

From the Frying Pan to the Fire: Dismantled Myths and Deviant Behaviour

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"...while men sleep and dream their dreams of omnipotence over a safely reduced worlds, women are not where they are supposed to be locked into male "views" of them, imprisoned in their master's dollhouse."

Tania Modleski in *Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (1988).

The paper is a feminist defense of Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1997) a film about two sisters-in-law who fall in love. While their husbands pursue their own compulsions (one pursues celibacy and the other his Chinese lover), the women are literally left holding the frying pan as they spend their day in the kitchen supplying food to the takaway restaurant that the family runs. I will argue that the significance of the film lies not in cinematic excellence but because it makes visible the hitherto invisible lesbian on the film screen. The Hindu Right's violent response to the film lends credence to this significance. Not just because of its lesbian content but because it interpellates the film within the social discourse that surrounds the film. The title is somewhat tongue-in-cheek. Just as the two female protagonists leap 'from the frying pan to the fire' in choosing to love each other instead of their husbands, those who choose to defend the film could well be doing the same.

THE HINDU RIGHT'S PREDICTABLE PREDILECTIONS

Exactly six years after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, fanatics of the Hindu Right went on a rampage against *Fire*. On December 2, 1998 activists of the *Shiv Sena Mahila Aghadi* accompanied by other Shiv Sena activists disrupted commercial screenings of *Fire* and vandalized theatre halls in Mumbai. As a precautionary measure other theatres showing *Fire* also discontinued screening. The next day, Shiv Sena activists stormed Regal Cinema in Delhi disrupted the screening and destroyed property. An eight member delegation of the Aghadi met the Cultural Affairs Minister, Mr. Promod Navalkar and asked for an immediate ban on the film. Condemning "lesbianism" in

the film the petitioners wrote: "If women's physical needs get fulfilled through lesbian acts, the institution of marriage will collapse . . . reproduction of human beings will stop." Navalkar forwarded the letter to the Chairperson of the Censor Board and the Prime Minister. Instead of acting against the vandalism of the Shiv Sena, the BJP government predictably chose to target the film as a problem. Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, Minister of State Information and Broadcasting re-directed the film to be reviewed by the Censor Board. Naqvi justified the vandalism of the Shiv Sainiks by stating that Freedom of Speech and Expression did not mean that "any thing" could be shown." Moreover, he said, the protests showed that whatever was being depicted in the film was non "Indian culture." Following the forced withdrawal of the film, actor Dilip Kumar along with filmmakers Mahesh Bhatt and Deepa Mehta filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court seeking protection for the screening of the film. On December 12, about sixty Shiv Sainiks clad only in their underwear demonstrated outside Dilip Kumar's house. The 'strip act' was ostensibly a 'protest' against Dilip Kumar's alleged support to 'nudity' in *Fire*. Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray defended the demonstration saying that he objected to *Fire* because "it is not our national culture." "Has lesbianism spread like an epidemic", he asked, "that it should be portrayed as a guideline to unhappy wives not to depend on their husbands and is this the meaning and message that should be given to spoil younger generations and those who have no idea about it.?"

Objecting to the "Hindu" backdrop to the story, Thackeray offered to support the film provided the names of the female protagonists were changed to Shabana and Saira instead of Radha and Sita. In other words, lesbianism was "alien" like the muslims and neither had any place in the socio-cultural landscape of 'Hindu India'. Earlier in the year when Bajrang Dal activists had broken into painter M.F. Hussain's house for allegedly 'hurting' the sentiments of the Hindus, Thackeray had said: "If Hussain can come into Hindustan why can't we barge into his house?" In another take on this twisted vision, Maharashtra Chief Minister Murli Manohar Joshi defended the Shiv Sainiks saying "culture is more important than art" as though the two could be separated.

Lesbianism apart, the Hindu Right's anxiety is also about the inseparability of art from cultural practices, cultural practices from cultural processes. The Hindutva imagery of Hindu culture as homogenous, pure and originary is threatened by any hint of diversity. The idea that both "culture" and "tradition" are dynamic, changing, fluid, flexible, impermanent, porous and often contradictory

destabilizes the Hindu Right's notion of a centralized "cultural nationalism" and a singular "nationalist vision". The discrediting of both Hussain's work and *Fire* using the allegation of "perversion" and thereby "alien" is Hindutva's desperate attempt to recuperate its authoritarian hold over the two fluid and multiply interpretable concepts of "culture" and "tradition". Like Hussain's work, *Fire* is both about "culture" (as embodied in the lives of a Hindu, middle class urban family) and a product of the same "culture." The inseparability of the two is anathema to Hindutva's "cultural nationalism."

PASSION IN THE PRIVATE SPHERE

Fire is a love story that challenges many assumptions. It does so with a simultaneous address to myths that is at one level oppositional and at another recuperative. For this recuperation and dismantling, it chooses the sanctum sanctorum of Hindu middle class existence—the home and the family.

Fire is about a middle class urban family living in Delhi's crowded Lajpat Nagar. Sita (Nandita Das) arrives into the family having married the younger brother Jatin (Javed Jaffrey) who runs a local video store. Radha (Shabana Azmi) is older than Sita and is married to Jatin's elder brother Ashok (Kulbushan Kharbanda). She runs the household including takeaway food service that the family runs. Other members include Ashok and Jatin's mute and paralyzed mother, the ageing Bibiji (Kushal Reikhi) and the devious domestic help Mundu (Ranjit Chowdhury).

