

Hated Bodies: Queer Cultural Politics in Deepa Mehta's *Fire*

Rinu Rijisha K P

Independent Scholar

ABSTRACT

Homosexuality is a derivative figure and a negative presence within the system of gendered heterosexuality. Power, as Foucault rightly argued, permeates into every aspect of social discourse. *Fire* connects ideas surrounding subaltern subjectivity with eroticism and agency to consider how female sexualities are being negotiated within domestic milieus, contemporary visions of nation privileges the home as the primary location for imaging otherness in gendered, sexual and religious terms. The film locates female desire as a concatenation of domesticity, privacy, friendship and eroticism. In this paper I make attempts to ask deeper questions on power about the intersections of politics in contemporary society. Political, ethical and cultural dimensions of the film are also explored. The proposed study is inter-disciplinary in nature. It makes use of theoretical framework of Queer Studies and Gender Studies.

Hated Bodies: Queer Cultural Politics in Deepa Mehta's *Fire*

Society constructed itself as pure and safe by labelling some persons as deviant and criminal.

(McIntosh, 4)

Queer cultural studies may be defined as an attempt to redefine identities and carve out cultural or political space within the dominant heterosexual paradigm, to simply stop being invisible or 'perverted' or 'sick' other of heterosexuality. Queer theory is therefore resolutely political in nature because of its concern with structures of power. Michel Foucault argues that:

As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth century homosexuals became a personage, a past, a case of history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form and morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious philology.

(Foucault, 37)

Tracing the origin of same-sex relationship in the Indian contexts, Ruth Vanitha argues that sexual identities were mentioned and constructed in the ancient and medieval

Indian texts. *Fire* is a 1996 film by Indo-Canadian film maker Deepa Mehta, was inspired by Ismat Chughtai's short story *Lihaaf* (The Quilt 1942). It was one of the first main stream films in India explicitly show homosexual relationship. *Fire* revolves around the relationship that develops between two daughters-in-law in a joint Hindu household. The loneliness of these two married women-Radha (Shabana Azmi) and Sita (Nandita Das) brings them closer to each other sharing passionate moments and nurturing a secret desire. The elder Radha, domesticated and obedient neglected by the husband, Ashok (Khulbhushan Kharbanda). The men house free to indulge in their interests: Ashok in spiritual pursuit, Gandhism and prayer, Jatin (Javed Jaffrey) in a torrid affair with an exotic woman Julie (Alice Poon). The film is a cultural landmark in the history of Indian cinema, has been loved and hated for its portrayal of lesbian resistance and desires.

The society informed by an acceptance of heterosexuality as the standard and lesbianism as a deviation. Lesbians were seen as monsters or unnatural. Women receive messages every day that promote heteronormativity in the form of myths and norms perpetuated by society. Patriarchal power has demonstrated the suppression of female sexuality for forcing male sexuality up on women; rape, incest, torture, a constant complex men are superior and excellent in society than women. Then lesbian mothers seen as unfit for motherhood, a kind of malpractice in society.

Society attributed compulsory heterosexuality, deny women of their own sexuality and comfortability in exploring their bodies and those of others. The dominant powers produced myths as that of vaginal orgasm. It implies that man can sexually satisfy a woman (by delivering a vaginal orgasm), and hence that serves to prevent women from having relationships with other women. Lesbians are marginalized in horizontal and vertical ways by the centre of the society, who holds power. Lesbians are seen as deprived with suppressed identity. Gayatri Chakravathy Spivak elaborates some contexts where in contesting representational system violently displaces or silence the gendered subaltern;

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but in to a violent shuffling which is the displaced figuration of the third world woman caught between tradition and modernization.

(Spivak, 15)

Deepa Mehta's *Fire* explicitly records the female pleasures and feminist resistance of two oppressed wives in a popular medium of Indian culture, film. *Fire* traces the lives of a newly formed or extended middle-class family in New Delhi. The film is a sustained critique of patriarchy through the possibility of lesbian love. One of the most powerful achievements of *Fire* is to represent a form desire which is not an escape, but a political challenge. *Fire* exemplifies how fantasies of the communal notion are sustained through surveillance or regulation of female (heterosexuality). By marking female Radha and Sita, or more specifically spousal citizenship in domestic terms, the appropriated figures becomes a metonym for a religious or national identity rooted in mythologies of domesticity.

