

## **Queer Politics and Feminism: Creating a Lesbian Feminist Space in Deepa Mehta's *Fire***

**Sreekutty S**  
Ph. D Research Scholar,  
Central University of Haryana.

**Article History:** Submitted-30/09/2020, Revised-20/10/2020, Accepted-21/10/2020, Published-31/10/2020.

### **Abstract:**

As a feminist approach, lesbian feminism enables the critique of both queer politics and feminism into an understanding of re-shaping queer discourses, which would be far off from the one-dimensional definition of lesbian lives. This paper shall look into a new reading of Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996), a queer classic film, from a lesbian feministic perspective which give what possible directions queer politics can take within a transnational context and how will they dissent complexities arising within the same circumstances. It sets out how queer identity has subverted into the cult of hetero-patriarchy. Even the discourse of feminism itself betrayed the non-conforming status of sexuality of their sisterhood for a long period of time. Hence, to expanding the conceptual framework of lesbian feminism would trace out how to accept pluralistic nature of sexuality and various choices of life as it is.

**Keywords: Queer Politics, Feminism, Subversion, Lesbian Feminism, Hetero-patriarchy, choice.**

Eurocentric characterization of queer politics had made an obscure deviation to the early queer studies, therefore a conscious turn from Eurocentric universalism to transnational world would facilitate new temporal and spatial discoveries for queer sexualities. Even the explored areas of western colonial modernity could not recognize the vividness of sexuality at the fullest. Among the queer politics, many kinds of research have been dealing with the particularity of the unexplored area in queer. Especially, the emergence of a lesbian feminist perspective as 'counter-study' has happened due to the deep understanding of queer politics as valorizing masculinity.

The Gay male culture has started ignoring the existence of lesbians in the queer space as the same thing has done by patriarchal society to women. Even though queer politics itself assume to entangle both lesbian and gay studies into a unified platform with common interests but there also the gay male cult of masculinity has completely refuted the interest of lesbian-

feminist understanding. Hypermasculinity as gayness has denied the reality as lesbians belong to the political class of women.

Considering the hypocrisy of queer politics in one end, then the existence of other end cannot be omitted, that holds 'feminism' itself, which betrayed their homosexual sisters as part of their fear as it would endanger their years of hard work or advancement. Even hierarchies created in the realms of feminist space as well. Henceforth, this is the perfect time to go deep into lesbian feminism which can trace out queer politics as well as feminism more specifically and identify various space to dissolve the contradictions. By re-considering the existing discourses and ruptures through lesbian feminist investigation would re-shape the plurality of lesbian lives.

After the historic event of Stonewall riots,<sup>1</sup> India has had a long wait, perchance, around twenty years to yield homosexuality as a debatable subject in Indian soil. Ironically, even that long delay would not transcend the remnants of Victorian morals<sup>2</sup> fully from Indian culture. At the same time in Britain, the actual progenitor of Victorian morals, had taken more revisions and amendments on such puritanical boundaries by bagging the inhuman sodomy laws very long years back. The majority of Indian people are still stuck in between conservatism and the flux of human queerness.

In India, the relationship between lesbian community and women's movement is co-existed though some complexities were there. The authors of the book *Lesbian Feminism: Essays Opposing Global Heteropatriarchies* (2019) remarked as "Post 1947 and up until the late 1980s, autonomous women's movements across India were primarily working around questions of violence (including gender class and caste-based violence)". Over time, the women-loving women gradually started to asserting their space along with the question "who is the woman in the women's movement" (Banerjea et al. 18). Later, lesbian collectives collaborated with feminist organisations to understand and discover the wider version of complexities surrounding women's sexuality. Nevertheless, the equality agenda in Indian feminist politics are questioned by lesbian women when homophobia and hierarchy of violence become prevalent within the movements itself. Due to the hierarchy of violence such as poverty, suicide and gender-based violence, even among feminist has had a confusion regarding how to give preferences or how to intelligibly articulate lesbian issues under the purview. However, the dilemma or "the defining moment, for the solidification of a 'lesbian

community and critique' triggered by the backlash surrounding the release of *Fire*" (Banerjee et al. 18).

