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Same-sex Relationship in Deepa Mehta's *Fire*

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by

Hari Prasad Bhattarai

Central Department of English

Kirtipur, Kathmandu

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Central Department of English

Kirtipur Kathmandu

Letter of Recommendation

Mr. Hari Prasad Bhattarai has completed his thesis entitled, “Same-sex Relationship in Deepa Mehta’s *Fire*” under my supervision. He carried out his research work from September 14, 2008 to July 26, 2010. I hereby recommend his thesis be submitted for viva voce.

Baikuntha Poudel.

Associate Professor

Central Department of English

Date:

TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “Same-sex Relationship in Deepa Mehta’s *Fire*” by Hari Prasad Bhattarai submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

Members of the Research Committee:

Internal Examiner

External Examiner

Head
Central Department of English

Date: _____

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Hari Prasad

Abstract

Deepa Mehta's controversial movie *Fire* raises issue in regards to hidden sexual practice, supposed to be taboo, among two sisters-in-law. The movie depicts Radha and Sita, two women married to middle-class Hindu blood brothers. They are ignored by their respective husbands, when it comes to matter regarding physical relationship. In an orthodox society like India, women prefer to remain silent in regards to sexual dissatisfaction; however, the two central characters in *Fire* cross the so-called boundary and indulge in a steamy relationship – lesbianism. In this way, the movie depicts the breaking of hegemony in the Indian scenario in regards to sex and, women coming to the forefront to enjoy sexual pleasure. In other words, the movie symbolizes the conflicts between the Western and Eastern worlds regarding love, sex, marriage and social ceremonies including rites and rituals. However, it is a slightly detachment from Eastern culture to the Western realm of Western post modernization.

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I. *Fire* and Same-sex Relationship

This research is based on *Fire*, a movie by a renowned Indo-Canadian film director Deepa Mehta, released in 1996. It movie explores on the changing definition of Indian cultural values and ethics in regards to sex. The movie revolves around same sex relationship among two sisters-in-law, and thereby depicts the traditional concept of sex that is prevalent in the Eastern society. Based on this idea, the present research attempts to depict the changing sexual relationship in the Indian scenario, represented by through the breaking of sexual taboo between two sisters-in-law and their same sex relationship.

In a largely confine society like India, same-sex relationship is a taboo and is considered a sinful act; morally and legally. However, in joint families where it is common to share beds among brothers and sisters, respectively it is unlikely to deny that there were no such relationships. Moreover, several of the engravings positioned in various sexual positions are a strong indication that lesbianism might have prevailed in ancient India much prior than our knowledge.

However, all these aspects of sex are considered to be under curtain issues all over India. As such, the release of movie in Indian theatres, instantly evoked rage from the Hindu fundamentalist organizations and conservative viewers. The movie raised controversy within the broader Indian cultural scenario, particularly in regards to the intention of sexual uprising in the conservative eastern society of India. However, the continuous targeting of representations of sex and sexuality, betrays an underlying fear that sex is something that is threatening to Indian cultural values, to the Indian way of life, to the very existence of the Indian nation.

The present research responds to one of the feminist issues, in regards to lesbianism, largely supposed to be unethical in Indian scenario. Contingent upon these responses rests the story in *Fire* and the way in which the lesbian subject, a sexual subaltern, is constructed in the cultural space is represented in the film. Many women are represented as victims in the film, and draw attention to the cultural, sexual and familial ruptures brought about by the main protagonists through their desire for one another. The researcher explores the complicated understandings of agency and desire that are represented through the assertion of this relationship. This essay explores the ways in which the definition of Indian culture has become a site of contest, and how this contest played out in the controversy that erupted over the release and screening of Mehta's diasporic film, *Fire* in India.

The plot of the film revolves around two female characters Sita, played by Nandita Das and Shabana Azmi, as Sita. They are two unhappily married sisters-in-law living in a household that contains four other people – two brothers, their ailing mother, and a house servant in Delhi. Of the two brothers, Jatin played by Javed Jaffer is newly married to Sita and Ashok by Kulbhushan Kharbanda, the elder, an ascetic who has taken a vow of celibacy is married to Sita. Ashok has ignored Sita's sensual and emotional needs. Mundu (Ranjit Chowdhary) is the manservant/housekeeper who keeps jacking off to porn movies in front of the mute and sickly mother, Biji (Kushal Rekhi).

Sita feels ignored during her honeymoon, as we find out that Jatin is in love with Julie, a Chinese-Indian, who refuses to marry him because he lives in a joint family. Sita, the senior sister-in-law (Bahu) of the family looks after everyone in the house and even contributes her time to the family business – a video store cum

fast food stand. She is one of the examples of a humble, hardworking and but since, long-suffering Bahu.

This is the liberation of Sita when she plants kiss on Sita's lips at the very first and unprobed meeting, and very soon we have them in each other's arms and behind unlocked closed doors through which Mundu, the house maid, spies Ms. Azmi caressing the dark nipples of Ms. Das (shot in a stylishly "aesthetic" angle) and rats on them to Ashok. Ashok gets mad, discovers his sensual side, but is too late to evoke any response except rejection from Sita, who then accidentally has her sari catch *Fire*. As she tries to put out the *Fire* she sees her husband rush to his mother's aid ignoring her own plight. This Sita is really the Sita who goes through a symbolic agnipariksha in this strange new Ramayana, wherein it is not a 'cold, distant' Rama who challenges Sita to undergo the test by fire so that his citizens are satisfied of her 'fidelity,' but it is a test by fire that liberates her from a husband who cares more for his mother than he loves his wife. Finally, we have Sita and Sita meeting in a Muslim sufi shrine, and the viewers are left to believe that they lived happily ever after in each other's arms.

The film has received a wide range of criticism from various walks of society since its release in 1996. Gay activist Ashok Row Kavi criticized the Shiv Sena – the fundamental Hindu supporter organization's protests as gay-bashing and disputed their claims that lesbianism was against Indian tradition, indicating that homosexuality is in fact abundantly present in Hinduism and that the criminalization of homosexuality was a legacy of British colonialism, heavily informed by Christianity. Pointing to evidence of lesbianism in Indian tradition, Kavi opines, "What's wrong in two women having sex? If they think it doesn't

happen in the Indian society they should see the sculptures of Khajuraho or Konark” (6).

Khajuraho is a temple in North India, where several explicit engravings depicting several of females engaged in same-sex relationship. This shrine is worshipped by hundreds and thousands of believers each year, but there are no complaints in regards to it. There are no complains in regards to enshrine of the temple. In turn, it receives millions of supporters flock to the shrine with full commitment. However, in practical sense, same-sex relationship holds the status of sin, in the society – a dualistic standard of the Indian society.

Similarly, feminist critics of Mehta's films argue that Mehta's portrayal of women and gender relations is over-simplified. Noted Indian feminist authors Mary E. John and Tejaswini Niranjana wrote in 1999 that *Fire* reduces patriarchy to the denial and control of female sexuality. The authors make the point that the film traps itself in its own rendering of patriarchy:

Control of female sexuality is surely one of the ideological planks on which patriarchy rests. But by taking this idea literally, the film imprisons itself in the very ideology it seeks to fight, its own version of authentic reality being nothing but a mirror image of patriarchal discourse. 'Fire' ends up arguing that the successful assertion of sexual choice is not only a necessary but also a sufficient condition-- indeed, the sole criterion--for the emancipation of women. Thus the patriarchal ideology of 'control' is first reduced to pure denial -- as though such control did not also involve the production and amplification of sexuality -- and is later simply inverted to produce

the film's own vision of women's liberation as free sexual 'choice.'

