intentionally or not, but most significantly, the first sentence uttered in Radha's reverie-remembrance is: "I speak the truth". This phrase sounds like a formula for opening a conversation and appears in a long shot of various women sitting and talking together, thus expressing the public intent of such a statement. Furthermore, it expresses concisely and plainly the relevance and power associated with speech that I intend to discuss. Previous to that phrase the only words spoken in Radha's reverie are the *mantras* used by the Brahmin for sanctioning the marriage between Shamu (Raaj Kumar) and Radha, shown in a number of consecutive scenes that fade into each other. Nonetheless, the *mantras* will not provide us with any meaning, not because they are meaningless, but because in order to access their meaning we would have to be versed in Vedic Sanskrit. And this is not the case for Radha or Shamu or for any of the villagers attending their wedding. The literal meaning, if any, of those formulae is somehow irrelevant, compared to how meaningful their effect is imagined to be by those who hold them as sacred. What matters about the words that pour out of the Brahmin's mouth is not whether they are understood, but whether they are correctly pronounced, since the right sounds are thought to make things happen, to have an actual effect in the world (i.e. turning the unmarried into married). In other words, *mantras* are not meant to mean anything, but to accomplish things.<sup>6</sup>

These words/sounds represent the folding and unfolding of the cosmos, the construction and deconstruction of the world through ritual. It is important to note here that it is not that those words contain or express an e(x)ternal metaphysical truth, but that their sound (and not necessarily their meaning) is identified with the rhythm of existence

<sup>3</sup> In fact, through the whole of Radha's reverie, the dominant colour palette is red, perhaps announcing the blood bath that ends her remembrance by fading into the last scenes of blood-tainted waters.

<sup>4</sup> At this stage I am using the word *episteme* in its etymological Greek sense, as a 'knowledge' or 'way of knowing', and not in the more nuanced sense given by Foucault in *The Order of Things* (1970).

<sup>5</sup> The 'Russian doll structure' is widely used, for narrative purposes, in the *Mahabharata* and in some *Mahayana Sutras*, especially in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, a text that I will bring in my argument later.

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed explanation of the role of mantras through history see Alper (1989); and for a specific account of how mantras work in different Vedic contexts see p. 15-123.

itself. Thus, their power does not lie in what they mean, their truth not being what they express but the fact they are thought of as cosmic speech acts, so to speak. This particular idea of ritual language is, consequently, not liable to being deconstructed by Derrida's critique of phonocentrism (1976: 157), since it is not the meaning of spoken words that makes them important in this context. Furthermore, Coward (1991) hints at possible similarities between Derrida's and Bhartrihari's thoughts on language, thus reinforcing the idea that Vedic orality is not necessarily phonocentric.<sup>7</sup> Whereas Foucault's notion of epistemic violence seems helpful in looking at *Mother India*, Derrida's critique of phonocentrism is not so easily applied to this context, since the notions of orality I engage with for looking at the film are not interchangeable with those deconstructed by the French philosopher. This does not mean that the villagers' approach to speech cannot be deemed phonocentric in the Derridean sense, but rather that the notions of orality in the background of Birju's contestation to epistemic violence cannot be seen as analogous to Western phonocentrism.

Thus, when it is said that these are 'true words', they are true not in the sense of containing or expressing truth but by virtue of their sound being identified with the truth of things themselves (i.e. ebbing and flowing of the cosmos). Analogously, when many modern 'Hindus' say things like *I believe in the Vedas*, they do not necessarily mean believing in what the Vedas say. One should not necessarily assume that the person who makes such a statement has ever read the Vedas (not unlike the villagers in *Mother India*) or has engaged particularly with their meaning. However, he or she believes in the Vedas as a set of (mostly incomprehensible) sounds that are identified with the dynamics of the cosmos and, therefore, have the power to modify such a cosmos. This explains the fact that the Vedas were written only "many hundreds of years" after they were composed (Avari 2007: 76), and that they were imagined as a text to be performed and not read (Patton 1994: 7-8). Thus, the Vedas were transmitted and preserved orally, their transmission being part of the ritual performance which appears to be the text's *raison de être*.

