

Eternal Seed depicts the agricultural practices and rituals of three women, Yashodha, Nilamma, and Sunanda, in an unidentified part of rural India. The women explain in a number of interview scenes how and why they want to preserve traditional crop varieties against the inroads of multinational agribusiness. Our view of their world is intercut several times with scenes from commercial greenhouses, agricultural labs, milking machines, artificial insemination stations, mechanized food processing, and other manifestations of the approach to agriculture that they oppose.

This film will engage classroom audiences at the visual level, with its lush portrayal of traditional agriculture and related rituals. The three women seem intended to represent “woman” in a generic “village India”: earth-mothers expressing their age-old wisdom. The narration is heavy with symbolism—seeds are described as being prepared for their “nuptial journey” into the soil, for example.

This impressionistic quality, however, will limit the film’s usefulness with most students. It seems to be preaching to the converted, and there is a minimum of information that the beginner would need to put this material in context. We are never even told what part of the vast and variegated realm of rural India we are looking at. (Eventually, in one of the interviews, there is a passing reference to Karnataka.) Likewise, the seeds that are so much the center of attention are seldom identified as to crop. The whole conception of agriculture is quite limited, with pictorial emphasis chiefly on preparing

Eternal Seed (Amrit Beeja)

A FILM BY MEERA DEWAN

WOMEN MAKE MOVIES
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Photo courtesy of Women Make Movies

the soil and planting. There are few scenes of other parts of the crop cycle, such as weeding, water management, the harvest, and social distribution of the produce.

Anyone familiar with India will know from the appearance of the people, their names, and the sound of the language that the setting must be somewhere in the Dravidian south (but few students will know enough to pick up on this). There is a certain irony here for a film that is determined to make a feminist statement about agriculture, because one of the more memorable images of South Indian village life is the large work-gangs of women, usually low-caste landless laborers, out in the fields.

Towards the end of the film a scene from an outdoor rally

shows these three women as part of an organized movement that aims to preserve indigenous crop varieties against the inroads of Green Revolution hybrids, and to foil the attempts of foreign agribusiness corporations to steal the birthright of Indian villages by patenting such traditional medicinal plants as the neem tree. It is unfortunate that the filmmakers were content to stop here. Curious students will want to know more about this movement, but they will not find out much from the film itself. If its makers had stretched *Eternal Seed* out to a full hour, there would have been time to include some political and economic context.

A certain amount is finally explained, but very briefly and quite obliquely, in the credits, where the inspiration of the

Karnataka Rajya Ryot Sangha and the writings of Vandana Shiva are acknowledged. The Karnataka Rajya Ryot Sangha is a farmers’ group that made headlines in January 1996 by trashing the Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet on Brigade Road in Bangalore. Vandana Shiva is a writer on ecological matters, and a vehement critic of what she regards as efforts by multinational agribusiness operating in India to introduce unhealthy meat-based diets and undermine cultivation of traditional foods.

These are real and important issues. The social costs of the Green Revolution, the preservation of genetic diversity in crops, and the penetration of traditional rural cultures by multinational seed and food corporations can—in fact *should*—be addressed by the teachers who might be interested in making use of this film. The fact that students may come to class just having eaten a meal produced by the very corporations the film is criticizing provides a great opportunity to put American students and Indian villagers into the same context. But that context will have to be provided by the teacher from other sources. Standing alone as an introduction to these issues, *Eternal Seed* is too vulnerable to being dismissed as simply a neo-Luddite diatribe against modern agriculture. ■

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