(582)

Whatever subversive potential 'Fire' might have had (as a film that makes visible the 'naturalised' hegemony of heterosexuality in contemporary culture, for example) is nullified by its largely masculinist assumption that men should not neglect the sexual needs of their wives, lest they turn lesbian. The authors additionally argue that viewers must ask tough questions from films such as *Fire* that place themselves in the realm of Madhu Kishwar, then-editor of *Manushi*, wrote a highly critical review of *Fire*, finding fault with the depiction of the characters in the film as a mean spirited caricature of middle class family life among urban Indians. She claimed that homosexuality was socially accepted in India as long as it remained a private affair, adding that Mehta did a disservice to the cause of women by crudely pushing the Sita-Nita relationship into the lesbian mould, as women would now be unable to form intimate relationships with other women without being branded as lesbians.

Deepa Mehta expressed frustration in interviews that the film was consistently described as a lesbian film. She said, "lesbianism is just another aspect of the film . . . *Fire* is not a film about lesbians, but rather about the choices we make in life" (97). This comment from the director seems rather a safer side to escape the rage of the fundamental organizations that have constantly spoken against the norms and issues rose by the director in the movie.

It is a tragedy that the fundamentalist attack such movies, as it is an issue that needs public attention and, serious mediocre to address it. The steamy scenes in the movie, may not seem very friendly to many orthodox viewers, but is a reality in a society where *Triple X sex movies* are found in each and every nook of the street

in almost all cities of India. In the context, Ramesh N. Rao in *The Times of India* opines:

Sex is a taboo in the Indian society. However, due to the soaring popularity of western culture in the eastern world, it has broken all the taboos in regards to sex. But as the society is yet in a juncture of orthodox beliefs and faith there cannot be the same old tradition in connection to sex and desire. (97)

When there are youths and mature person exposed to the rampant disclosure of sex in the society, they cannot remain aloof of the same. Thus, the hidden desire due to the neglect of their respective husbands, the wives are choosing for an alternative way to address their physical need. As such, the effect of global media and development in communication sector has its impact in a largely conservative society. Thus, there is likely that the Indian society and especially, the female will revolt for a better and happier sexual relationship.

Taking all these views in consideration, the present research would concentrate self on the view that Indian women are desperate, and in need of more fruitful role in sexual relationship. Thus, the first chapter of this research is “Fire and Same-Sex Relationship” so as to analyze the movie in views of current trend and in the eyes of various critics. Similarly, the second chapter will be, “Sexuality and Gender” so as to analyze the role of sex and gender in the current society. The third chapter will discuss on issues in regards to same-sex relationship being depicted in the movie, under a title, “Same-sex Relationship in *Fire*.” Finally, the research will close with a short conclusion, on how females in the Eastern world are opening up from the traditional concept of sex and sexuality.

II. Sexuality and Gender

'Sex' and 'gender' are terms closely related with 'sexuality' and 'gender,' respectively. In turn, sex-sexuality and gender-identity are closely associated terms used to define an individual and the society one lives in. They are inter-related to an individual and society. These words are catchwords in various social theories like feminism, sexuality studies and gender studies.

The *Oxford Dictionary* defines 'sex' as, "either of the two main categories (male and female) into which humans and most other living things are divided on the basis of their reproductive functions." In general, sex is understood as state of being male or female. Sex is divided into male or female according to their function in the process of producing offspring's. Sex is also an action that involves sexual organs and results to pregnancy of the female. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her essay, *Gender Criticism* writes:

Sex has had the meaning of certain group of irreducible biological differentiations between members of the species, Homo Sapiens, who have XX chromosomes and those who have XY chromosome.

Sex in this sense as "chromosomal sex" is seen as relatively minimal raw material based on the social construction of gender. (Sedgwick 273-302)

According to chromosomal definition, only one chromosome out of 46 determines sex. According to this definition, sex is a "natural biological coupling" (Cranny-Francis and et al. 4). It is a part and parcel of the establishment in western cultures. It establishes male and female as binary opposite identities.

In normal understanding, if "sex" is an essential biological difference of the species Homo sapiens "gender" is a social construction in which certain identities

and behaviours are attached to the biological and anatomical raw material of human sex-male/female. Simon de Beauvoir, in “The Second Sex” (1972) tries to distinguish “sex” and “gender” saying, “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman; gender is the effect of social and cultural processes” (Cranny-Francis et al. 5). The above analysis shows that “sex” is natural and “gender” is a cultural phenomenon.

In general, ‘sexuality’ refers to the direction of somebody’s sexual desire, towards people of opposite sex, people of the same sex, or people of both sexes. But, in literary theory, it is associated with ‘power’ concept, deployed in socio-political analysis of ‘sex’ and ‘gender.’ In this regards, Beasley writes it, as:

Sexed regimes, identities and practice, which typically involve binary and hierarchical categories such as men and women, usually associated with an account of biology and reproductive function as well a sexual regimes, identities and practices. It is also commonly involved to binary and hierarchical categories such as heterosexual and homosexual usually linked to conceptions of biology and reproduction. (1)

Lately, there have been various new trends in the Study of Sexuality. People of varied sexual backgrounds and groups are in search of their identity and hence this field of study is in rapid rise. However, homosexuality and heterosexuality are the most common sects of this study. All these epochs of study have their root in Queer Theory.

Michael Foucault’s *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality* (1984) is considered a landmark text for the relatively new field of queer theory, whose root lies in counter culture. Queer Theory studies the intersection between politics,

gender and sexuality. Its main thrust is to refute the idea that our identities are somehow fixed or determined by our gender or sexual preferences.

Study of 'sexuality' cannot be possible without the study of 'sex' and 'gender.' In this regard, *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler has following opinion:

They are highly inter-related term and often mistaken for each other. The term 'sex' denotes to an individual's genetic identity of whether a person is female or male. At the same time, it also denotes to the sexual behaviour of an individual. On the other hand, 'gender' means class, race, ethnicity, or imperialism. But, when it comes to scholarly studies, Beasley writes, sex and gender refer to sexed and sexual, respectively. (21)

Butler is of the opinion that the study of sexuality deals in two major parts of human life; sex and power. It focuses upon the field critical to socio-political analysis of sex, gender and sexuality. This discipline assumes that sex is a matter of human organization that is, it is politically associated with social dominance and subordination, as well as capable of change. So, theoretical frameworks and writers in this field are concerned with how power is constituted and perpetuated in the formulation of 'sexed' and 'sexual differences.' They reevaluate mainstream knowledge that marginalizes those who are beyond power position.

The crucial subject of sexuality, even today remains to be female, but these days, its study, basically refers to gay men's sexual positioning. This focus has been laid more upon gay than lesbian, because the queer behaviour of lesbian is no new concept to the society, in respect to the gay studies.

Moreover, study of sexuality cannot be studied excluded from counter-culture. Root of this relatively new field of writings lies in the sensual writings of

Whitman, Emerson, Ginsberg and Kerouac. It is rather concerned with, “whether sexuality can positively disrupt oppressive power relations” (Beasley 118). But the study of Sexuality gained a full critical acclamation only from 1960s and 70s. It was oriented from gender studies. Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* has a considerable contribution in the study of sexuality in literary discourse.