It needs to be added that this reluctance to write and, therefore, to transfer sacred knowledge to an external physical object, also kept the Brahmins as the sole embodiment of the text, and, consequently, as the only bearers of its power. This idea of the text holder as a power holder will be further developed when I discuss the figure of Sukhi (Kanhaiya Lal), the money lender who embodies 'the knowledge that hinders', and who is eventually destroyed, along with his knowledge. Having explained the relevance of speech in a Vedic context, I do not mean to suggest that other non-Vedic Indian traditions did not have a similar approach to the sacred oral. Taking as an example the Buddhist traditions, which were the greatest rivals of Vedic-based traditions from the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE (Before the Common Era) to the 8<sup>th</sup> c. CE (Common, or Christian, Era), we can see how their source of authority, *Buddhavacana* (Buddha's speech) was not so different from the Veda in terms of its emphasis on the oral. Even though the Buddha's speeches (*sutra*) were written down from the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. BCE onwards

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, the third chapter of *Derrida and Indian Philosophy* (see Coward 1991) is entirely devoted to Derrida's and Bhartrihari's views about speech and writing.

as a means of preserving them, they are still recited aloud today and treated as oral texts, as *Buddhavacana*, the ‘breath’ or communicative power of the Buddha.

Although many of these ideas about orality were mostly developed among South Asian religious elites (e.g. Brahmins), we should not imagine that they are contained within the circles that first formulated them. Like any other cultural item, they have been extrapolated, appropriated and reformulated in a myriad of contexts. So, even though the villagers in *Mother India* might not be particularly aware of the South Asian history of representations of the oral as a source of power, they are familiar with some of its running themes and can, therefore, appropriate them for their own ends and struggles. This can help us to understand how the characters in *Mother India* are not simplistically disempowered because of being illiterate, but how they are linked to a rich and powerful oral heritage; an oral heritage in which the interrelation between speech, ritual and power is in many ways sacred. This will also shed some light on the fact that Birju does not need to learn to write or read in his process of empowerment; he draws power and inspiration while remaining illiterate. It is true, that he engages with writing through Chandra’s (Azra) oral mediation, but his acquisition of knowledge and power remains within the limits of orality. Furthermore, this background also explains how Sukhi is not only swindling the villagers through his literacy but also disturbing a whole universe of orality in which the value of the word given has paramount importance.

A good example of this alienation takes place when Shamu’s mother denounces Sukhi’s power, sustained by unshared knowledge, in a medium shot scene by saying: “God knows what nonsense you write. Talk of what we spoke. I believe in spoken words”. She is brought before the *panchayat* to discuss whether three shares of her crop correspond to Sukhi or to herself.<sup>8</sup> Although she was told (by Sukhi) that they were hers, Sukhi wrote down they were his and duped Shamu’s mother into sealing the contract with her thumbprint. Oblivious of the difference between what was said and what was written, Shamu’s mother is a double victim of epistemic violence. In the first place, her value system, based on the legitimacy of the word given is subjugated to that of written contracts (the one given primacy by the *panchayat*). In the second place, her illiteracy enables Sukhi to dominate her through knowledge (or lack thereof), since, unaware, she has, been made to comply with Sukhi’s (unspoken) terms.

*Mother India* is then a clear example of both subjugation of knowledges and subjugation through knowledge. Not only are oral knowledges subordinated to written knowledges in the realm of power; the subordinating relationship itself is sustained by means of knowledge. In other words, Sukhi uses his literacy as a way of perpetuating his control over the peasants and this reinforces the subjugation of orality to writing. In this way, the word given by the peasants loses all its validity, legitimacy and power; they are deprived of a voice for negotiating their relationship towards Sukhi. Thus, their will is alienated by obscure written characters that will govern their lives from the moment they stamp their thumbs on them. This situation was by no means characteristic of the whole of India in the 1950’s, but it seems an accurate description of the context in which some (though not all) of the peasants in *Mother India* find themselves.

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<sup>8</sup> For different manifestations of the *panchayat* institutions, although not all directly related to *Mother India*’s setting, see Raghava (1980) and Mukhopadhyay (1977).