Mehta's film eroticises same-sex eroticism in Indian domestic space, the kitchen, normally a major zone of oppression, become an important space for their love. The film actively deconstructs the notions of visibility, revelation and sexual subjectivity and deconstructs the traditional frame work of queer discourse that constructs sexualities as repressed. Through the colonized voices of Radha and Sita, queer female subjectivity resonates with the position of subaltern as suppressed. The lack of social mobility derives from particular social and historical conditions of colonial oppression. Highlighting the political and academic invisibility of colonized subjects, the subaltern emerges as a figure deeply in shadow, positioned in-between spaces of culture. The subaltern female subject is positioned in a problematic margin between spaces of patriarchal nationalism.

Fire contests the ascriptions of subaltern spheres of the female protagonists. Subaltern configurations are easily recognized in the nationalist construction of female body—a body that must be tightly regulated to preserve cultured tradition and national values. *Fire* primarily evokes female homoeroticism in order to define a feminist resistance to patriarchal constructions of female sexuality, exploring lack of intimacy between Ashok and Radha. Radha, who is unable to conceive a child, loses her desirability as a wife. If sex is framed in productive terms, as the servant Mundu claims, “Once you are married, you are stuck together like glue”, Radha's inability to have male children propels Ashok in to acetic existence.

Displaced as a potential mother, Radha's body for Ashok is an object to test his own spiritual strength. He refuses to touch her nude body is a sign of his ability to transcend sexual desire. Radha's body becomes an object of exchange within marital life capture the discursive violence and emotional labour of losing her subjectivity. She becomes an object of Ashok's religious, rather than sexual proclivities. Her desire and agency as a female subject are consistently undermined by Ashok's gaze. Ashok objectifies Radha's spousal value solely in terms of her capacity to act as sexual obstacle or spiritual test to his virtuous existence,

Correspondingly, Sita's husband Jatin continues his affair with his long term Chinese girl friend Julie. Marriage for Jatin, for fulfilling familial obligations, rather than desire for Sita, intimacy between these characters becomes robotic and laboured. The marital bed for both Radha and Sita signifies isolation or abjection. In order to resist heteropatriarchal construction of their bodies as marital commodities, Radha and Sita become intimate, so female same-sex desire; emerge from a failure of patriarchal heterosexuality. The pleasures and intimacies shared between Radha and Sita conducive to an overwhelming dissatisfaction with a middle-class heterosexual lifestyle obscures their erotic agency. These characters become desiring subjects rather than desiring objects. *Fire* is not about passive inheritance of tradition, but rather is the way cultural commodities are encountered and used in everyday practice to make a culture. Radha's erotic agency contests the rhetoric of victimizations, as Radha's desire culmination with an exclamation that she desires Sita's love, her compassion, her warmth and her body. Radha has been renegotiated her sexual desires as she is unable to reproduce children.

The exposition of female drag highlights the expression of alternative sexualities. Sita often challenges her 'natural' femininity by expressing masculine traits such as cigarette

smoking and wearing male attire. The narrative of cross-dressing is structured around the repudiation of conjugal heterosexuality. The coherent performativity of gender and heterosexuality is troubled when masculinity is deployed by a female body. The consensual relationship having a female body and expressing a naturalised heterosexual femininity de-established when Sita chooses pants instead of sari. The fantasy or gender play, is more than a psychoanalytic attempt to recuperate heterosexuality, it is a space for articulating queer pleasures and gender masquerades.

Mehta's Diasporic commentary on domestic life in India explores the relationship between queer desire and lesbianism, in oppressive patriarchal values. Mehta once responded: 'I can't have my film hijacked by anyone organization, it is about loneliness and choices.' Desire then becomes configuration with in a patriarchal space of marginalization and victimization, as evidenced by the use of loneliness. Through the explicit portrayal of lesbian sexuality the story line reveals the underbelly of Indian society and the possibilities available for agency and the expression of female sexual desire. Deepa Mehta represents lesbian desire as a simple choice exercised by two women rather than a gesture that has important consequences on individual lives and social structures, the two lovers seek refuge in a Muslim shrine.