*Fire* (1996) is an exemplary movie directed by Deepa Mehta, which has narrated, investigated, and deciphered the multivalence of desire in India. It explicitly deals with non-normative love, emotions and togetherness between two female characters, Sita and Radha. Literally, since the name of the characters itself to each and every single element of this movie has subjected to questioning by the conventional society in India. Despite the train of controversies, it has opened new landscapes of sexuality and desires to the centre of discussions.

Deepa Mehta, an Indo- Canadian director who made this trailblazer movie and released in Europe and US in 1996, got a positive reception from the audience. Later she won several international accolades and critical acclamations. But this favourable juncture did not help in Indian soil. *Fire* was released in 1998 in India which created a huge furore in the society. The protesters went to vandalise screening all over the nation, even halted the screening in Mumbai. Shiv Sena, the right-wing organisation, "justified its actions by claiming that the film's depiction of lesbianism was an affront to Hinduism and alien to Indian culture" (Gopinath 131). Perhaps, this statement suggesting how the basic instinct of sexuality being politicised into the eastern-western binary.

The detractors were primarily believed and propagated that homosexuality was a western creation as perhaps the influence of colonisation and whereby this particular discourse was actually trying to exterminate the sanctity of both womanhood and Indian nationhood. Henceforth, even the diasporic status of Deepa Mehta was questioned, and the Hindu extremists filed an obscenity charge against her. This incident, indeed, recalls the publication and the following turmoil around Ismat Chughtai's short story "The Quilt" in 1941. According to Deepa Mehta, *Fire* movie got its source from "The Quilt" and the story metaphorically alarming the existence of female homoeroticism under the shadow of the quilt (Indian culture). Chughtai also faced obscenity trail for the content. Interestingly, once again, the double standard of society came to the forefront when Lahore government specifically charged case for the portrayal of female same sex relations in Chughtai's short story on one hand, and on the other they conveniently ignored male homoerotic sections in the story. *In Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (2005), Gayatri Gopinath writes:

That the Indian colonial government, alerted by members of the elite Muslim community in Lahore, deemed Chughtai's representation of female homoeroticism a far greater threat to public decency than her representation of male homoeroticism speaks volumes about the tremendous symbolic and discursive weight attached to female bodily desires and practices (132).

Although many feminist groups and collective started to come forward to fetch their support over the film. They actually brought several campaigns and open discussions not only about homosexuality but also about the freedom and expression of art and the politics of woman body and desire more explicitly, even tried to ask for constitutional rights. For a feminist movement, "the creation of woman-loving" (Jeffreys 20) is necessary, because the plights of women in a patriarchal structure is/ are almost identical. Nevertheless, on the other side the majority of protesters among Hindu extremists were primarily women activists of Shiva Sena. They thought it would destroy the sanctity of both womanhood and marriage. When the film began to challenge marriage as completely a hetero-sexual institution, the women who were fighting for woman's right quickly changed the track. One among the prominent detractor was Madhu Kishwar, a famous feminist writer who critiqued the film as "the director lacks an understanding of family life and emotional bonds in India... I wanted to ignore [the film] as an exercise in self-flagellation by a self-hating Hindu and a self-despising Indian ... (Gopinath 132). Such types of scathing attacks are certainly a backlash to feminism itself. In fact, the core problem is that, women have internalised patriarchy to the extent as they could not even identify their mediocre status in both domestic and public life, moreover, the power dichotomies in the family structure like husband/ wife, mother/ father has been normalised as a typical or standard mode of living. Indian culture sanctified conjugal loyalty as the building block of family, henceforth, being unmarried is regarded as something ill-fate or jinx to the society.

The movie started with a mind soothing scene of a flowery mustard field where the child Radha and her parents spend their leisure time. Her mother tells an old story that a long time ago people who lived in the mountains had a wish to see the sea. Thus, an old woman among them opined that "what you can't see you can see ...you just have to see without looking!" (00.00.56). This incitement actually analogizes the affair between public visibility and erasure of lesbian relationship in the society. Even the younger Radha at the time could not digest the connotative meaning of "see without looking". This scene is more than enough to explain Deepa Mehta's capability as a director in Asian- diasporic cinematic world. She visualises the

whole implications and meanings of the movie with a simple phrase of exhortation “see without looking”, which demarcates the politics of visibility.