This subjugation of knowledges is not, however, grounded on traditional epistemic systems, but has entirely to do with Sukhi's influential and powerful position, based on his wealth, which is in turn based on the exploitative situation he maintains by means of (unshared) knowledge. So written knowledge contributes to the accumulation of wealth, and this accumulation enables the power relationships that enshrine written knowledge as dominant. It is because of wealth that Sukhi can keep a personal guard that enforces what has been written in his books, and can disregard whatever is or was once said. We find a very plastic expression of this power-knowledge alliance when Birju asks Sukhi to show him the accounts and Sukhi asks his guards to "show him the accounts", which turns out to be a metaphor for pointing their guns at him. The accounts (the source of knowledge) are, thus, fully identified with the guns (the source of power) yielding a poignant image of epistemic violence which will be contested in similar visual terms when epistemic retaliation is accomplished. In fact this early episode hints at the final one: in the first scene the camera is tilted down, showing Birju under the guns pointed at him. However, things are quickly reversed when he stands up to face the guards, the camera being then tilted up, showing him above and his face, angry and resolute, is zoomed in via three successive cuts. Thus, the pattern of subversion is also expressed in the way the scenes are shot.

It has to be borne in mind as well that Sukhi ascribes, at least theoretically, to the belief in the sacred oral, although his actions contradict this belief. It is not hard to imagine him hiring a good Brahmin to consecrate, with his recitations, his daughter's wedding. However, this does not prevent him from violating the implications of regarding the oral as sacred. It seems that his main allegiance is to Laksmi, the wealth goddess, who sits at the very centre of his shrine. Also, his pursuit of wealth can be seen as a way of accomplishing one of the four *purusartas*, or aims of life: *artha*, the one concerned with building a social status and gathering wealth. As we can see, Sukhi's behaviour can also be seen as grounded in some aspects of local knowledges, although he applies double standards in following their ways.

Furthermore, Sukhi's double morality goes together with his sophistry, sarcasm and tendency to exaggerate, which are all acts of double speech. By double speech I mean ways of expression that are not clear-cut and which imply something other than what they say. Many are the expressions of Sukhi's sarcasm, e.g. encouraging Birju to read the accounts, or giving voice to Birju's criticism in a satirical way on some occasions. His tendency to exaggerate also reaches a peak when after being attacked by Shamu he proclaims (the unproclaimable): "He killed me!" And his sophistry, along with his sarcasm, is further demonstrated when he retorts to Birju's aunt's curse ("you will die a dog's death") by saying: "Doesn't matter. Even the dog is a creation of God". Such a use of language contrasts with that of Birju and Radha, who remain faithful to the word given and speak in a straightforward manner. However, all this shows how various aspects of religious practices and ideas are appropriated for the legitimisation of everyday practices of domination, or their subversion. The fact that both Sukhi and Birju use this common pool of signifiers in constructing their respective narratives further justifies a thorough exploration of such signifiers and their subversive possibilities. Thus, I now turn to the construction of Birju's narrative and its relationship with the sacred oral.

#### 4. “The son will see the father’s account”: Taking vows

Whereas the previous section started with a statement (“I believe in spoken words”) that could summarise the episteme that is being undermined in *Mother India* (orality), this new section starts with a quotation that corresponds to the most powerful manifestations of that episteme, that is, the utterance of vows. The vows taken in *Mother India* are many and the path to their fulfilment shapes the unfolding of the narrative. Their eventual accomplishment shows the triumph of orality in the film, its preeminence as the epistemic framework that knows and shapes the world.

Ironically enough, the first vow expressed in Radha’s reverie is taken by Radha herself when she says to her husband in an intimate close up: “I pray they [the golden bracelets] always remain in my hands for you to see”. What seems at that point to be a playful remark between lovers will lead us through the narrative up to its tragic end, when the bracelets (once pawned to Sukhi) fall from Birju’s dying hands and are, in that way, retrieved for Radha. The peculiarity of this vow is that it is transferred from mother to son, thus establishing the continuity of a certain uttered will. In this sense, Birju inherits his mother’s vow and engages her will on his retaliative agenda. Moreover, the scene in which the bangles are returned starts with a long shot that progressively zooms in as mother and son embrace, and ends in a close up, resembling the close-up in which the vow was first taken. In fact both close-ups feature Radha together with a male figure, either her husband or her (dead) son, both characters being concerned with her honour.

However, the utterance of vows and their significant role in the articulation of narratives is by no means an exclusive feature of *Mother India*. A similar pattern can be appreciated in the great cycles of the *Itihasa* (such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ram Katha*). The utterance of a vow is not only a way of announcing what is going to happen, by showing the will-seed that will eventually ripen into a fully developed situation, but also a way of communicating the power of orality to the reader/hearer. As certain formulae (*mantra*) are thought to be able to shape and influence the world, the utterance of one’s resolution is also meant to do so. This is not something *essential* about Indian cultures or traditions, but a feature that goes hand in hand with epistemological systems that value orality as a source of power. As I mentioned before, many (although by no means all) are the instances of systems that have given orality a dominant role in Indian contexts and, therefore, have looked at the utterance of vows as a powerful means of shaping the world.

