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**I Want my Ayah: Women at the Centre of  
Conflict in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*  
and Deepa Mehta's *Earth*.**

**TFG Estudis Anglesos**

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## 1. ABSTRACT

Bapsi Sidhwa wrote *Cracking India* out of her personal experience as a Parsee child who, like Lenny, witnessed the Partition of India into two different States: India and Pakistan. It is through Lenny's eyes that we are introduced into a multicultural world of shared communities which turns into chaos with the Partition of the country. Sidhwa relates a story where, not surprisingly, women are at the centre, either as symbols of political and familiar power, bearers of men's honour, or trophies of war. In the same way, Deepa Mehta's film *Earth*, the film adaptation of Sidhwa's *Cracking India*, sustains the importance of women as central figures of the conflict, but in a different way.

The purpose of this project is to provide a feminist approach to understand how Sidhwa and Mehta's works portray women's experiences during the Partition of India and the impact that the conflict had upon them. Thus, the objective is to focus on how the characters represent the condition of women in that critical period and to analyse their development through the story. The aim is to comprehend how by understanding women as symbols of honour and cultural identity the result is to turn them into the target to attack first.

To do so, I undertake an extensive analysis of both the novel and the film adaptation focusing on the female characters, especially on Lenny, Ayah, and Lenny's mother and Godmother. To begin with I analyse the main female characters in *Cracking India*, their relationship with other female and male characters of the story, and also, the differences among them depending on their social status and ethnicity, and secondly I compare the characters in the novel with their representation in Mehta's film adaptation. In the case of Godmother, I analyse the implications of her absence and how it makes *Earth* to end in a completely different way than *Cracking India*.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* is a novel set in the context of the Partition of India in 1947, specifically in Lahore, a city of Punjab that suffered many riots and violence among Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, and that finally became part of Pakistan. The Partition forced all non-Muslim people to migrate to other cities or to convert to Islam or Christianity. The Partition of India is regarded as the largest mass migration in human history and its brutality is even compared to that of the Holocaust. However, this paper is focused on analysing and comparing how Sidhwa's *Cracking India* and its film adaptation *Earth* reflect women as central figures of the conflict.

In patriarchal societies, women are seen as bearers of honour and culture, they are symbols of social and religious identities and their lives are highly conditioned by the pressure that they must preserve those ideals. As a result, in times of war, men must prevent them from falling into the enemy's hands, at any cost. If a man does not succeed in protecting his sisters, daughters or wife from the enemy, disgrace falls on his family and his manhood and honour become challenged.

During the time of the Partition of India, 33,000 to 50,000 Hindu and Sikh women were abducted in Pakistan and approximately 21,000 Muslim women in India (Butalia, 1997). The chaos and violence spread during the mass movement of people between the new state of Pakistan and what remained as India, made it impossible for men to prevent their wives, daughters or sisters from being taken by the enemy. Women became the means by which each side could take revenge on the other and men would do anything not to be dishonoured. They would kill the women in their own families or even force them to commit suicide in order to "save" them from the threat of disgrace. Once a woman was raped, she had no place in society, she was rejected even by her own family (Rajakumar, 2008).

### 3. FEMALE POWER IN *CRACKING INDIA*

#### 3.1. The Narrative Voice: Lenny

First of all, the narrative voice in *Cracking India* is a female voice, which is something that already positions women at the centre of the story and provides us with an interesting female perspective of Partition. The fact that the narrator of the novel is Lenny, a naïve, vulnerable, and easily influenced young girl who is constantly learning from what she sees and who, as a child, manages to eavesdrop on many contexts and conversations, allows us to have a complete perception of the events and to connect with different characters. She is so transparent and sincere with what she experiences that we can easily perceive the reality of what is going on. Sidhwa herself has explained in many interviews that she chose a child to be the narrator in *Cracking India* in order to write about such an emotional topic as the Partition in a fairer way. As a child, Lenny does not know yet about prejudices or religious differences, she gives the reader a point of view that does not take sides.

Besides, the fact that Lenny suffers from polio makes her even more vulnerable and dependent on others, though for her it is something to celebrate: “Having polio in infancy is like being born under a lucky star.” (20)<sup>1</sup>. While other children have to claim what they want, she just has to show her calipers and, immediately, people would feel sorry for her and give her whatever she wants. Besides, because of her disability, she is kept out of school; Lenny feels protected from a “laborious and loveless life” (23) by her disability.