Characteristic of sexuality studies are more contextualised ones. The first direction of sexuality study is emancipator and second is Sexual Differences and its critiques on singular differences. Sexuality also includes topics on Multiple Differences for example Race/Ethnicity/Imperialism approaches, the phrases coined as (REI). Other popular fields it includes are Constructionism, Fluidity of Identity Crises and Queer Theory.

Beginning of Sexuality goes back to the roots of modernism. It has links with eighteenth century European Intellectual and Cultural Movement. The common element of this movement was a trust in human reason and the application of human reason to dissipate the darkness of superstition, prejudice and barbarity. In the context, Abrams writes, “Its purpose was to free humanity from its earlier reliance on mere authority and unexamined tradition,” (75). So, modernity as a cultural movement contributed for the emancipator thoughts on gender and sexuality. The ethos of this movement took all human beings as equal as they possessed rationality whether they were women or homosexuals or blacks. Liberal human rights approaches first developed antidiscrimination stance for the woman and homosexuals.

Kate Millett, in *Sexual Politics*, analyzes western social arrangements and institutions as covert ways of ‘manipulating power’ so as to establish and perpetuate the dominance of heterosexual men and subordination of women.

Feminist liberationist's approach perceived sexuality as intimately tied to the normative power. They developed a critique of existing heterosexuality as about a male model of sexuality in which "penetrative sex is sex, and everything else is fore play that is just the preliminary before the real thing" (Beasley 122). Such a critical analysis of sexually encouraged to discuss about the other forms of sexuality such as masturbation and celibacy. They noted a link between rape and heterosexuality, child abuse and violence. The idea of sexuality is innate need of men was criticized. The idea that debate in relation to power relation, caused split between the feminists favouring heterosexuality and lesbian feminist. Therefore, both the gay liberation movement and women's liberation movement remained significantly in sexuality political studies.

By late 1980s and 1990s the multiple differences occurred in sexual minorities including in ethnicity/imperialism theorizing. The categories of sexual identity politics began to be questioned in sexuality studies. Many gays and lesbians expressed their frustration with the divisiveness of identity politics.

First lesbian sex radicals, who supported the more libertarian, sexuality as pleasure, position associated with gay men's politics began to mount a rejection of women's liberationists thinking. The lesbian sex radicals turned their back upon the notion of shared women centred approach of women liberationists thinking. The lesbian sex radicals turned their back upon the notion of shared women centred approach of women liberationists. They began to promote new lesbian coalition. They "denounced women centred model because it revolved around a perspective of the good women" (Rubin 78). Lesbian sex radicals actively supported sexuality, butch femme lesbian identities and the beneficial use of pornography.

Moreover contrary to women centred approaches, they insisted that such practices were not initiation of heterosexual perspective norms of patriarchal relation of dominance and subordination. Besides sexual activists the critique of sexual identities arose from other minority groups such as race/ethnicity/imperialism studies. Beasley in this context writes, “They drew attention with the notion that more than sexuality, race, ethnic, class, imperial issues may be crucial for them” (124). He advocates for stronger identity oriented modernist approach in analysis of race, ethnics and others.

bell hooks, a contemporary critic raises her suspicion on Sexuality in her book *Postmodern Tendency*. She believes that identity politics only can be means to overcome oppression. She writes, “She raises doubts about the benefits of postmodern challenges to identity; if we say that there is no fixed sexual identity that we can call ‘gay’ or ‘straight’, then what becomes of the experiences and the understandings collectively that allow people to politically organize for gay rights,” (qtd. in Beasley’s *Smith and Petrases* 125). Sexual Orientation, however, refers to the sexual preference of an individual -- whether heterosexual or homosexual.

By adolescence, it is assumed that most individuals establish a clear erotic preference for a partner of the opposite sex, that is, are heterosexual. Some are attracted to members of both sexes and are termed bisexual. Small but not significant proportion of the populations is attracted only to members of their own sex and is exclusively homosexual.

In theory, biological sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation develop independently. For example, most commonly a biological male identifies himself as masculine (his gender identity is male), and chooses opposite sex partners (his orientation is heterosexual). Another example, less common, might be a biological

male with a female gender identity who chooses to live in the female gender role and has a biological male for a sexual partner. This person would be a male-to-female transsexual with a heterosexual orientation. Even less common, but indicative of the variety of human sexuality, is the existence of transsexuals with a homosexual orientation: for example, having changed from female to male gender, a transsexual may then prefer other men.

However, these definitions alone cannot satisfy the scholars of the feminist, gender and sexuality studies. “Sex” has its binary quality for the psychoanalyst like Sigmund Freud. Human beings are divided into two categories: either the father’s replacement or the mother’s. However, Freud showed possibilities of sexual “perverts” because of excessive repression in the society.

In his essay “Sex/Gender System” (1974), feminist anthropologist Gayle Rubin explains the variable ways that kinship organizations produce gendered beings out of bodies. She argues that all societies have a sex gender system, and that system produces social conventions on gender from the biological and anatomical raw material of human sex and procreation. She argues that for both Levi-Strauss and Lacan, it is “only through being subjected to the process of heterosexual gendering that human subjects are produced” (Cranny-Francis et al. 6). For Levi-Strauss and Lacan, to have a status of a person, “I”, everyone must first be positioned within kinship that is to become a daughter, sister, brother, or son. The individual is prohibited from desiring members of their own kinship group. One is a man to the extent that one does not desire other men but desires only those women who are substitute for the mother. One is a woman to the extent that one does not desire other women and desires only those men who are substitute for her father. So, hetero-normatively and incest taboos on “sex” are determining

factors of one's identity. Kinship systems make all homosexual practice taboo, so heterosexuality was made natural by culture.

For Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick also the term "sex" extended indefinitely beyond "chromosomal sex". She says that the history of usage of sex often overlaps with what might now more properly be called "gender". Genres are two, and they are defined in contradiction to each other. They may be said to be opposite. But, she questions and elaborates:

But in what sense is XX the opposite of XY? Beyond chromosomes, however, the association of sex, precisely through the physical body with reproduction and with genital activity and sensation keeps offering new challenges to the conceptual clarity or even possibility of sex-gender differentiation [. . .]. These usages involve [. . .] sex-gender only to delineate a problematical space, rather than a crisp distinction. (271-302)

Sedgwick uses "gender" in order to analyze men and women relation under the physical and cultural rubric, and she uses "sex" in order to analyze male and female relationship. She further supposes, "the whole realm of what modern culture refers to as sexuality and also call "sex"- the array of acts, expectations, pleasures, identity formations, and knowledge, in both men and women, that tends to cluster . . . around genital sensations" (274). Sedgwick, here agrees in the line of Freud and Foucault that sexuality might be the very opposite of what we "originally" referred as chromosomal sex. It can be more relational, the socio-symbolic, the constructed, the variable, the representational.

Drawing the history of sex and sexuality, Michel Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality* 1978 links sex and sexuality in the realm of power and discourse.

Foucault shows that prior understanding of sexuality (including the psychoanalytic and Marxist) has depended heavily on what he calls “repressive hypothesis”.