There is a particular Buddhist *sutra*, the *Avatamsaka* (see Clearly 1993), that plays with time and vows in a way that resembles *Mother India*. The history of the *sutra* shows us that any direct intertextual link with the movie is unlikely, since only some fragmentary sections of the Sanskrit original have been preserved. This original text would have been compiled between 350 and 400 CE before being translated into Chinese in 421 CE and later in 699 (Hirakawa 1990: 279). Nevertheless, even though the text might have disappeared in India at some point during the decline of Buddhism (10<sup>th</sup> -13<sup>th</sup> c.) its ideas did certainly not vanish with the text. The *Avatamsaka* draws heavily on a view of the cosmos as a network of *bandhus*, that is, links between the microcosms and the macrocosms (e.g. between the human body and the cosmic body –



or the cosmos as a body).<sup>9</sup> This interbounded (or *bandhued*) idea of the universe can be traced back to the Vedas (Smith 1998) and is definitely not expressed for the first time in the *Avatamsaka*. Nevertheless, the way the *Avatamsaka Sutra* deals with it seems to be particularly relevant to the way Birju's story is mediated in *Mother India*.

Although Birju as a child does not take many vows, we are given many hints of what kind of person he is going to become. In other words, many are the narrative *bandhus* that link Birju, the child, with Birju, the grown-up who accomplishes retaliation. Let us use as examples the scene in which Birju the child (Sajid Khan) calls Sukhi 'a thief' (*choor*) and destroys his umbrella, and the final scene in which Birju breaks into Sukhi's house, calls him *dacoit*, and destroys his epistemic umbrella, the overarching knowledge that legitimises his practice of domination. The connection between both moments seems quite clear, but, if we needed any further confirmation, Sukhi remembers loudly at this point that very episode of Birju's childhood, perhaps realising the dramatic parallelism between the two situations. Furthermore, there is a third moment, when Shamu tries to kill Sukhi and the latter shouts in his defence: "What crime have I committed. Am I a thief? Am I a *dacoit*?" The answer to his question will come in the scene described above, when Birju kills Sukhi. All these connections can also be appreciated in the colour palette, black playing an important role. Thus, black appears first as Sukhi's destroyed umbrella, exhibited by Birju as a trophy or banner, and later as the dominant colour in Birju's *dacoit* outfit.

The correlation between these three moments brings me back to the last chapter of the *Avatamsaka sutra* (one of the few sections preserved in Sanskrit), in which we are presented with the following view of time, interestingly enough embedded in a vow: "May I be engaged in and penetrate, in each part of an instant, as many kalpas as are in the three times" (*Avatamsaka* 10, 32).<sup>10</sup> As I said before, it is not my aim to prove a most unlikely (direct) connection between the *Avatamsaka Sutra* and *Mother India*. I simply wish to apply the notion of *bandhu* found in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* to *Mother India*. In this light, and setting aside the impressive time-length described, we can access a view of time in which *an instant* becomes the gate through which the vow-taker accesses *as many kalpas as are in the three times*. This interconnection between moments allows the vow-taker to penetrate the future (or the past, for that purpose), turning his or her vow into a long thread that links an almost endless set of moments.

This view provides us with a vast landscape for the construction of a narrative. However, if we take its implications at a simpler and more constrained level, we can see how *Mother India* is continuously establishing links between moments that are significant, drawing a line between the utterance of a vow and its accomplishment, and, therefore, giving the viewer a sense of the power of speech. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* also plays with the idea that the moment in which a vow is uttered and the moment of its fulfilment is indeed non-dual (Chang 1971: 18-21, 37-41). This view of time as both fluid

<sup>9</sup> The word *bandhu* literally means 'bond' and is generally used to refer to family links. See Smith (1998: 31).