In mainstream Indian movies, family relationships, their ramifications and consequences are central to the plot. Similarly the narrative in *Fire* centres on (in) stability of the family of the family. Through a focus on issues pertaining to the domestic arena and kinship relations the narrative unravels the crisis within the middle-class family and tenuous resolution. The character of Sita is presented as introducing alien values which lead to an irresolvable crisis of the family. It must be noted that the husband's behaviour not cast as disruptive and destabilizing of the family order, instead they are seen as normal. Bollywood films upholds the status quo 'pray to god, love your parents, live for your husband, and everything will be perfect'. These themes are addressed in *Fire* only to be cast aside decisively by its female protagonists. Rather than up hold the institution of heterosexual marriage the film configures it as a central site women's oppression. The message that comes through the film is the loneliness of women with in the institution of marriage, the inequality of patriarchy that gives men the right to seek their salvation in another woman and the impotence of men where women decide to take hold of the lives and look for love, compassion and companionship elsewhere. *Fire* thematizes the issue as well as revealing the tug of war between family affiliations and the individual's desire for freedom and independence. However, offering a female point of view of arranged marriages it rejects traditional values to embrace the modern concept of foregrounding the desire of the individual over the well being of the community.

Fire focus on female protagonists and the representation of a social problem resonate with the characteristics thematized in alternative Indian cinema. The female characters are depicted affirming sexual and social relations based on individual happiness. In mainstream cinema, the woman has a very clearly delineated role to perform with in a marriage. *Fire* redraws the field of visibility by addressing the subject of female sexual desire, soliciting the female spectator, and initiating a dialogue that points towards the articulation of a postcolonial sexual identity for Indian women. The film foregrounds the economy of female

libidinal desire and the limited space for its expression within the patriarchal structure of arranged marriages. In depicting the topography and vicissitudes of desire the movie offers female same-sex relations as a viable alternative.

The 'lesbian gaze' that engenders itself in *Fire* is one which in the two women protagonists learn to look at each other and recognize the possibility of same sex desire. The males of the house are therefore responsible for the arbitrate relationship that develops between sexually and emotionally frustrated sister's in-law. One of Sita's final lines towards the end of the film gestures to how love is negotiated as a socio-political platform to articulate the position of sexual minorities in India. The film echoes the homonationalist ambivalence. In the final scenes, Radha and Sita must leave the home in order to live with their choices; both of them attempt to negotiate a way for their intimacy to co-exist within the national space. Resonance of erotic subaltern desires reveals the bottom of Indian society and the possibilities available for agency. The narrative structure of the film elaborates on the thematic of love relation of mutuality, which is in conflict with the compulsions of the institutions of the arranged marriage. *Fire* offers simplistically a vehicle for female liberation. The film is a powerful, sometimes hypnotic critique of the rigid norms of patriarchal society. Homosexuals are perceived as threat to the established essence of society, specifically family, male dominance, and control and the very heart of sexism.

The taboo related to sex became one strand in pre-modern Hindu thinking that marginalized all the other, more pleasure oriented strand of thinking. Consequently there was preponderance of homophobia or homophobic tendencies in colonized India. British rulers imported a strong homophobia in to India and other countries they colonized. The enshrined it in section 377 of Indian Penal Code 1860, which criminalizes "intercourse against order of nature." These have been using to threaten women and cast all homosexual relations under the cloud illegality.

In its politics of representation to save the family, mainstream cinema on lesbianism in India has portrayed female homoeroticism as a consequence of the denial of women's natural heterosexual becomes a lesbian. In addition to this, Hindi cinema has shown lesbianism as "western" thing-girls who speak English, wear jeans are more likely to be having a different sexual inclination that a girl who is truly Indian. Such stereotypes reinforce the notion that lesbianism is not natural and has social and not biological reasons furthermore.

In terms of masculinity, *Fire* constructs a pathological Indian masculinity, which provides a fertile ground for the relationship between female protagonists to emerge. *Fire* questions the naturalness and normalcy of the heterosexual family if it is so precariously held in balance. The film was about the changes in Indian tradition due to the new openness fostered by globalization. Repressed female sexuality thus emerges yet against as quintessential emblem of an oppressive traditional culture in need of transformation by outside forces.

Although *Fire* addresses the queer subject a discussion of the status of lesbians in India is absent; instead competing discourses tried to fix lesbian identity as either native or alien. The female protagonists subvert the patriarchal nationalist constructions of home and

family as domains of a chaste femininity through their articulations of homoerotic desires in the repressive familial and domestic spaces. *Fire* also challenges the nationalist heteronormative ideologies by transforming the domestic spaces as sites of intense desire and new ways of being. The particular familial context of female protagonist's homoerotic relationship suggests the politics of location embedded in particular context of queer politics of post colonial India which is contextual and has multiple meanings and trajectories across the nation.