The burgeoning love story of Radha and Sita, the two heroines of the movie have really made a blow to Bollywood’s hero vs heroine camaraderie. *Fire* has chosen the character of two sister in laws as their cardinal subject of love and desire. Radha and her saintly husband Ashok, Sita and her indifferent husband Jatin live in a joint family in New Delhi which explicates the familial structure of Indian culture. Indeed, no doubt, these respective husbands are the prodigy of patriarchal mindset. Ashok is highly religious and devoted to a local guru in order to find a way towards universal truth, for that guru advised him to be detached from the worldly pleasures and Jatin who is already occupied with a Chinese woman despite the fact that he is married to Sita. Later, some of the unprecedented efflorescence of various events in the plot perhaps, has created an amazing closeness between Sita and Radha, they fell in love with each other.

*Fire* has actually made an attention of the immediate requirement of a feminist reading, more specifically, a lesbian feminist understanding of Indian narratives and its overlapping structures like religion and patriarchy. Even the name of Sita and Radha itself became a subject of debate among Indian folks, as a result they have changed characters’ name in Mumbai. According to Hindu mythology, Radha and Sita stand as the paragons of Indian ideal women which is rooted in their chastity, self-sacrificing and servitude towards their respective partners, Krishna and Rama, both are the incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Even the title of the movie, *Fire* itself originated from the *agni pareksha* or the Fire trial in the story of *Ramayana*. Sita an ideal woman and an epitome of Hindu wives, has to face a trial by fire in order to prove her chastity before Rama. In the epic *The Mahabharatha*, Radha portrayed as the consort of lord Krishna, and her existence is always appraised with the union of Krishna. That dependency has organized the ideal conception of “transcendent hetero-sexual union” in Hindu religion, despite the fact that “Krishna, who is famous for his womanising” (Gopinath 141). Consciously ignoring the real or symbolic misconception for the convenience would facilitate more preferences and privileges, for instance, to a particular gender, which can be under varied social-political-religious spheres. The image of Krishna itself is represented in such a manner, only the virtue has exposed and the vices are intentionally erased for the invention of a prototype.

An analysis of the movie *Fire* would definitely reveal the fissures and ruptures of society, especially dealing with alternative sexualities as an antithesis to both Indian nationalistic and hetero-patriarchal framework. Even the Indian feminist scholarship has not adequately critiqued the dominant realms of heterosexuality. However, the examination of storming atrocities happened inside and outside India due to the screening of a film are enough to show how badly Indian scholarships needed a feminist reading of heteronormativity.

In *Identity Politics; Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community* (1989), Shane Phelan writes: "The first lesson we can learn from Lesbian Feminism is the extent to which relations of power manifest themselves in and through language" (135). What exactly does this mean that a conscious use of language would demarcate the real undercurrent root of patriarchy and it can be used as a weapon to establish a space for the marginalised. But it is also true that, from the time memorial, languages are structured systematically in support of the privileged classes. In the case of homosexuality, there are scarcity of languages or words which is narrowed or entirely erased from the hetero-space.

Interestingly, *Fire* movie is entirely in English language despite the fact that India is rich with immense variety of languages. Many critics have questioned the choice of English language in this film, which they have interpreted as the colonial hangover of the director. But Mehta justified this treatment in no time, as the film itself portrayed a scene where Sita comments to Radha, "There is no word in our language to describe what we are or what we feel for each other" (01:33:17). An exhortation of this conversation brought back the real anxiety of Indian women as how much they are being inaccessible to the basic mechanism of a society. "Mehta's own pronouncement in the press note that "Indians don't talk about sex"" (Gopinath 142). In the film, as in 'The Quilt', Chughtai had also made a tricky declaration which helps her out of the obscenity trial. In the *Manushi*<sup>2</sup> Interview, she says:

In those days the word 'lesbianism' was not in use. I did not know exactly what it was. The story is a child's description of something she cannot fully understand. It was based on my own experience as a child. I knew no more than the child knew. The lawyer argued that only those who already had some knowledge could understand the story. I won the case" (Chughtai 1983: 5) (Gopinath 151).