Repressive hypothesis says that our entire culture represses sexual desires by ignoring sex or by silencing sex through various discourses that conceal sexuality. According to “repressive hypothesis”, the history of sexuality could only be that of the “negative relation” between power and sex, “the cycle of prohibition” (82-85). Counter to “repressive theory” Foucault argues that modern societies created more discourse on sexuality. Responding to this paradox Foucault writes:

The multiplication of discourses concerning sex in the field of exercise of power itself an institutional incitement to speak about it, and to do so more, and more; a determination of the part of agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated details. (198)

Instead of envisioning “power” as something exercised prohibitively from the top of the society downward, against sexuality, Foucault describes both sexuality and power as relations that are operating circularly and affecting each other. He further says that the entire history of ‘knowledge’ is not separate realm of sexuality: rather it “constitutes that sexuality” (20). Foucault through his *The History of Sexuality* justifies a view of sexuality as the central repository of truth values of modernity.

Sexuality is assumed hetero-normative and unified. Foucault questions the neatly unified sexual field. So, *The History of Sexuality* has been an assertive unprecedentedly institutionalized movement of gay and lesbian criticism.

Commenting on this book, Sedgwick says that the book is “most famous and agenda setting formulation about the history of homosexuality under the heading

“incorporation of perversion, and a new specification of individuals” (Sedgwick).

Drawing the history of homosexuality Foucault writes:

As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden act [. . .] the nineteenth century homosexual became a personage a past, a case history and a childhood [. . .]. The psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was a secret that gave itself away. The psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized-Westphal’s famous article of 1987 on “Contrary Sexual Sensations” can stand as its date of birth-less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility [. . .]. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration. The homo-sexual now was a species. (43)

Foucault in “*Scientia Sexualis*” explores the historical continuity between religious confession and psychiatric “free association” as the forms of finding truth and secrecy of an individual. By writing the history of sexuality from the view point of discourse Foucault denaturalizes hetero-normative sexuality and opens the way to multiple sexualities. Foucault says, “After the turn of the century, if regular sexuality happened to be questioned, it was through a reflux movement, originating in [. . .] peripheral sexualities” (39).

First Lesbian sex radicals, who supported the more libertarian, sexuality as pleasure, position associated with gay men’s politics began to mount a ejection of women’s liberationists thinking. The lesbian sex radicals turned their back upon the notion of shared women centred approach of women liberationists. They began to promote new lesbian coalition. They “denounced women centred model because it

revolved around a perspective of the good women” (Rubin 78). Lesbian sex radicals actively supported SM (consensual sadomasochist) sexuality, butch femme lesbian identities and the beneficial use of pornography. Moreover contrary to women centered approaches, they insisted that such practices were not initiation of heterosexual perspective norms of patriarchal relation of dominance and subordination. Besides sexual activists the critique of sexual identities arose from other minority groups such as race/ethnicity/imperialism studies. “They drew attention with the nation that more than sexuality, race/ethnic/class/imperial issues may be crucial for them” (Roen qtd. in Beasley 124). Bell hooks advocates for strongly identity oriented modernist approach in analysis of race/ethnicity/imperialism/gender/sexuality minorities. She is suspicious about postmodern tendency in aiming to deconstruct identities:

She raises doubts about the benefits of postmodern challenges to identity: If we say that there is no fixed sexual identity that we can call ‘gay’ or ‘straight’, then what becomes of the experiences and the understandings collectively that allow people to politically organize for gay rights?’ (Smith and Petracos qtd. in Beasley 125).

She believes that identity politics only can be a means to overcome oppression, in regards to say that some one is straight, or gay.

There were movements that raised the issues of these gay, lesbian and straight and to secure them identity in the society. In the context, hooks, opines:

Finally certain practical political movements in the early 1990s raised serious difficulties regarding the coherence of gay and Lesbian identities, as well as the coherence of the identity of homosexual in the homo/hetero binary. These political movements involved

rejection and expulsion of certain groups from gay and lesbian organization for denying fixed identity of these categories. An organization named NAMBLA (The North American Man/Boy Love Association) was expelled as not belonging to within homosexual collective politics in 1994 from ILGA (a worldwide confederation of Lesbian and gay organization). (11)

All of the examples above in relation to race/ethnicity/ imperialism as well disrupted any simple notion of gay, lesbian and homosexual identity political groupings. This situation leads to a greater stress on plural identities and increasing fragmentation, in other words to postmodern/Queer identity.

To sum up, sexuality does have two opinions. The first opinion is essentialist's opinion. According to this opinion our sexuality has biological basis- genetic and parental hormonal factors have determined our sexual orientation. Our sexual orientation is set early in life. We may try to repress but we will no longer be able to deny our true self. The identity, (gay, lesbian, male, female, bisexual) with which we are born and which we will take to the grave. But the second opinion of sexual orientation is "social constructivism": those events on the environment made us who we are (Cranny-Francis et al. 9). Our sexual orientation and desires are based on social and cultural factors. So, sexuality is a set of social processes which produces and organizes the structure and expression of desire.

'Identity,' the term cannot be separated from 'sex,' 'sexuality' and 'gender.' Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines "identity" as "who/what somebody or something is" (588). Who (what is his/her identity) somebody is, is defined by his sex, sexuality and gender in the society. One's self (subjectivity) depends on these factors.

There are different concepts of “identity” besides our very common understandings. Earlier views of individuals as “self-determined, integrated beings” have been replaced by a more complex notion of “individuals as multiple subjectivities, sometimes described as fractured and split” (Cranny-Francis et al. 33). “Identity” is used as political weapon to fight against marginalization and exploitation. For example females, blacks, homosexuals were united under their identities respectively and fought against the mainstream culture and marginalization of these multiple cultures. On the basis of some shared physical features, sexual orientation and shared desires certain groups form an identity.

“Sexuality” and “Gender” are highly interrelated terms in the field of “gender” and “sexuality” studies. What is clear about the definitions and discussions of “gender” and “sex” is that ideas about “sexuality” are so intimately tied up with “gender” that it is sometimes difficult to see where one ends and other begins. In this discussion the researcher is going to draw an analytical outline about the dynamics of power in current social arrangement about sex. The focus of this chapter is to show how sexuality and gender are deployed in socio-political analysis of “sex” and “gender”. The term “sex” throughout much of English speaking world and history has covered both:

Sexed regimes: identity and practice-which typically involve binary and hierarchical categories such as men and women, usually associated with an account of biology and reproductive function as well as sexual regimes, identities and practices, which also commonly involve binary and hierarchical categories such as heterosexual and homosexual usually linked to conceptions of biology and reproduction. (qtd. in Beasley 1)

The word “sex” is used in everyday language to refer to one’s sexed identity (one’s sex) as well as to the sexual. It has been used for biological or material body. But “in scholarly analysis it is used for sexed and sexual-that is gender and sexuality respectively” (Beasley 1). The terms have been used by the various thinkers/theories in the gender and sexuality politics.

III. Same-sex Relationship in *Fire*

Fire is about middle class arranged marriages and the persistence of joint family establishments in cramped urban apartments. Set in contemporary New Delhi, its protagonist Sita, played by Shabana Azmi, is married to Ashok. When the story begins the childless couple has been married for over fifteen years. Sita runs the family take-out business; she is the primary caregiver of her stroke-ridden mother-in-law and stoically bears the stigma of her infertility. She epitomizes the "traditional" Indian woman, duty bound and subsuming her individuality to the needs of the family. Ashok has shifted his attention from his family to his spiritual guru, attends to him and practices celibacy. In a move reminiscent of Mahatma Gandhi's experiments with celibacy, Ashok insists that Sita share his bed so he can test his capacity for sexual restraint.