The sexual desire of Radha and Sita portrayed in complex and multifaceted ways, and their relationship takes different form under given circumstance Radha and Sita such as oiling Sita's hair, massaging Radha's leg, feeding one another and their hopscotch game, gradually turns into an intense homoerotic relationship. As Sita explains, "There is no word in our language to describe what we each other," and Radha responds "You are right; perhaps seeing is less complicated." The multiple and diverse ways in which Radha and Sita articulate their sexual desire criticize the dominant western discourses of fixed lesbian identity. *Fire* underscores the critique of colonial constructions in which non-western sexualities are pre-modern and in need of western political development and challenges dominant Indian nationalist narrative that consolidate the nation in terms of sexual and gendered normativity. The diverse and heterogeneous expression of Radha and Sita suggests the fluid and changing nature of sexual relationships and sexual identity.

The complexity of their homoerotic desire becomes clear in the picnic scene and the oiling of Sita's hair scene. In the picnic scene, Sita offers to massage Radha's feet. When Radha oils Sita's hair, both women exchange their gaze through a looking glass. By portraying their pleasure and desire through looking Mehta demonstrates women's sexual pleasure through women's gaze where women are defined as both sexual subjects and objects. Mehta challenges the long established tradition in Hollywood and Bollywood films constructing women as sexual objects of the male gaze; instead, Mehta explores the ways in which Radha and Sita deconstruct the patriarchal nationalist construction of their identities and interstitial agencies.

The opening scene of Radha with her parents in the mustard fields, young Radha's mother urges, "What you cannot see, you can see you just have to see without looking" (00:54). Following feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, looking is intrinsically tied with a patriarchal gaze who constructs women's identities as objects. As Laura Mulvey points out that:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong erotic and visual impact so they can be said to connote to- be-looked-at-ness

(Mulvey, 9)

The statement of Radha's mother also suggests "seeing without looking" can be liberatory for Radha, as Radha can resist the symbolic domains of patriarchal heteronormative discourses

by entering a third or luminal space through the practices of alternative seeing and viewing. The idealized image, which recurs throughout the narrative, is the director's poetic tableau of the seductiveness of seeing. The romantic story of Tajmahal symbolizes the patriarchal heteronormative discourses. Radha and Sita use the food to articulate their desire,

Radha mentions to Sita while they work in the kitchen that "certain spices are good for some occasions and some for others". In another kitchen scene near the end of the film, Ashok tries to convince Radha what he sees in the bedroom is sin, so he suggests she goes to Swami for penance. In this scene Radha questions the impact of Ashok's celibacy on her sexuality and clearly expresses her sexual desire for Sita. As she states: "Without desire I was dead. Without desire there is no point to living and you know what else? I desire to leave, I desire Sita, her warmth, her compassion, her body. I desire to live again. If you can't control desire, ask to Swamiji for help, not mine." *Fire* (01:38:44)

This statement demonstrates the ways in which Radha transforms this space into sites of resistance and contestation. Significantly it is the place where Radha proves her love for Sita by undergoing a metaphorical trial by fire as Ashok is prepared let her consumed by the fire. In this scene Mehta depicts the symbolic trial by fire of Radha instead of Sita's actual trial by in holy Ramayana. This scene highly metaphorical because by portraying Radha's survival, Mehta rewrites the Hindu mythology and suggests the ways Radha transforms herself into a new subject who is no more considered as a barren and dutiful wife.

Fire manages to do knocking down of the theory of desirelessness, is to validate the efficacy of female desire. At least fire in the film can be seen as visual and theoretical register for the sexual or subjective desires of two protagonists. The lesbian relationship in *Fire* destroys the predominance of the male gaze. Radha and Sita would have been content to remain in the house, taking care of their emotional or sexual needs through each other and enjoying at the same time the privileges of heterosexual domesticity. The two women's pleasures or pleasuring signals a changing signification for parameters of sexual desiring in Indian Cinema.

Works Cited

- Biswas, Ranjita. *The Lesbian Stand Point*. Culcutta: Seagull, 2007. print.
Fire. Dir. Deepa Mehta. Bobby Bedi. Zeitgeist, 1996. Film.
 Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality Volume I, An Introduction*. London: Vintage, 2002. Print.
 --- *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: Vintage, 2004. Print.
 Gutting, Gary. *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.
 McIntosh, Mary. *The Homosexual Role*. London: Routledge, 1998. Print.
 Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak?*. Columbia U, 2010. Print.