The figure of Lenny, as a narrator and as a main character, is also relevant because of her connection with Bapsi Sidhwa’s childhood, which gives to the story a strong

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<sup>1</sup> I will be using only the page numbers to quote from the primary source *Cracking India*.

sensation of reality. Bapsi Sidhwa revealed that even though she had to create some distance between Lenny and herself, there is a lot of her own childhood experience in the book: “partially I took things directly from my own experience, but the rest is created.” (Sidhwa & Singh 1998: 291). Like Lenny, Sidhwa was a young girl that lived in Lahore when the Partition of India and Pakistan took place. Besides, she also suffered from polio.

By having Lenny as a narrator, we are able to connect with Ayah and Godmother, two of the most inspirational and influential female figures in her life, but also with Ice-Candy-man, a very controversial and interesting character –which I would like to analyse but I cannot focus on because it is beyond the scope of this dissertation– that, in fact, will end up taking advantage of Lenny’s naivety. Through Lenny’s eyes, we connect with her “compressed world” (11) where women are empowered individuals but also victims of an oppressive patriarchal society.

### **3.2. Ayah**

In *Cracking India*, Lenny spends most of her time with Ayah, and consequently, with all her suitors from different cultures: the Faletti’s Hotel cook, the Government House gardener, the butcher, Sharbat Khan, and the zoo attendant, but mainly with Masseur and Ice-Candy man, both of them Muslims. Through Lenny’s perspective of Ayah and her suitors we get to see the harmonious interaction among Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh cultures. Life before Partition seems to be peaceful and the cultural and religious differences are left apart. Lenny goes everywhere with Ayah, being present even in the more intimate moments with her suitors, which allows her to learn from Ayah’s experiences: “I learn of human needs, frailties, cruelties and joys. I also learn from her the tyranny magnets exercise over metals.” (29). Lenny is fascinated by the power Ayah has over men, attracting them as a magnet attracts metals, just the effect she wants to cause on her cousin.

Ayah is presented as a sexually empowered woman and her physical presence is described as irresistible to men. The power Ayah exercises over men has been compared to the power India has exercised over many colonizers and ethnic groups. Some scholars, like Bharucha, see Ayah as a symbol of the Indian earth: “Lenny’s ayah, the chocolate-brown, desirable, round-cheeked, full-breasted woman, is symbolic of the Indian earth.” (Bharucha 1994: 81). Not only because of her physical appearance and because she is Hindu, but also because of the reactions she creates around her. “The ayah, untutored, curvaceous but virtuous, is not naïve; she appears to give in to the blandishments of the Ice-Candy Man, but maintains her distance. The Ice-Candy Man who is a Muslim is not her only suitor; she is assiduously courted by Hindus and Sikhs too, as has been the Indian earth.” (Bharucha 1994: 82). Even though she has many suitors chasing after her, she has the power to choose which man she wants to spend time with and she does not hesitate when she wants to refuse the companionship of any of her suitors. At the same time, Lenny’s admiration and highlighting of Ayah’s body might lead us to get the impression that Ayah is reduced to just a body, a symbol of an undivided India.

Nevertheless, as we keep reading, the situation starts changing, the country is being divided into Pakistan and India and people are being divided too. Neighbours who have always been friends turn into enemies just because of their religious beliefs: “It is sudden. One day everybody is themselves —and the next day they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and Christian. People shrink, dwindling into symbols.” (101). the tension in the streets is unbearable and non-Muslim people are no longer safe in Lahore.

During the Partition conflicts, Ayah works as a unifying reason for her group of admirers: “Only the group around Ayah remains unchanged. Hindu, Muslim, Sikh,



Parsee<sup>2</sup> are, as always, unified around her.” (105). In fact, even though Ayah is Hindu, she seems to be neutral among them, to impose a neutral position in order to leave religion aside and prevent conflicts among her admirers. Thus, we can say that she has the power to unify men from different ethnicities in a context where people are killing one another precisely because of religious differences.