<sup>10</sup> A *kalpa* is a particular Indian measure of time. In Buddhist texts three kinds of *kalpas* are outlined: a regular *kalpa* is 16 million years, a medium *kalpa* is 320 billion years, and a great *kalpa* is about 1.28 trillion years (Epstein 2003).

and interpenetrative is very relevant to the film, and a quick look at the framing sections of Radha's reverie will show this. Firstly, Radha's memory is triggered by the smell of flowers, which takes her back to her wedding, the smell of flowers being the element that not only links those two moments, but also makes them, somehow, inseparable. Secondly, towards the end, Radha sees the waters of the new canal tainted by blood, making that moment overlap with the final episode of her remembered narrative, in which she kills her son. Moreover, many of those moments that can be said to interpenetrate (e.g. beginning and end of reverie) are scenes that fade into each other. This interpenetration of moments happens all through the film, shaping the narrative, empowering orality and showing the unfolding of vows into actions.<sup>11</sup>

By taking this dialectical structure as a model, we can appreciate how Birju manifests from his early years an extraordinary ability to use speech in subversive ways. One of his most significant features is his tendency to both rename things and people and to retell stories. The act of renaming is the first step in epistemic retaliation, since it transforms the reality of the retaliator and shapes it in a way that legitimises his struggle. In other words, when Birju calls the moneylender (Sukhi) "a thief" he is renaming him in such a way that at once denounces his practice of domination and also legitimises Birju's fight against him. This process is also important because it establishes a parallel episteme, a mode of knowing and naming things, a framework that allows Birju to articulate his response to oppression. The echoes of this incident in the family provide us with more instances of Birju renaming ("Grandma is a liar") and resisting being labelled ("Don't call me a devil, I'll fight back") as a way of asserting his mode of knowing or episteme.

Analogously, Birju shows some ability to retell stories and to challenge the narratives he is presented with. For example, when his grandmother tells him stories about mice with four tails, he exposes them as false and tells the story back by presenting the grandmother with a belligerent narrative in which he kills mice and lions "by petting them gently". Furthermore, we witness another amusing retelling when he tells the traditional story of the saint (*saddhu maharaj*) who grants wishes and who is, in the end, non-existent, in order to deceive his mother. He uses the narrative of an imaginary sage who can materialise objects as a way of hiding the fact that he has been stealing. Those retellings echo the final transformation of Birju into a *dacoit*, which is, once again, a subversive retelling of his own life-story. These instances of retelling can also be seen as instances of epistemic retaliations, since knowledge is used in a way that counteracts the pattern of epistemic violence.

From childhood, Birju displays an ambiguous attitude towards knowledge (*vidya*). He shouts at the local Pandit that he "knows everything" and goes as far as to hit him with a stone, both actions in medium shot and in front of other pupils, underlining the open nature of his challenge. However, this attack on the local embodiment of

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<sup>11</sup> Other remarkable instances of overlapping moments are the many times in which Sukhi is grabbed by the neck (by Shamu, Birju or Radha), Radha's threats to Birju to "kill him" before actually doing so and Radha's moments of remembrance, in which the past and the present meet for her in a single instant, while being carried away by music (e.g. during *Holi* or when the great harvest takes place).

knowledge does not seem to mean a complete rejection of knowledge, but rather a rejection of the way knowledge has been codified and embodied through certain institutions. Later on, Birju will reveal his fascination for Chandra, the Pandit's adoptive daughter. This fascination is very much based on Chandra's knowledge, as Birju confides in her. It also seems to relate to Birju's sense of disempowerment and his aspiration to acquire power through knowledge.

Chandra, in turn, will be instrumental in this process of acquisition of knowledge, because she will empower Birju by engaging with his episteme and by not trying to assimilate him. Chandra does not teach Birju to read or write; in other words, she does not introduce him to the oppressive episteme, but translates for him the written knowledge of the accounts into an oral explanation. This process is, thus, an oral transmission of power and knowledge. In this way Birju accesses the 'cruel knowledge' of Sukhi without entering his mode of knowing. At this point, Birju looks for the first time like the empowered man that will fulfil his vows. Having understood the mechanism of oppression, he grabs the stone employed by Chandra to symbolise the land in her explanation and proclaims: "This land is mine, it is my mother. No one can snatch it from me". And after Chandra expresses her hopelessness about a cycle that has gone on from beginningless time, Birju utters four vows: "I won't let it [the cycle] continue! I have understood the account! I'll tell mother and the whole village! I'll take back our land! I'll take back everyone's land! He's a thief and I've caught him!"