Into this unhappy family enters Sita, the new bride of Ashok's younger brother, Jatin. It becomes very clear early in the film that although Jatin has agreed to the arranged marriage with Sita, though he is still in love with his Chinese girlfriend. Jatin abandons his bride for his girlfriend and leaves Sita to negotiate her position within the joint family set-up. Sita is the antithesis of Sita; in an interview Mehta describes her as "modern India, desiring independence over tradition" (Sidhwa, 77). Gradually, the two women, who have been abandoned by their husbands for different reasons, forge a deep emotional bond, which evolves into a sexual relationship. Ashok stumbles upon the two women in bed after he learns of their relationship from a disgruntled servant. The movie ends with the two women opting to leave their married home, but not before Sita chooses to explain her choice to Ashok. While the husband and wife conduct a heated discussion in the kitchen a *Fire* erupts and Ashok decides to rescue his invalid mother rather than

help Sita, who is caught in the flames. She saves herself and leaves the home to join her lover, Sita.

A winner of fourteen international awards, *Fire* was first screened in India in 1997 at two international film festivals. It was hailed by diverse responses; while some were enraged by its portrayal of lesbian sexuality others praised its presentation of a woman-centered narrative. Before its theatrical release in November 1998, *Fire* was approved by the Central Board of Film Certification, commonly addressed as the censor board. (No film can publicly be screened in India unless it carries a certificate issue by the censor board.) It received an "A" (adults only) certificate; the Board did not require any cuts but recommended that one of the female protagonist's names be changed from Sita to Radha. The original version of the film is in English but in India this was supplemented with a dubbed Hindi version. With the name change suggested by the censor board both versions were screened in major metropolitan cities for three weeks before protesters halted its screening. Theatre owners averred that the film ran to full houses and was patronized primarily by young urban women before they were forced to withdraw it. Press reports suggest that women's groups in Bombay organized special women-only screenings to facilitate its viewership among females, since the average cinema viewer in India is male.

At first glance, *Fire* is a flawed but compelling movie that draws attention to the oppressive conditions of married women's lives in arranged marriages. It reveals poignantly the woman's perspective of being caught between desire and an oppressive tradition. It delineates the everyday struggles Indian women face when they try to work within the structures of the joint family. Mehta's film also captures the anxieties that accompany the changes occurring in the bourgeois Indian family

as middle class women are interpellated within the flow of a global market economy. Foregrounding the gendered processes of modernity, the movie presents middle-class mundane life as both stifling and marked with possibilities.

Fire can best be described as a melodrama, one that turns a horrified gaze on the Indian family. It draws upon popular religious epics to highlight the specific ways in which "tradition" structures everyday life. Specifically, the film draws upon the epic narrative *Ramayana*. Although there exist a number of different versions of this narrative, Mehta references the one that has been popularized in Bollywood cinema and the eponymous television series. The epic is about the life of King Rama and the various trials he undergoes before he is able to rule over his kingdom. Central to the narrative is the abduction of his wife, Sita, by the King of Lanka, Ravana, and Rama's successful but harrowing rescue mission. The narrative emphasizes that although Ravana kidnaps Sita he does not molest her. When the triumphant couple, Rama and Sita, return to their kingdom some of the subjects challenge their queen's purity--and consequent worthiness to remain queen--until she has undergone an ordeal by *Fire*. Rama accedes to his subjects' wishes and Sita participates in the agnipariksha from which she emerges unscathed, proving her chastity. The citizenry however remain skeptical and Rama banishes Sita from his kingdom. In Bollywood, Sita is held up as the ideal of Indian femininity and the so-called chastity test has been variously deployed by cinema makers, often uncritically.

It is this trial by *Fire*, agnipariksha that Mehta refers to in *Fire*. Religion and religious epics function as heuristic devices through which the concept of tradition is mobilized. At three different moments, twice theatrically and once performatively, the film draws attention to the chastity test Indian women is

expected to meet. Indian women are depicted as wholly determined by the weight of an oppressive tradition; their activities are regulated and policed constantly. Despite the heavy handed criticism of tradition and the chastity test, *Fire* points out that a bad marriage need no longer be a tragic event for women, the female protagonists reject the rules of a ritual bound society to seek autonomy. It also foregrounds questions of female desire outside patriarchal scaffolding. Through its explicit portrayal of lesbian sexuality the storyline reveals the underbelly of Indian society and the possibilities available for agency and the expression of female sexual desire.

The word lesbian cautiously is used to indicate female same sex desire. Evelyn Blackwood and Saskia Wieringa acknowledge the misrecognition and (western) ethnocentrism that the use of the term occasions. "Making lesbian a global category is problematic because it imposes the Eurocentric term 'lesbian', a term usually used to refer to a fixed sexual identity, on practices are relationships that may have very different meanings and expectations in other cultures" (19). Nevertheless, they suggest its use to signify women's same sex eroticism as distinctly different from men's and because it inherently demands a recognition of women's differences. I use the term lesbian in this essay in the same spirit.

The narrative structure of the film elaborates on the thematics of love as a relation of mutuality which is in conflict with the compulsions of the institution of arranged marriage. Overall, *Fire* offers simplistically sexual expression as the vehicle of female liberation. Feminist scholars have long been divided over the deployment of sexuality as a mode of female agency (e.g., Vance; Valverde). While some believe that female sexuality can indeed emancipate women providing them

the same freedoms accorded to men in patriarchal society, others argue that this could in fact further curtail women's bodies.

As in many post-modern and pretentious plays, movies, art or music, the viewer/listener is supposed to fill in the missing details and discover hidden meanings in the product. These "discoveries" have provided the fuel to make this superficial and mediocre film a household word, and mediocre "scholars" with axes to grind have rushed in to write their conference papers and journal articles. So, for example, we have in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, appearing in March 1999, an article by Linda Hess titled "Rejecting Sita: Indian responses to the ideal man's cruel treatment of his ideal wife.

The hypocrisy part has to do with the opportunities that the film has created for the likes of Ms. Azmi and Ms. Mehta to talk about Indian (Hindu) women, the influence of religion and myth on interpersonal and marital relationships, bride-burning, dowry, et al., while at the same time to go around claiming in India that the movie was not meant to harm Hindu sentiments. For these two women, and for many pseudo-secular Hindu bashers, these opportunities to lecture to Western and international audiences about the nature of the Hindu joint family system, of the oppression of Hindu women, of the patriarchal nature of Hindu families, and how all of these can be traced to the Hindu epics, especially the Ramayana would not have come if not for the production of such "media artifacts". The Ramayana has now been made the fount of all things ugly in the Hindu psyche and society, and "siting" Radha has become a major cottage industry for academics (There were about ten papers on the subject in the recently concluded South Asia conference at the University of Wisconsin, Madison).

In India Ms. Azmi and Ms. Mehta (the two have been the most vocal and visible) can claim that since the character is Sita and not Sita, people don't have to worry about their sentiments being trampled upon. Elsewhere, they can share their "deep reading" of the Hindu epics and make all those cliched connections to oppression, women's emancipation, et al. Note that the attack is on Hindu society and not Indian society. All of the Hindu male characters in the movie are blemished. The Hindu women are all fighting oppression, and that is supposed to be good for they can thus be emancipated. And the emancipation comes not just through the abandoning of the two husbands/brothers, but through the symbolic embrace of a new religion and a new sexuality.