In its representation it is very ironic that a country which wrote *Kamasutra*, cannot have a word or language to extricate woman's love for each other! Once again, the discussion on western and eastern dichotomy is back on the front. Western reviewers like Margaret McGurk,

Bill Morrison criticised *Fire* as an authentic picturisation of regressive sexual oppression exist in non-west countries. By this statement they were tried to articulate a colonial stand point as non-western countries are primitive. But lesbian feminism eliminates such hierarchies by organizing and expanding the available resources in an egalitarian sense. Nothing new could be added to it, even in the most advanced work of western queer theory, Guy Hocquenghem's *Homosexual Desire* (1972), did not mention the term 'lesbian'. In fact, "it was a good example of a fundamental problem with generic words such as 'gay' 'homosexual' and 'queer'. They mean men unless women are explicitly included" (Jeffreys 34). In the sense, there is a common grounding everywhere in women's issues regardless of wester/eastern difference perhaps, the degree of hierarchies may change corresponding to it. In western countries racism would highlight other hierarchies, similarly in India perhaps, caste would grab the same role. Thus, a lesbian feminist analysis requires a new language to extricate the foundation of heteropatriarchy and to interrogate the erasure of lesbian subjectivities.

Yet Deepa Mehta also repeatedly defended the film *Fire* is not a lesbian film, as it is about a personal choice of two persons. Perhaps, this statement has two purposes; firstly, the director has made a compromise or a reconciliation more effectively through generalising things under humanism, she does not want to be specific or directly project her films as labelled a lesbian film. Even the situation in India at that time was not in favour of welcoming a lesbian film whole handily. Secondly, the articulation of seeing lesbianism as a choice, which is a core point of lesbian feminist theorization. Mehta deployed a realistic narrative strategy towards the play of choices as throughout the movie. Lesbianism can be a choice, that great possibility is acknowledged and executed through the relation of Sita and Radha. Their emotional dependency and sustenance for each other simply define that homosexuality can be situational. But several critics argued as: "Fire's "subversive potential" is "nullified by its largely masculinist assumption that men should not neglect the sexual needs of their wives lest they turn lesbian" (Ghosh 137). Even queer scholars supported this argument by saying this film is an insult to lesbians. Actually, some of their views are entirely depending on the essentialist thought as sexuality cannot be stimulated in unlikely circumstances. Those critics believe lesbians are born that way; it is not out of choice.

Further, lesbian feminism points to the politics of cross-dressing as a transgression in queer theory. This notion has become fashionable content in many queer discourses, even in *Fire* as well. Deepa Mehta has delineated the possibility of cross-gender identification mainly through two scenes, the first one was when Sita locked her room and removed her saree in order to

wore her husband's pants and danced effortlessly with an Indi pop song. This mode of adaptation of the conventional attire of the opposite gender (masculine gender) which could interpret as a temporary urge to enjoy the freedom even that dress can cause. Then she took a cigarette and mimic as the way her husband smoke. In its representation it is clear that Sita was so excited to enjoy every bit of freedom that masculine gender has been enjoying in the society for a very long time. The second example is when Sita and Radha danced before of Biji, the head of the family, where they exactly imitated the cliché visualisation of Bollywood hero-heroine playfulness. However, their dress and their acting show their true desire to enjoy the freedom through 'role-playing'. The gender mobilisation, the dressing of Sita and Radha depicts the butch/ femme role respectively. Here, the circumlocution of queer theory in treating Butler's idea of 'performativity of gender' is used to shield role-playing. But according to the perspective of lesbian feminism, it would be a mere example of eroticisation of inequality which is always glorified by queer theory without any fringes. Lesbian feminism traces the impact of such imitation as;

Sexism is also reflected in the roles homosexuals have copied from straight society. The labels might differ, but it is the same unequal situation, as long as roles are rigidly defined, as long as one person exercises power over another. For straights it is male-female, master/mistress. For gays it is butch/femme, aggressive-passive (Jeffreys 11).

There is no advantage being indulging in role playing as it is an imitation of heteropatriarchy. Perhaps, that particular scene can be demonstrated as an inner cry of homosexuals to the audience or to Biji, to accept them as a couple as the way they accept hetero-couple. Any way the lesbian feminist challenged the role-playing as it will re-constitute new hierarchies among homosexuals itself.

