

Deepa Mehta's *Fire*: An exploration into possibilities of alternative love.

SONAM NARAYAN
Research Scholar
MJPRU, Bareilly

Dr. Reena Mittal
MA(Eng.), PhD, MBA
Asso Prof. and Research Guide

Abstract

This paper analyses the movie *Fire* (1996) by Deepa Mehta to investigate the deeper underpinnings of same sex desire in a patriarchal world which is at the same time heteronormative. The paper looks at the kindling of love between Radha and Sita (which are by the authors choice names of a famed Indian Goddess) The paper explores what happens when old values collide with an existing and newly emerging form of sexual practice and expression- lesbianism. This was one of the first movies in Indian Cinema to broach such a topic and like all extraordinary art had to face the ire of the people and was banned for a long time. The paper however is more interested in the socio-political dynamics of same sex desire. It looks at the family as a repressive system of female ownership that limits the female's potential to explore her sexuality and thus becomes a hindrance on the path of self-realization by denying the woman a free choice of alternative love.

Keywords: alternative love, sexuality, lesbianism, self-realization

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The date of the release of the movie is of prime significance to understand the kind of reception it had on the cinema viewing public of the time. *Fire* was released in 1996 and dealt with the theme of repressed homosexual desire which was a controversial theme in the largely homophobic country. While with the reading down of article 377 same sex love has been permitted by law in India- social homophobia and a desire to control the woman's body is still predominant in the Indian psyche.

The movie opens with the scene of a garden and light falling across a green field- perhaps an attempt to depict pure untouched nature, the root of natural desire. The storyteller in the first scene narrating to the children asks the girl child to see without looking. The director is perhaps suggesting the metaphysical nature of reality or trying to focus on the reality open to the hidden eye. The attention is directly shifted to the household which has Biji (the old mother of Ashok and Jatin), Ashok, Jatin, Sita- Jatin's wife and Radha Ashok's wife along with Mundu the servant of the family. Ashok is the classical example of a man who understands his manhood in terms dictated by religious takes and religious autodidacts, in this movie played by Swamiji. There is a looming burden of morality in the lives of these women. This moral responsibility is unfairly skewed towards women. While men like Jatin can openly indulge in an extramarital relationship with Julie a Chinese girl. The realm of a man's desire crosses not just the household but also the geography. He also makes objectifying and essentializing remarks on his wife that are immensely limiting. Jatin turns violent and in the same instance says Sita should be thankful that he does not support violence against woman. This raises a question that is of immense importance. Is violence on women merely physical? The frank answer is a clear No. Emotional and psycho-social violence are forms of violence that often pass unnoticed despite laws being available to prevent the same.

The movie offers a subversive reading of the Ramayana of a particular scene where Sita after having testified of her purity and Rama saying he knew she is 'pure' still sends her to the forest. The irony and the injustice are quite clear. Similarly, the behaviour of Ashok is so degrading that he limits the woman to an object to test his own potential for salvation-his oneness with God. Nevertheless, Mira finds a subversive subjective understanding of the traumatizing experience of sexuality being controlled by her husband- she says lying naked and yet not aroused Ashok looked like a child looking at his mother. The religious function of normative sex is boy bearing (notice the male bias) which is completely opposed to the understanding of sex for a re-creative purpose and as a basic human need. The lack of companionship in the conjugal lives of Ashok-Radha and Jatin-Sita lacks any sense of belonging whatsoever. This opens spaces for the exploration and expression of same sex love which is in fact intrinsic to both these women. The movie raises questions on traditional and outdated moral systems. Radha upon being discovered with Sita decides to open and refuses to touch her Husband Ashok's

feet. This is a bold denial of the socio religious morality that is often strongly upheld in Hindu upper class families. Radha refuses to be merely the companion of Ashok. She looks at herself subjectively and reveals that she desires Sita. The flawed understanding of Ashok terms it as modern¹ where in fact it is only the latent desire of Radha and Sita both. The act of transgression that Radha commits is an act of saving the self. At this point, I am reminded of the pain of Radha in confessing to Sita that she has no eggs in her ovaries. This pain is so immense that she feels incomplete at the core of her very being. It is as if motherhood is the only way to realize the being of the individual woman. The way Sita convinces Radha for living together is of immense significance to understand the way a woman's mind thinks constructively in this movie (and by extension in other scenarios) to create possibilities for firm and graceful parting. But the climax of the movie is heart wrenching. The oldest member of the house, Biji, with the incessantly ringing bell (think of it as the warning bell of tradition limiting change) becomes a part of the crime and lights Radha's sari burning her alive. The climactic scene is at once that of meeting and parting, the voluptuousness that creates desire. In this regard, the remark of Julie, the object of love and the extramarital partner of Jatin is significant. She says in essence that possession obliterates desire and creates a situation of stagnancy. We can ponder as to whether all heterosexual relationships especially those formed on the premise of reproductive conjugality and carrying forward the family name suffer the same fate. A lesbian couple both externally and in the mind is an example of a revolt against such heteronormative social normativity. Though Initially the couple shares and laughs at jokes that are intended for hetero normative love, they are nevertheless aware that there is no word in their language to describe the kind of bond that Sita and Radha shared. Their bonding clearly beyond the socially given sisters-in-law. In her conversation with Ashok at the time of confrontation, Radha opens that she desires Radha's body, her warmth and compassion. At once this seems to spark the control freak in Ashok who grabs Radha by her hand starts to forcefully caress her. Touch and sex without consent is also one of themes that this movie brings up in a starkly noticeable way. While Radha has endured years of non-consensual sexual objectification at the hands of Ashok without the fulfilment of her sexual desires. Sita refuses undesired touch by Jatin at the first instance. In this regard a point worth making is that non-consensual marital rape has been one of the major issues in India and the society has let it pass and even considered the woman who stands against it as a polluter of social morality. The keen viewer would also notice that the long-held fallacy that penetration is the only way of fulfilment of sexual desires of women is categorically questioned by same sex love as an alternative. Touch, caressing and even crying together form an important part of the love that lesbians share.

In more senses than one same sex companionship for those who are inclined to it is an option to express themselves better. The last scene sequence of the movie ends in literal fire when Radha's Sari catches fire, but the real fire is indeed within these two-woman characters, the fire to relive their true selves and create a meaning-space where they can relate to their sexuality. The movie is in this sense a cinema of emancipation.

Regarding the notion of freedom, it is ironic that those characters who belong from the lower socio-economic strata appear to be comparatively freer. Mundu does not feel the burden of honour and masturbates in the presence of the old lady- Biji. While on the contrary class and age become limiting factors. Biji's puja bell is a clear symbol of traditional religiosity preventing free dressing, dance, expression and even movement. It is to be noted that the perpetrator of discrimination in this instance like many others in real life is a woman. Thus, the repression of alternative desires is validated not just by men but also women who become a part of the patriarchal machinery.

Overall, the movie is a social commentary on the repression of same sex desires within the socially controlled unit of the family which makes each day of the life of women a testimony to women being helpless. The end however is in a world beyond where the little girl learns to look at the horizon (of being?) and find herself free.

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Author Bio

Sonam Narayan is a PhD scholar at Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Rohilkhand University, Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh. She has qualified the Kumaon University SET organised by the UGC along with the UGC NET. She has interests in Feminism and LGBTQ studies and her proposed research delves into LGBTQ issues in Indian English Literature. She has earlier been invited to a Graduate Conference at IIT Patna earlier this year.

¹ The word modern is used here in a derogatory sense as something that makes traditional and respectable life polluted.