Linda Hess says that the television serial Ramayana "entered the plot at crucial moments" but she does not mention that one of those crucial moments was when the servant, Mundu, claiming to show the old, sickly, mute mother the Ramayana inserts a porn movie into the video player and masturbates in front of the woman. Many have falsely jumped to the conclusion that in fact the servant masturbates to the scenes in the epic. Some others have said the scene depicts the helplessness of the old and the sickly in India. Yet others have asserted that the ill-treatment of maids and servants in India is so rampant that we can expect them to hit back at their employers or take advantage of them when the time is right.

There can be endless speculation: the renting out of porn videos to 'special' customers and 'under the counter' indicates the hypocrisy of a society that has censored even scenes of kissing in Indian movies but is willing to allow that and more in imported films, and who are not too bashful of watching porn; the masturbation scene shows how Indian men are sexually repressed and deviant; it shows how man-servants vent their sexual frustration, and on and on. There is

another scene where we are shown Mundu possessing a photograph of the family, and on which he has drawn a heart around the face of Sita. It is the servant who is in love with her, desires her, whereas the husband is mostly interested in listening to his guru pontificate on the Ramayana. Real, human love of the servant as opposed to the sublimated and deviant version of the husband.

The servant masturbating is really therefore not the deviant one. It is the repressed sexuality of the husband that is deviant. Get it? Can you hear the graduate students in a seminar on international films dissect the movie, and have them invite Ms. Azmi to come talk to them? Therein lay the problem with this film. It attempts, like good literature or art to leave something out, to hint at other things, so that readers and viewers have both the challenge and the satisfaction of trying to make connections and making them; but unlike good art that is highly and deeply contested, this movie is trite and clichéd. It is as one reviewer points out, far too simplistic. Chris Chang, writing for Cinemania Online says, "The film glosses over complex sexuality with a bad husband turn their wives into lesbian's formula. And even Freud would admit that that's cartoon-like psychology" (visited on Mar. 28, 2010).

As such, the film might have been saved if indeed it had explored in-depth sexuality and lesbianism. But no, the director has a number of other axes to grind and a variety of postures to strike, and so we have an attempt at making all sorts of connections to myth, social conditions, sexuality, both male and female, religion, oppression, class differences and conflict, and anything else you might want to think of or project on to. So, we have a "slick" director who has been able to get a "rise" out of a variety of groups, and thus get the kind of media and public attention panderers almost always get: too much.

Some have seen the last scene in which the two female characters take refuge in a mosque as a case of rejecting the aggressor in an emotionally reactive way such that everything associated with the aggressor becomes the object of their rejection. The mosque, for such viewers, may symbolize the going to 'something different,' nothing more. Others have argued that such a perspective is invalid. Mr. Pran Lal, in a discussion on the South Asian Journalists' Association web forum argues that the issue of the characters taking refuge in 'something different' from their aggressors depends on how the director/story-writer defines the aggressor. He asks, "Who are the aggressors in the movie? Are the aggressors males or are they Hindu males?" (97) and suggests that if the aggressors were (just) males then the protagonists going to a mosque (another male bastion) would not constitute going to 'anything different.'

A mosque, surely, is not a feminine entity. He argues that if the director really wanted to portray this in terms of a male-female or a protagonist-antagonist dichotomy then she could have shown the two characters taking refuge in a Kali or a Durga temple. After all, Durga's slaying of Mahishasura is the representation of ultimate supremacy of feminine power, he claims. Thus, the two taking refuge in a mosque has no other explanation other than the director portraying this as "Hindu women fleeing the tyranny of Hinduism, and taking refuge in Islam." In a country that has been subjected to enough conversion through force and seduction this may be seen as yet another not so subtle invitation for conversion to Islam.

One can criticize the movie for a myriad other reasons, and find glaring problems at the turn of almost every frame. For example, in the English version of the movie all the characters speak in the kind of Hollywood stereotype of Indian English, except when the scenes are of the roadside enactment of the Ramlila (a

drama performed in the life of Ram, a Hindu God) or some milkmen conversing at daybreak on a Delhi street. In those scenes Hindi/Bhojpuri is spoken and subtitles are in English. It shows class difference prevalent in broader Indian society. .

However, one of the interesting aspects is Mundu – the house maid cum helper speaks fluent, phonetically accurate English, which is very difficult to explain in the film. Mundu is supposed to be an illiterate village boy, and when many educated fail to pronounce correct English, he does; surprising. That conundrum must be a good one for those graduate students to resolve. We have an early scene when Sita enters the house and is received at the door by Mundu (who performs the aarti!) and Sita who not only does not wear the auspicious bindi (a red tika to be put by married Hindu women) but is wearing salwar-kameez. So, we have a man-servant and a widow-like sister-in-law in Punjabi/Muslim garb welcoming the new bride into the household. The director either has no clue about Hindu rituals or is trying to make space for literary criticism in her film. However, it is true that many Hindu homes they really have no clue about the right way of performing these rituals, and thus these rituals are without meaning and significance.

Another scene for deep probing would be Sita's first act as soon as she enters the household. She goes into her room, takes off her sari, pulls on a pair of jeans (to enable the panting male audience to get the first look at Ms. Bose's bellybutton), turns on the stereo for some loud pop music, lights up a cigarette, and gyrates wildly. This is an interesting scene to prove that the Indian women are no more the same, as they used to be. The director must be aware of the Indian scenario of cultural aspects of Indian women; so when this scene is presented in the

movie, one cannot think but to accept that the Indians are demanding for more cultural freedom.

At the same time, it is an indication something of the qualities of *Fire*: to burn, to destroy, to provide warmth, to cleanse, to purify the long existing debate in regards to sex. Surprisingly, one of the interesting aspects of Hindu and Indian cultural aspects is the rampant engraving of sex images and postures in various temples and holy places. Despite, all these being so explicit and easy all over Indian temples, sex still remain a close door scenario. To talk and discuss sex is taken as an unwanted activity that no sane people should be indulging in. This is very further

Newspapers reported that after the screening of the movie at the Indian Film Festival in Trivandrum, a man came up to Ms. Mehta and told her that he was going to shoot her. It was not a mere threat, as there were Shiv Sainiks in their underwear protesting and shouting slogans in front of the house of the veteran actor, Dilip Kumar, who had signed a petition to the President of India seeking to condemn those who were calling for a ban on the film. I don't know why the man in Trivandrum was so incensed.

Contemporary discussions of globalization and the trans-national circulation of cultural products are often marked by celebratory exhortations of the imminent global village or by less optimistic perspectives that present the Third World as beleaguered and besieged. Countering these perspectives, through an examination of media commentary on the Canadian-Indian film *Fire* this essay underscores the difficulties involved in transporting meaning across cultural borders. Even as cross-border flows have facilitated the movement of media products, I argue that understandings of cultural artefacts are embedded in specific places and locations.