However, in accordance to queer theory, this particular scene of cross-gender identification is articulated as a method of subverting male space. But the real problem lies where this transgression became closeted in the binary field of masculinity verses femininity and so it would be better when "there should be less celebration of transgression and more consideration of how the behaviours being celebrated may emerge from the internalised self-hatred of subaltern" (Jeffreys 43). In the movie there is one more scene which has given a cue, female subversion is the revolutionary idea of the movie, particularly in Karva Chauth scene, Sita breaks her fast by using a glass of water offered by Radha, according to the Indian tradition, husbands should break the fasting of their respective wives. As Shohini Ghosh writes: "The



ritual of Karva Chauth is subverted, reconstituted, rendered meaningless and infused with new meaning (90). Indeed, the romantic vision of rituals are queered through this subversive act and it can be called the queering of tradition.

The impossibility of women to consider lesbians are also part of the existed political class of women is highly despondent and it should be rectified for the expansion of solidarity. In the movie, Gayathri Gopinath writes: “the stultifying effects of ‘tradition’ are embodied in the character of Biji, the mute, paralytic grandmother who keeps a disapproving eye on the activities of her daughter-in-law” (141). As a woman, Biji’s character is loaded with lots of significance. On the half of the movie, Biji has been portrayed as a woman who is tortured and suffered of patriarchy. She was really a victim to the male-servant Mundu, when he masturbated in front of her non-hesitantly, ignoring even her status as the head of the family. This shows since Mundu has no authority in the family but he belongs to the political class of men that hired him at this level. And the other half, she became the intimidator and constant watcher of the relationship between Sita and Radha. She keeps ringing a bell when she needed, later, the furious sound of bell itself symbolically represent a warning to their relationship. Hence the role of Biji has featured as the harbinger of hetero-patriarchy among the political class of women, and her muteness playfully represent her helplessness even inside the patriarchy. According to Sheila Jeffreys, “the solidarity of the oppressed was a necessary basis for organizing” a lesbian feminist perspective (20). Feminist politics should maintain an effort to capture the basic understanding of woman-bonding to eradicate the regulatory forms of hetero-patriarchy.

Tracing such intersectional instances from a classic work like the movie *Fire* explores the varied narrative concept of different politics pertaining to queer discourses. Lesbian feminism as a critique of both queer and feminist politics, has been trying to “build a woman-identified, woman-loving world”, for that to engaging in a radical process of "cultural reconstruction," lesbian feminists must start from the ground up (Phelan 63). A lesbian feminist reading would facilitate the creation of a democratized non- normative desires and theorizing alternative sexualities from a feminist perspective would allow new models of sexual subjectivity into the forefront. This approach would enable how to understand the queering of feminism and queer theory intensely.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> An uprising began in Stonewall Inn, a gay bar, on June 28, 1969 at Greenwich Village, New York City. This rebellion was a gay rights protest against the immediate raiding of police into the homosocial bars and took many lesbian and gay people illegally into the custody. In 1970, the first gay pride march took place in New York as the triumphant anniversary of the protest. Indeed, Stonewall riots became a stepping stone of the liberation and the formation of LGBTQ movements. Manalansan, Martin. "In the Shadows of Stonewall: Examining Gay Transnational Politics and the Diasporic Dilemma." *In The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, Duke University Press, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> The colonial British rule has introduced criminalization of homosexuality in 1864. Homosexual acts considered as sinful and unnatural and it was against the moral set in Victorian era.

<sup>3</sup> *Manushi*: An Indian journal founded in 1978 by Ruth Vanitha and Madhu Kishwar, the famous feminist scholars in India. The journal has published immense number of articles and research papers on gender studies and feminism.

### **Works Cited:**

Banerjea, Niharika, et al. *Lesbian Feminism: Essays Opposing Global Heteropatriarchies*. Zed Books Ltd., 2019.

Chughtai Işmat. *The Quilt: The Story in Multiple Translations*. Four Corners, 2008.

*Fire*. Directed by Deepa Mehta, Zeitgeist Films, 1996

Jeffreys, Sheila. *Unpacking Queer Politics: A lesbian Feminist Perspective*. Blackwell Publishers, 2003.

Ghosh, Shohini. *Fire: A Queer Film Classic*. Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010.

Gopinath, Gayatri. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Duke UP, 2005.

Phelan, Shane. *Identity Politics; Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community*. Temple University Press, 1989.