It is worth mentioning the peculiar way in which Chandra's teaching and Birju's realisation and resolution are filmed. Even though she is teaching him, he sits above her in the medium shot fixed frame scene in which transmission takes place. The relevance given to him, as the one being empowered, is paradoxically shifted when he proclaims his right to the land, shot in close up focusing on the stone that stands for his land rather than on his angry face. The utterance of vows that follows is also cast in a highly theatrical fashion. Birju and Chandra appear next to each other in close-up, but they are not facing each other. Chandra stares into space in a thoughtful manner, whereas Birju stares angrily in a similarly indefinite way. They are clearly not talking to each other and their words could be seen as asides, like the utterance of Birju's four vows. The four vows are in a long shot cut to medium shot showing Birju surrounded by some villagers who remain as still as statues. Even though he is seemingly taking the vows in front of them, and for their own sake, they do not seem to be listening or even hearing. By portraying such an event as an apparently open proclamation that goes unnoticed by its immediate audience, the ambiguous attitude of the villagers towards Birju's project is first hinted at.

Furthermore, Chandra's transmission confirms Birju's first renaming (of Sukhi as a thief) and, therefore, feeds and empowers Birju's construction of an alternative retaliative episteme. However, the role of Chandra as a translator/mediator/exegete does not end with her translation of the 'cruel knowledge'. Another turning point in Birju's quest happens when Chandra, after the Pandit refuses to marry him to her daughter, consoles him by articulating a most empowering reading of Birju's situation: "You are already married. You're married to your land. She's your bride. The moneylender has forcibly taken her away. Won't you release her?" This amazingly subversive interpretation of the marriage narrative provides Birju with a metaphorical

framework for articulating his situation and his role within it. In this way, Chandra not only plays the role of mediator between two knowledges, but also that of the exegete who exerts her power in the world/text by reading and rewriting its narratives. Chandra's reading of the marriage narrative has an incredible power in legitimising, articulating and empowering Birju. It will not be adventurous, thus, to say that Chandra becomes the hermeneutic means through which Birju's retaliative project is accomplished. Furthermore, teacher and pupil are filmed in a medium fixed frame that shows them at the same height this time. It seems that through the process of transmission they have become somewhat equal and intimate, even though romantic and physical intimacy was frustrated.

Also, through this process of translation, orality is empowered. Knowledge is transferred from one episteme to another without attempting to assimilate orality to writing. This brings about understanding and the utterance of resolutions in the form of vows. These vows, once uttered, unfold, through an interconnecting sense of time that weaves the narrative together, until their eventual fulfilment. Following this pattern, Birju first vows to *see* the account his father never *saw*; then, by means of Chandra's mediation, he understands the situation and takes further vows that will be materialised when he proclaims proudly before Sukhi: "I've learnt your knowledge".<sup>12</sup>

##### 5. "I've learnt your knowledge": Accomplishing

Now that the ground of epistemic violence and the articulation of a retaliative response to it have been discussed I will focus on the final stage of the process, that is, the accomplishment of epistemic retaliation. Birju's expulsion from the village seems to mark the end of his learning period and the arrival of the time for action and fulfilment. His sense of empowerment is also translated on to his external image. Birju stops walking around half-naked like a fool and presents himself as a full-grown and fully dignified man, carrying a gun, clad in black, riding a horse, displaying the appearance of a *dacoit* and, more often than not, in close tilted up shots. It is at this time that he takes a vow that somehow summarises all his previous vows: "I'll kill Sukhi". Having *seen* his knowledge, Birju takes the resolution to destroy the embodiment of "cruel knowledge" as a way of liberating whoever is subjugated by it. At this point, knowledge is poignantly embodied. Sukhi stands for the 'cruel knowledge' that hinders and exploits. Besides, Birju stands for a subversive version of oral knowledge, empowered by Chandra's mediation, that aims to destroy literacy as a means of exploitation. In this scheme of things, Radha is another embodiment of orality who is not concerned about epistemic retaliation but about fulfilling traditional roles and keeping her (personal and collective) honour intact.