Examining Indian press coverage of *Fire* contend that the director's (authorial) intention to draw attention to the oppressive conditions of Indian women's lives was subverted by nationalist modes of thinking developed during colonialism, which informed the most visible reaction to the film. This is in connection to the deep faith the Indians bestowed towards religion and its deities. The movie, as such, had depicted scenes where women enter into same-sex relationship on the very night of *Karvachauth* – an auspicious celebrations of women, where they pray the almighty for a healthy and long life of their life partner.

The question of right and wrong, moral and immoral hits the sentimentality of the characters throughout the novel. After the sensational love scene, the younger sister-in-law asks the elder, as:

Sita: Sita did we do anything wrong?

Sita: No

As such, the dilemma of morality and immorality hangs on the fate and will of the character, thanks to the age-old system of Hindu belief and culture in which the society has laid its foundation on. Hindu society rejects the concept of woman falling for another woman, in matters concerning sex. As such, the characters mentality is to carry out those activities inside a closed door.

There are several scenes that challenge the concept of Indian ethics of value laden society. The two sisters-in-law falling for each other, and the house maid Mundu masturbating in front of the old grandmother of the house, are unacceptable to the Indian audience and, especially to the conservative society. Several scholars have presented the global-local relationship as a sharply oppositional one. For instance, editing a special edition of boundary on globalization Arif Dirlik and Rob

Wilson declare that “the global deforms and molests the local” (8). In this evocative sentence, the editors present the global as a stooge for a malevolent trans-national capitalism while the local or Third World is the site of agency and resistance, the last bastion against global capital. Eschewing such a polarized vision I illustrate through an examination of the responses to *Fire* that both the terms global and local are conjunctural; their meanings are specific to the site of enunciation and cannot be conceived as universal categories.

Following the scene, where the sisters are shown involved in steamy scenes, it is largely taken as issues that challenge the traditional concept of the eastern values. The movie cautions against the static model of homogenization or resistance and instead uses an interaction-based analysis, one that recognizes the traffic in ideas of humanhood and selfhood. Thereby, there is a formulation of site of agency and resistance begs also the question, for whom? As this essay illustrates local resistance to the global is manifested in a series of practices that invoke religion to regulate women; control over female bodies becomes a crucial strategy for rejecting the global. Issues pertaining to female identity, sexuality and social location are repeatedly reworked in the context of global flows. The female body, as my analysis reveals, becomes a central site where discourses of power and regulation come to bear.

Viewing the film through a historical eye and condition, the contexts within which discourses of nation are produced, circulated, and consumed. While it reveals the generic conventions within which *Fire's* narrative operates, specifically that of Bollywood cinema, the paper focuses on the social relations and global flows that shape its viewing. Mainstream Hindi movies are referred to derogatorily as Bollywood products, the Indian version of Hollywood. A specific way in which

the local frames understandings of both the global and the local ideas are set in regards to the scenario of local cultures. Hence, the scrutinize coverage in Indian national newspapers such as the *Hindu*, the *Hindustan Times*, and the *Deccan Herald*, and newsmagazines such as *India Today* and *Outlook*. These materials are accessible on the internet and I obtained my primary data from the websites each of these organizations maintains. While this issue was covered extensively in the various regional language presses and focuses on English-language materials since these were most easily available in the U.S.

Coming back to the Indian scenario, masturbation is also not accepted by the Indian scenario. It is immoral, and when the house-maid, Mundu is caught by Sita, she slaps her and asks him to quit the job and leave the house. However, later on she realizes that it is the desire that has motivated him to do so. As Mundu tries to justify his act, as:

Mundu: Madam all I do here's work, work, work. There's zero recreation time for me. So tell me ma'am why taking such little pleasure deserving so many slaps.

So, it is pleasure factor that has dominated the essence and want of an individual, male or female. However, there are societal norms and values that have restricted to the desire of individuals and, they are forced to live under pressure degrading and declining their interests.

The idiomatic phrase spoil women refer to the corruption of the female psyche through processes of westernization and modernization which would make her ineligible for the mantle of Indian femininity. The protests spread to other parts of the country where theatre owners withdrew the film rather than face the wrath of the religious right. The only exception to this trend was in the city of Calcutta

where viewers shouted out the protesters and forced them to leave cinema halls. These violent responses were countered by civil rights groups, women's groups and other organizations that rallied in support of the screening of the film. The ensuing debate foregrounded the film's representation of women and sexual desire, the role of cinema in the articulation of a national culture, and the limits of dissonance and debate within a liberal democratic framework.

Popular opposition to cinematic representations is not novel nor is it limited to India, but this particular debate reveals the multiple and contradictory ways in which gender, sexuality and religion intersect to produce discourses of national identity. Made by Indian-born Canadian director Deepa Mehta the film's reception in India and other countries with sizable populations of Indian origin reveals as well the imbrication of gender in local resistances to the effects of globalization. (In Singapore and Kenya, residents of Indian-origin were successful in banning *Fire*.) The film and its representations of women became repositories for the anxieties accompanying economic and social transformations enabled by the global flows of labour and capital.

The controversy surrounding *Fire* lies not in the scenes depicted in the movie, but due to the mentality that has ruled the people since ages. They are under the impression that human desire should go according to the culture and traditions, which in Indian scenario is depressing to humans. While the majority of the news articles and journalistic accounts focused on the protests conducted against the film, the opinion pieces and editorial columns tended to espouse support for it. The multivalent reception of *Fire* in India is most usefully seen as an arena wherein a number of discourses around femininity, sexuality and modern nationalism intersect and feed on each other. The various articles and commentaries presented

radically polarized understandings of the function of cinema and of *Fire's* representations of middle-class Indian women. These responses can be understood only in the context of the difficult shifts and uneasy negotiations that mark the construction of modern India; the different valences accorded to gender, sexuality and religion in competing definitions of Indianness.

Above all, the movie exposes the centrality of the female figure in imaginings of the Indian nation and culture. Sorting through these divergent responses helps we understand the ideological investments that have accumulated around the articulation of the female subject and the location of sexuality in discourses of Indian identity, and, in general, discussions of nationalism. An analysis of the para-texts surrounding *Fire* reveals as well the irritated position diasporic cinema occupies in definitions of national identity or national culture.

The controversy over *Fire* occurred at a historical moment when Indian woman was being reconstituted as a diacritic of Hindu nationalism, a specific religious nationalism. When the Hindu fundamentalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), took over the national government its members attempted to resituate women within the structures of the patriarchal family. At the same time, politicians sought to institute an affirmative action program that would ensure women comprised at least a third of elected officials at all levels of representation. On first glance these appear to be contradictory gestures, but, in fact, they permit the Hindu parties to present a 'modern' face and simultaneously lay claim to being the guardian of tradition. As in the nationalist movement of the early twentieth century protesting British colonial rule, in the political arena enabled by the rise of religious fundamentalism woman has emerged once again as a contested symbol central to the articulation of Indian identity. The policing and containment of female sexuality

have become central elements in these imaginations of nation and national identity. Through an examination of the various debates that exploded around the screening of *Fire* I explore the manner in which homosexuality and women's assertion of sexual desire come to signify the endangered purity of the Indian nation. Although I have singled out this instance for analysis, within India, the social construction of gender and compulsory heterosexuality occur quietly at quotidian sites where politics and religion intersect.