However, Ayah is not only a central figure in Lenny’s life and in the union of a multicultural group of admirers, but also the protagonist of the most shocking moment of the novel: when she is kidnapped by a group of Muslims led by Ice-Candy man. This moment is crucial not only because of the horror it causes to see that Ice-Candy man is totally commanded by the beast that inhabits him and that Lenny so much fears, but also because Lenny is the one that tells Ice-Candy man where Ayah is hiding. Unconsciously and without being aware of the dangers and consequences involved, Lenny betrays Ayah.

### **3.3. The Parsee Community: The Sethi Family**

Lenny is a Parsee girl, therefore, her family is in a neutral and distant position during the Partition conflicts. The Parsees migrated from Iran to India to avoid Muslim persecutions and they were accepted because of their willingness to integrate into Hindu culture. The Parsees are a very small minority in India and they are not considered a threatening community. During the British colonial period in India, the Parsee community assimilated themselves to contemporary British norms, they were influenced by Western education and ideas. The Parsee community was appreciated because of their wealth and social position, as they helped to establish institutions of all kind in India, earning the title of “the Jews of India”. As Palsetia explains: “The incorporation of the Parsis into the economic and political world of British power, from the late eighteenth century, evinced

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<sup>2</sup> I will be using the spelling “Parsees” instead of “Parsis”, even though other scholars, as Palsetia use “Parsis”.

the successful transformation the Parsis effected from minority community in the provincial setting to influential colonial elite in the new urban setting of Bombay.” (Palsetia 2001: 28). Thus, during Partition they tried to avoid conflict and were not forced to leave or to convert to Islam, they could remain the same and once more, adapt to the current situation by maintaining themselves as imperceptible as possible.

Some scholars, like Bharucha, argue that Lenny’s betrayal symbolizes the betrayal of the Parsee community for turning their back on the conflict: “the wider and constant betrayal by all Parsees of the one land which has given them refuge” (Bharucha 1994: 82), implying that, by keeping the neutral and distant position of a witness, they are actually betraying the land of India that welcomed them. In fact, we can find many conversations in the book where, in community dinners, Parsees are discussing where they should position themselves and whether or not are they betraying their neighbours by remaining neutral:

“I don’t see how we can remain uninvolved,” says Dr. Mody, whose voice, without aid of mike, is louder than the colonel’s. “Our neighbours will think we are betraying them and siding with the English.”

“Which of your neighbours are you not going to betray?” asks a practical soul with an impatient voice. “Hindu? Muslim? Sikh?”

“That depends on who’s winning, doesn’t it? Says Mr. Bankwalla. “Don’t forget, we are to run with the hounds and hunt with the hare.” [...]

“As long as we do not interfere we have nothing to fear! As long as we respect the customs of our rulers...” (45-48)

It really seems that the Parsee community looks only for their own interests and they are willing to support whoever is ruling in their land.

However, we do not see Lenny’s family in a totally distant position from the events, at least not its female constituents. We are told that her mother and aunty are involved in some way in the conflict. First, when Ayah tells Lenny, Cousin, and Adi about the petrol cans in the family car, they think that Lenny’s mother and aunty are setting fire to Lahore, that they are the arsonists. Then, we know that what Lenny’s mother and aunty are doing

is smuggling petrol to help their Hindu and Sikh friends to escape and to rescue kidnapped women by sending them to their families across the border or to the Recovered Women's Camps. Agreeing with what Kleist claims: "In rescuing these women, Lenny's mother has clearly moved beyond the traditional role of housewife to become a social activist." (Kleist 2011: 74), in this case, we can see how Lenny's mother and aunty take advantage of their Parsee position not to remain just as witnesses of the tragedy but to help their friends and abducted women, even though they are risking their lives in doing so.