Just as Brahmins were the embodiments of the Veda, the text-men who personified sacred knowledge and authority, Sukhi seems to have become an embodiment of his own text: the accounts. Analogously, Birju incarnates a retaliative narrative, handed

<sup>12</sup> The verb *see* is very relevant to the whole process, since the Hindi word employed in the film for knowledge is *vidya*, which comes from the same root as the Latin verb *video* ('see'), also connected with Veda. In this sense, to *see* the accounts means also to know and to understand them.

down orally from Chandra, and concerned with the destruction of the text-man who has abused his authority. So, in order to 'kill Sukhi', Birju has had to 'learn his knowledge' first. The understanding of Sukhi's deception is, in a sense, the killing of Sukhi, since once his knowledge is revealed (i.e. shared) his power vanishes. However, such a metaphorical killing needs to be actualised, and that is Birju's endeavour

After a failed attempt to return to the village and kill Sukhi, in which the villagers try to set Birju on fire, Birju comes back once more leading a gang of *dacoits*. On their way they encounter Chandra's wedding caravan and this last meeting between the *dacoit* and his teacher seems most significant. Not surprisingly, Birju treats her with respect and when he unveils her their eyes meet in some sort of fierce complicity shot in a rather intimate close up. Chandra stares back at the *dacoit* in a fearless yet not challenging way. It looks as if she were reminding Birju of his vows and providing him with a last spark of inspiration to accomplish his task. Birju, now in a close fixed frame shot, veils her again, leaving her untouched and covering up their mutual secret: the transmission of knowledge that fires his quest, expressed rather intimately in this last and wordless eye meeting. In the following scenes, Radha will vow to Sukhi to take responsibility for Birju's actions and to prevent him from taking Rupa away, in a close and blurry shot that reflects her own feverish state of mind. However, Radha's concern is not so much for Sukhi's life, or his knowledge, but Birju's intentions to kidnap Sukhi's daughter and ruin her and her wedding. It is because of this intended attack on Rupa's honour/shame (*laaj*) that Radha takes sides against her own child. In this way, Birju's epistemic project is left unchallenged and implicitly confirmed by his mother and brother.

The scene of Sukhi's death is a long one, as if the actual murder were delayed, almost ritualised, in order to convey its full significance. Birju appears almost always in a close fixed frame and slightly tilted up shots, whereas Sukhi, despite being at the centre, is always overpowered by the tall, armed *dacoits*. Sukhi first welcomes Birju with a scared politeness and tries to gain his sympathy by remembering anecdotes of his childhood. In a twist of ironic tragedy, Sukhi actually remembers Birju's first instance of rebellion. However, Sukhi thinks that Birju will be satisfied by taking back his mother's bangles. For Birju, this is just the first of his vows, the one inherited from his mother, but by no means the only one. After that, Birju and his gang proceed to scatter the accounts and to spill fuel over them. At this stage, Sukhi realises the nature of Birju's project and acknowledges the threat that it poses to his power/knowledge. It is then that Sukhi tries to persuade Birju by telling him that "It is a sin to burn knowledge", to which Birju retorts: "I've learnt your knowledge", and goes on to outline the consequences of Sukhi's 'cruel knowledge' in a strongly tilted up shot that then expands by zooming out and shows the accounts being soaked in fuel. So, Birju has indeed *seen* the accounts his father never *saw*. He has learnt the trick behind Sukhi's knowledge, he has released himself from its bondage and now has the chance to contest it and put a halt to its oppressive consequences. In fact, Birju surveys a kneeling Sukhi while exposing his crimes in a medium fixed frame shot.

Immediately afterwards, and as Birju gets closer to the fulfilment of his vow, he will give a forceful speech that could well summarise his retaliative project. This speech is delivered in a strongly tilted up fixed frame close shot, stating Birju's new, clear position of power, with only a quick cut to show a disempowered Sukhi in tilted down close

shot. Birju starts by asserting his knowledge (“I remember everything”) and the consequences of his knowledge (“I will avenge everything”) while he points his gun at Sukhi, who is on the floor. He then draws a most important parallelism between Sukhi and himself (“You are a dacoit, I’m a dacoit”) and a further parallelism about their destinies (“The law won’t spare me, I won’t spare you”). By equalling himself to Sukhi, he fully legitimises his violent act, removing its criminality and presenting it as fair retaliation. Similarly, by accepting that the law will not spare him and then proclaiming he will not spare Sukhi, he identifies himself with the law, at least with the particular law operating in the given situation. In this way, and immediately before destroying the oppressive episteme (the man embodying knowledge along with the text encoding knowledge), Birju proclaims him along with the knowledge he embodies as the ruling law. This is the confirmation that his episteme has become the overarching system that now exerts power. Like Sukhi, who imposed his way of knowing by using guns, Birju has come to contest such knowledge and also to impose his own by violent means.