Akhil Gupta has theorized that newspaper reports are a discursive form through which daily life is narrated and collectivised. The movie examines English-language newspapers and news magazines as constituting a "zone of public debate" in which journalists, politicians, women activists and community leaders formulated specific discourses about homosexuality, gender, community and nation. The print media challenged and reinforced emergent cultural and political perceptions of a global threat to Indian social structures. The perspectives presented reveal crucial questions about national identity, who belongs, who does not belong, and what characteristics are considered indigenous and which ones alien. In what follows I first describe the film and some of the play it makes with notions of femininity and tradition. Through an examination of newspaper and print media reports it is exposed that the rhetorical tropes and representational strategies adopted by those who protested against and those who supported the screening of the film.

The movie unravels the politics of male hegemony, where it is desired that the female should act for the welfare of the male. It is an engendered species of arguments; however, holds the majority of conceptions of the Indian state residents. The incorporation of a specific brand of woman within the body politics to be

exploited is the desire of the male mentality. The movie juxtaposes these commentaries against the silences that invariably accompany the objectification of women that has become an essential trope of mainstream Indian cinema. Finally, the scenes in the movie point out the spaces made available by the debates presented in the public sphere of print media and the discourses that were marginalized.

Fire is the first part of a trilogy Mehta has conceived to offer a gendered view of the social transformations affected in India during the twentieth century. The second movie in this trilogy is *Earth*, based on Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*, and was released in 1999. It deals with the partition of the subcontinent following British withdrawal in 1947. *Water*, the third movie, travels further back in time to the 1920s and has not been completed at the time of this writing. The Hindu right has opposed the shooting of the film in India, as it was against the norms of their belief.

In *Fire* Mehta presents lesbian desire as a simple choice exercised by two women rather than as a gesture that has important consequences on individual lives and social structures. Indeed, rather than contest existing social structures, the two lovers seek refuge in a Muslim shrine. Fleeing from Hindu patriarchy the two turn to another religious institution rather than seek out a secular space. It is questionable whether any religious organization would offer these two women sanctuary, but Mehta opts to present a rosy, happy-ever-after ending that papers over the social conditions that render lesbians invisible in India. Her narrative suggests that lesbian desire can offer women avenues outside oppressive patriarchal structures.

The film replicates narrative strategies that are commonplace in mainstream Indian cinema and reworks them; its unique features are its explicit portrayal of lesbian desire and the identity of one of its protagonists, Shabana Azmi, who plays Sita. Lesbian relationship in family relationships, their ramifications and consequences are central to the plot in *Fire*. Similarly, the narrative in *Fire* centres on the (in)stability 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 offers a tenuous resolution. In Hindi cinema, the figure of the woman is often cast as posing a threat to the unity of the middle class family, as exemplified in *Mother India*. In *Fire* 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 husbands' behaviours are not cast as disruptive and destabilizing of the family order, instead they are seen as normal. According to Chidananda Das Gupta, Bollywood cinema upholds the status quo, "pray to God, love your parents, live for your husband . . . and everything will be perfect" (40). These themes are addressed in *Fire* only to be cast aside decisively by its female protagonists. Rather than uphold the institution of heterosexual marriage the film configures it as a central site of women's oppression. According to a writer in the English daily the Hindu, lesbianism is:

the loud message that comes through in the film is the loneliness of women within the institution of marriage, the inequality of patriarchy that gives men the right to seek their salvation in another woman or in God and the impotence of men when women decide to take hold of their lives and look for love, compassion and companionship elsewhere. (*Kapur*, 26)

The conflict of values between tradition and modernity is another well-visited theme in mainstream cinema. The binary modernity/tradition, whether it is employed to indicate conflict or complementarity, amounts to an explanation, a conceptual or belief system which regulates thinking about the modern Indian social formation. This binary also figures centrally, both thematically and as an on-going device, in popular film narratives . . . the explanatory scheme in question functions as a disavowal of modernity" (Prasad, 7-8). *Fire* thematizes this 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's focus on female protagonists and the presentation of a social problem resonate with characteristics thematized in alternative Indian cinema. The women may destabilize the family and the traditional order but they are not presented as villains. Instead, they are depicted as heroic for affirming sexual and social relations based on individual happiness. As I have already pointed out, in mainstream cinema, the woman has a very clearly delineated role to perform within a marriage. If for any reason she deviates from it, she is seen as betraying her biological role and she is expected to pay the price in humiliation and defeat. Suicide or a conveniently accidental death has always been the solution for uncomfortable situations involving women. *Fire* rejects this plotline and offers a tentative happy ending as females with same sex relationship does not have a happy ending. Further, women in mainstream cinema are seldom depicted as understanding or supporting of each other. While male camaraderie has been celebrated, women are often depicted as "each others' worst persecutors" (Vasudev,

103). In *Fire* not only do the female protagonists fall in love with each other their relationship from the beginning is depicted as supportive? With these themes Mehta joins several Indian women filmmakers, such as Aparna Sen, who have redrawn the field of the visible by addressing the subject of the female sexual desire, soliciting the female spectator, and initiating a dialogue that points toward the articulation of a postcolonial sexual identity for Indian women.

As such, the gender identity is does not come by birth, but comes through performance. Sexuality of an individual comes through It is constructed depending on the circumstantial and sociological surroundings.

IV. Conclusion

Fire, one of the most controversial movies, depicts lesbian sexual relationship being practiced between two sisters-in-law in a middle class family in India. Lesbian relationship, same-sex relationship, is taken as taboo in a highly conservative society like India. Directed by Indo-Canadian director, Deepa Mehta, the movie revolves around the fact that unfulfilled sexual desire leads to such activities, even amid the near family members.

As in many postmodern and pretentious societies, movies, art or music, the viewer/listener is supposed to fill in the missing details and discover hidden meanings in the product. As such, the depiction of lesbian relationship between the sisters in the movie portrays the existent sexual relationship being practiced in the Indian sub-continent, and within the close family members. Moreover, the notion of indication of Sita resembles one of the deities of Hindus, and hence, there was much furore on the issue by the religious fundamentalists. The depiction of the scene where the sisters are engaged in tongue-kiss and later on massage each others body is the depiction of hidden desire of the women that go unaddressed.

Sexual orientation toward people of the same sex is in frequent rise, as indicated in the movie. The fact is the relationship between Sita and Sita are not new issue in the Eastern concept, but is an ancient issue. Sita is Homosexuality contrasts with heterosexuality, sexual orientation toward people of the opposite sex. People with a sexual orientation toward members of both sexes are called bisexuals. Female homosexuals are frequently called lesbians. In recent years, the term gay has been applied to both homosexual men and women, which has been depicted in the movie, in the scenes where the sisters-in-law are engaged in steamy relationship.

Homosexuality is not an exception to eastern society, as it appears in virtually all social contexts, throughout the world. The number of homosexuals in the population is difficult to determine, and reliable data do not exist. The movie is definitely bold in depicting the same-sex relationship; however, is not knew to the context that almost all the societies around the world have known or followed same-sex relationship.

However, the hypocrisy is film has created opportunity for the Hindu extremist to raise their issues in regards. In a largely conventional society like India, the role played by Shabana Azmi as Sita and Nandita Roy as Sita and the steamy scenes is not digesting in the movie. However, it is a bold step taken by the director to expose the hidden reality in concern to the age-old belief that sex is the determining facts of the society. Thus, the movie, *Fire* is an exposition of hidden reality in regards to lesbian relationship existing in the Eastern society. However, the fact is it does exist, when the male member show their dislike and ignore the physical need of a woman.

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