Another female character that does not remain as a mere witness of the events is Lenny's Godmother, Roda. From the very first moment, Godmother is described as a fundamental pillar in Lenny's life: "The intensity of her tenderness and the concentration of her attention are narcotic. I require no one else." (17). Moreover, Roda is described as a very influential and respected character, and she proves to be so at the end of the novel, by finally extraditing Ayah from the Hira Mandi and restoring her to her family in Amritsar. In fact, Godmother is the strongest representation of female power in the novel. She dares to challenge Ice-Candy man, questioning his manhood and even threatening him with death. She makes him realize the wrong he has done to Ayah: "you permit her to be raped by butchers, drunks, and *goondas* [...] you have permitted your wife to be disgraced! Destroyed her modesty! Lived off her womanhood!" (260), she makes him burst into tears and feel ashamed of himself. Furthermore, she decides to go with Lenny to his house in the Hira Mandi to see Ayah's condition by themselves and finally defy patriarchal power by defeating Ice-Candy man. Thus, by having Ayah restored to her family, even though her forced husband, Ice-Candy man, does not approve of it, corroborates what Kleist states: "the patriarchal binary of power is clearly subverted." (Kleist 2011: 78).

Sidhwa has managed to create very powerful female characters in a context where we would expect the prototypical passive and submissive women. As Kleist argues:

the strongest—and most subversive—examples of feminine power in the novel stem from women who are able to completely step outside their traditional domestic roles and utilize their community connections as a source of influence. Both Lenny's mother and Godmother demonstrate the power gained through economic status—both women are upper-class and educated—and both proactively exert influence and make changes in the lives of those around them. (Kleist 2011: 70)

Thus, in spite of being in a war context, where women are seen as passive subjects that must be protected from the enemy, we can see how Lenny's mother and Godmother take advantage of their Parsee and upper-class position to play an active role during the conflicts generated by the Partition.

### **3.4. Social Oppression of Female Power**

Even though Sidhwa has created empowered female characters in *Cracking India* and has given to the story a female perspective from Lenny's point of view, she has also shown to the reader the reality lived by women in India. We see a society where sexual objectification and exploitation of women is part of the routine. A society where young girls like Papoo are mistreated and married off to old men. A society where women are not seen as individuals but as bodies men can possess. A society in which young boys like Cousin see as normal the sexual abuse of women and make fun of it because it is the example they have been given. A society in which men like Imam Din, “the-Catcher-in-the-kitchen”, have a position of respect. A society where women are blamed for being women, blamed for being abducted and raped, and blamed for bringing dishonour to their families.

Interestingly, in *Cracking India*, we have a dual representation of female power. On the one hand, we see Lenny's mother as a powerful character because of her active role during Partition, but on the other hand, we also see Lenny's mother fitting in the

submissive, attentive, and serving wifely role in her marital relationship. Images such as: “She puts toothpaste on Father’s toothbrush, [...] removes his sandals, his socks if he is wearing socks, blows tenderly between his toes, and with cooing noises caresses his feet.” (75-76) evidence that Lenny’s mother role at home is subordinate to the man of the house. We are even led to think that Lenny’s mother might be suffering from physical abuse: “Father has never raised his hands to us, one day I surprise Mother at her bath and see the bruises on her body.” (224). Thus, Mother is an empowered woman outside her wifely role, where she can become an active humanitarian person, but when she is at home, she is just another abused woman.

Likewise, we also see a dual representation of female power in the character of Ayah. At the beginning, we see the power of her irresistible attractiveness and how she manages to keep a group of men from different ethnicities united around her. Then, her power is completely lost when she is kidnapped and transformed into a dancing-girl, abused by her friends and admirers such as Imam Din and Sharbat Khan, and married to Ice-Candy man, completely losing her power of decision. Nevertheless, conveying an encouraging message by doing so, Sidhwa decides not to finish the story that way. Ayah is finally given back her voice and she is able to express her desire to go with her family in Amritsar, and more importantly, she is given hope for a better future.

As Kleist defends: “Sidhwa presents a uniquely gendered perspective of Partition. Moreover, Sidhwa’s novel provides a comparatively inclusive view of the diverse feminine roles during Partition, roles in which the female characters are not entirely empowered nor entirely victimized.” (Kleist 2011: 70). In *Cracking India*, we find very powerful female characters who are restrained by their social and cultural environment. They find themselves in a context of a patriarchal society, where they are not given equal rights to men and are forced to live a dutiful life at home which prevents them from being

totally in power of their lives. Sidhwa succeeds in representing both this impossibility for most women to be completely powerful and at the same time their rejection to remain passive and obedient.

#### **4. FEMALE POWER IN *EARTH***

##### **4.1. Lenny's Adult Account of the Events of Partition**

In *Earth*, the point of view of the events is the same as in *Cracking India*, from Lenny's perspective. Nevertheless, the film starts with Lenny's voice as an adult, not as a young girl, and we are transported to what is supposed to be her memory of the events of Partition.