It is important to notice that neither his brother nor his mother attempt to stop Birju when he tries to kill Sukhi. Ramu (Rajendra Kumar) even acknowledges, implicitly, the legitimacy of his brother’s project when he intends to stop him from taking Rupa away: “Your fight was with Sukhi who is now dead”. Ramu understands that Birju’s retaliation should be over once Sukhi is killed and that taking Rupa away is going too far. This kind of thinking seems to confer some legitimacy to Birju’s project, at least as far as his epistemic retaliation is concerned. Killing Sukhi and his knowledge is not regarded as going too far. However, kidnapping Rupa, who is seen as the daughter of the village and thus Birju’s sister, is perceived as going too far. This is not only the view of the villagers in general but also, and most importantly, Radha’s view. Radha kills her own son, not because he killed the moneylender, but because she sees his attack on Rupa’s honour as a defilement of her own.

Analogously, Ramu defends Birju when Radha takes her vow before Sukhi, but Radha convinces him that kidnapping Rupa is wrong. So there is never any explicit condemnation, either from Ramu or from Radha, of the final act of epistemic retaliation (killing Sukhi/destroying the accounts). It is also shocking to realise how no one stops Birju and his gang when they enter Sukhi’s house, whereas the resistance faced by Birju when he tries to kidnap Rupa is considerable. Could we view the entire village, which mostly shares Birju’s mode of knowing, as complicit in his killing of the oppressive episteme?

It seems clear that the kidnapping of Rupa is regarded as an outrageous and punishable act, but the murder of her father evinces no clear judgements from any of the characters. Nobody tries to avenge Sukhi’s death, and all the hostility Birju faces, mainly from his family, is because of Rupa. This silence surrounding Birju’s project seems to tacitly confirm its legitimacy. It is true that Birju dies in a most dishonourable manner, killed by his own mother, but it is also true that he stands up to his own vows to the end, and so does his mother. The fact that he accomplishes epistemic retaliation does not mean that he is successful in bringing about a revolution; he does not manage to subvert the order he is rebelling against. However, as far as my reading is concerned, Birju is not a social revolutionary but an epistemic retaliator, and he is a retaliator who gains empowerment and accomplishes his vows (mostly) through orality.

Furthermore, the ending of *Mother India* can be seen as a general triumph of orality, since all the main characters fulfil their vows: Birju, by reconquering his mother's bangles, destroying Sukhi and his knowledge and trying to kidnap Rupa; Radha, by sacrificing her own son to the honour of the village; and Ramu, by fighting for his mother's vow. This is not to say that the film's ending is not tragic or that the main characters are not faced with terrible suffering, but rather to underline the fact that the value and power of orality is upheld to its last consequences. Even though such actions do not bring social change as such, they invert the roles of the subjugated and subjugating knowledges, even if temporarily, and thus suspend subjugation through knowledge.

Therefore, in the end orality is presented as the ruling episteme, once the alienation of writing has been challenged. Although Birju is confirmed in all sorts of ways in terms of his epistemic retaliation, his attempt to take his revenge further (beyond the strictly epistemic) is seen as outrageous and is consequently punished. Thus, in another twist of tragic irony, Birju, the liberator of orality, falls prey to the power of orality, his thirst for revenge having overtaken, in the eyes of his fellow oral subjects, his initial quest for justice.

## 6. Conclusion

To sum up, I have tried to show how we can read Birju's story in *Mother India* in terms of epistemic violence and retaliation. By exploring the knowledges present in the film as embedded in their contextual histories and their conflicting relationship with each other, we can understand the implications of Sukhi's alienation. In this way, we also avoid imposing a foreign model of analysis on to the context of *Mother India*.

Furthermore, by taking into consideration the relevance of vows in certain oral epistemes and their connection to ideas of temporality, we can see how Birju's process of empowerment can take place without engaging with the oppressive episteme. This aspect also reveals to us the decisive role of Chandra as mediator between epistemes. Finally, once this line of analysis has affected the way in which we read the film, we can appreciate the relevance of Sukhi's murder not only as personal revenge but also as epistemic retaliation. Remarkably, this epistemic retaliation is articulated by engaging the subversive possibilities of local oral knowledges.

Thus, Birju's story can be interpreted as a rebellion against a situation of domination that is grounded on issues of knowledge. The fact that his subversive response remains mostly within the scope of the oral and the local makes his accomplishment twofold: On the one hand it contests the oppressive situation and on the other it empowers orality as a ruling episteme.

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Received 12 March 2010

Revised version accepted 7 July 2010

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