The image of Lenny we get in *Earth*, is the same as in *Cracking India*, an innocent and vulnerable young girl that manages to eavesdrop on contexts she should not be in. As in the novel, Lenny spends most of her time with Ayah and therefore, with all her Muslim, Hindu and Sikh admirers (see fig. 1). Even though we are not connected to Lenny's thoughts, we can perceive Lenny's feelings and emotions in the eyes and expressions of Maia Sethna's performance; the detailed descriptions we have in the novel are substituted by the vivid images of the film.



Fig. 1. (*Earth*, 00:10:30)

In *Earth*, we also manage to connect with the characters around Lenny, even in a more direct way than in the novel. Nandita Das portrays a very cheerful and coquettish Ayah and we see many intense and passionate moments between her and her two most prominent suitors: Masseur, played by Raul Khama and Ice-Candy man, played by Aamir Khan. For instance, a very beautiful and passionate moment between Ayah and Ice-Candy man in the film is when he is showing her how to fly a kite (see fig. 2). Besides, the music A.R. Rahman chooses as a background creates a very special atmosphere that is transmitted to the audience. Nevertheless, the most passionate and intense love scene is represented by Ayah and Masseur in their sexual encounter (see fig. 3).



Fig. 2. (*Earth*, 00:17:51)



Fig. 3. (*Earth*, 01:16:32)

Ayah is portrayed as a sexually empowered woman who works as a unifying element for a group of men from different ethnicities. However, at some points, as in *Cracking India*, it is a bit shocking to see Ayah's easiness and openness in which she interacts with the group of men, especially in a context where we would not really expect that behaviour because of women's expected role in Indian society, where they are supposed to build a "dignified" image of themselves. Nonetheless, at the same time, this portrayal is a way to break with stereotypes and show an image of a woman that can flirt with different men at the same time without losing her dignity. We see that Ayah is very

comfortable being surrounded by men and she has the power to choose the best suitor for herself. There is an image that is quite significant, and at the same time funny, in the celebration of Papoo's wedding, where Ice-Candy man invites Ayah to dance. It is a beautiful scene until Ice-Candy man tries to pull her closer to him and she immediately refuses and pushes him back (see fig. 4). With this image, Mehta represents Ice-Candy man's desire to possess Ayah, and Ayah's resistance to it.



Fig. 4. (*Earth*, 00:33:28)

Nevertheless, Ice-Candy man is not willing to accept Ayah's resistance and after seeing how she has chosen Masseur instead of him, he does not hesitate to kill Masseur and lead a group of Muslims to the Sethis' family house to kidnap her. In *Earth*, it is also Lenny who tells Ice-Candy man where Ayah is hiding. Thus, the symbolic betrayal of the Parsee community is maintained in the film.

#### **4.2. A Dramatic Ending for Ayah**

After Ayah's abduction, we hear Lenny's voice again and we are told that fifty years have passed since then. The film ends with the unknown fate of Ayah, leaving what might have happened to her to the audience's imagination: "Some say she married Ice-Candy man, some say they saw her in a brothel in Lahore, others that they saw her in Amritsar, but I never set eyes on her again." (*Earth*, 1:35:00) This dramatic ending reinforces the idea of women existing just as victims during Partition.



On the contrary, even though in *Cracking India* we do see women portrayed as victims, we are also shown women playing active roles in society, women who highly influence the events of Partition by helping their neighbours and abducted women to escape. As Kleist defends: “Rather than portraying women as exclusively victimized, Sidhwa provides a more nuanced depiction of the variety of ways women influenced—and were influenced by—the events of Partition.” (Kleist 2011: 79). Of course, this different ending in *Earth* is also due to the absence of the most influential character in the novel, Godmother.

We might wonder why Deepa Mehta has chosen such a dramatic ending for Ayah and decided to end *Earth* just after her abduction, perpetuating in that way the image of a victimized Ayah (see fig. 5). Besides, the fact that in the film, Masseur was going to convert to Hinduism and go to Amritsar to marry her, makes the ending even more dramatic. Masseur is killed just after we see their declaration of love, and just after we see Masseur’s body, Ayah is abducted. The fact that we go from such a beautiful and encouraging moment to a completely devastating one makes the shock even stronger. Nevertheless, Bapsi Sidhwa seems to have agreed with this ending, she herself said for the *Hindustan Times* newspaper that the film had to end differently from her book in order to create a more dramatic ending (<http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2000/05/dm2-m19.html>, June 2015) Sidhwa believes that the impact on the audience would have been weakened otherwise.



Fig. 5. (*Earth*, 01:34:05)

However, as Kleist argues, it is “Because of this focus on female victimization, much of the writing about Partition reduces both men and women to “perfect binaries—rapists and raped, protectors and protected, villains and victims, buyers and bought, sellers and sold” (Kleist 2011: 69). Even though a dramatic ending creates a stronger impact on the audience, a happy ending for Ayah would have conveyed a message of hope for a better society in which, if women help each other to fight against patriarchal oppression, they can have a better future.

At the end, we get the impression that all women end up as victims, they all lose something. Lenny and her mother lose Ayah, Ayah loses her power over her body and over her own life when she is abducted, and Papoo loses her childhood when she is married to an old man (see fig. 6).



Fig. 6. (*Earth*, 00:35:27)

#### **4.3. A Neutral Sethi Family without Empowered Female Characters**

The story told in *Earth*, even though based on *Cracking India*, conveys a completely different message regarding the position of women during Partition. In *Cracking India* we have active female characters like Lenny’s mother and Godmother, whereas in *Earth* we have a passive and submissive Mother and no Godmother. The

power of these women in the novel is so significant that the lack of them in the film creates a completely different ending.

In *Earth*, Lenny's mother is reduced to her role as a wife. We do not see her participate in any way in the events of Partition but only in the household sphere. Mehta has chosen to maintain images from the novel such as Mother blowing her husband feet, but has decided to suppress scenes of Mother as a rescuer. Thus, Lenny's mother has completely lost the empowerment she had in *Cracking India*. Nonetheless, we do see an image in the film where she feels the need to do something to help their neighbours. One night, when Lenny has one of her nightmares, Lenny's mother says to Father that this neutral position in which they are is not comfortable, that they are letting down their neighbours, but her husband convinces her that the best position for them is the neutral position. This is a clear example of women's subordination to the man of the house, as in this case, Lenny's mother does not rebel against her husband's unwillingness to help their neighbours. That might be the reason why in the film we do not get clues that make us think she is suffering from physical abuse, because she does not give her husband "reasons" to do so by being a submissive and obedient wife.

Nevertheless, the most significant difference between *Cracking India* and its film adaptation *Earth* is the absence of Godmother, as it completely changes the ending. One of the possible reasons why Mehta might have chosen not to have the presence of Godmother in the film is because she might not believe her existence to be possible in a patriarchal society like the one in India. Perhaps it does not seem realistic enough to have a woman, during Partition, with such an influential and respected role in society. Another reason could be due to film producing and selling requirements, perhaps the existence of Godmother in the film would have weakened the ending.

By not having Godmother, no one can rescue Ayah. We need empowered women in the story to make a difference, to make it possible for Ayah to go to her family to Amritsar. If empowered women do not exist, if Godmother does not exist, no one dares to challenge Ice-Candy man for what he has done, no one has the influence and power to find Ayah and restore her. Without Godmother the patriarchal binary of power cannot be subverted.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, by comparing Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India* and Mehta's film adaptation *Earth* we get to see how having or not empowered women in a story might completely change its ending. While Sidhwa goes for a more optimistic fate for abducted women, Mehta decides to have a sad, dramatic ending. While Sidhwa tries to build a story where women are at the centre of it as not only victims, but also helpers and relevant figures in the events of Partition, Mehta just gives a victimized version of them.

The feeling we get after having read *Cracking India* is completely different to the feeling we might get after watching *Earth*. After reading *Cracking India*, you feel frustrated for everything Ayah and other abducted women have had to go through, but we are given hope, and more importantly, we are given women characters that are willing to challenge the patriarchal oppression and help one another. On the contrary, after watching *Earth*, the feeling left is a feeling of sadness, frustration, and impotence. We find no female power, and no hope.

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