For entirely different reasons neither Jatin nor Ashok are particularly interested in their wives. Ashok is devoted to his spiritual leader Swamiji and spends most of his time and money at the ashram. Jatin has a Chinese girlfriend who he is unable to stop seeing. *Fire* is about the growing bond between Radha and Sita and their eventual falling in love. The relationship erupts into a family scandal when Ashok, tipped by Mundu, discovers the two women in bed. Despite Bibiji and Ashok's contempt and a literal 'trial' by fire, Radha and Sita leave the house in order to start a life together.

The metaphoric dismantling of the master's house begins with the home itself. The space for Radha and Sita's growing erotic intimacy become articulated around sisters that have traditionally been used to keep women in their place like the kitchen, bedroom and the terrace. Both Radha and Sita spend a lot of time in the kitchen helping with the takeaway. Sita chooses to be in the kitchen with Radha instead of watching religious videos with Bibiji. Ashok is pleased with Sita's

decision. "It's good that you want to help" he says. "After all, if family members don't help each other who will? But of course, once you have a baby that will become your full-time job. A child is a gift from God and deserves full time attention." (Radha has been unable to bear Ashok any children. Therefore, Ashok practices celibacy because according to Swamiji, indulging in sex outside the purpose of procreation is sinful). Later, after the two women have fallen in love, Radha begins to tell Sita the virtues of various spices while cooking in the kitchen. The green cardamom, she says, is used as a breath freshener for young brides to please their husbands. "What about wives?" asks Sita popping one in her mouth and inviting Radha to smell her breath.

For Ashok the bedroom is a space to experiment in abstinence using Radha. In Jatin's bedroom, Sita is mostly alone. It is here that Radha discovers the newlywed Sita crying and takes her into her arms. Comforting her leads to their first kiss. Then when Ashok goes away to the ashram, Sita steals into Radha's room where they make love for the first time. Thereafter, the bedroom becomes the space where Radha and Sita consummate their love.

The terrace is a space of both work and leisure. Here the women hang and dry clothes and at the same time look out to catch glimpses of the world outside. From here, Radha and Sita watch a wedding procession go by as they wait for their husbands to return. The terrace also allows play and games and the re-working and dismantling of rules. Here, Radha and Sita turn the husband-worship of Karva Chauth into a ritual of their love for each other and where an innocuous game of hopscotch turns into erotic foreplay.

Concurrently with the gradual excavation of desire, Radha learns to disobey diktats of Hindu middle class traditions. The willing Radha is seductively led astray as disobedience seems to come naturally to Sita whose first miscarriage of housewifely duties occurs when she fails to hear Bibiji's bell. This inadvertent act of disobedience sets in motion the project of dismantling. And for the love of Sita, Radha becomes an accomplice in disobedience. From Sita, Radha unlearns compulsions of duty and traditional expectations including that of compulsory heterosexuality.

The Karva Chauth sequence exemplifies the film's engagement with the dismantling and recuperation of myths and cultural traditions. On this day, a dutiful Radha and a reluctant Sita fast for the long life of their husbands. According to tradition the fast is broken after the wives have seen the moon and thereafter their husbands. Having received the blessings of the husbands, the wives are allowed to break their fast. As Radha touches Ashok's feet he asks: "Are you Happy?"

Then adds benevolently: "Take it Easy. Fasting without water was difficult even for Mahatma Gandhi."

As the day goes by Mundu and Bibiji keep a check to see that the women are indeed fasting. Bibiji rings her bell each time Sita makes any hungry or thirsty exclamations and Mundu sadly comments that "Sita madam is too modern." Radha proceeds to enlighten Sita about this ritual by recounting the legend of Karva Chauth; the story of a queen's devotion to her royal husband and her final reward and salvation. Radha's oral telling of the story is transformed into 'calendar art' images by Mundu's colourful imagination. In this kitschy visual narrative Mundu is king and Radha is his devoted queen. Predictably, his imagination takes the form of television mythologicals that Bibiji loves to watch. That Mundu's grand egocentric fantasy is rendered through the matrix of televisual kitsch underscores the irony of the unsettled domestic situation and preempts the complete dismantling that is about to follow.

Finally, the women sight the moon but Sita is unable to break her fast as Jatin is missing and therefore unable to bless her. Radha breaks Sita's fast and tradition by offering her a glass of water. As Sita drinks the water offered by Radha the ritual of Karva Chauth is dismantled and reconstituted; rendered meaningless and infused with new meaning. Disobedience becomes both an oppositional discourse and the language of reclamation.

Bonded by their love, Radha and Sita begin to turn their weaknesses into strengths. They become complicit in metamorphosing mundane chores into pleasurable activities. At the family picnic in Lodhi Gardens, Jatin asks Sita to press Radha's feet. Clearly, Sita's ready compliance does not spring from familial obligation or a sense of duty. Similarly, both women look forward to their husbands leaving the house so that they can be alone together. Here, in the masters house, the women use the master's tools to dismantle his own house.

But do Radha and Sita fall in love because their husbands refuse to love them? That the film shows lesbianism as a fallout of unhappy marriages has been a major criticism of the film and a legitimate one. Women need not fall in love with women because of painful encounters with heterosexuality. Just as women do not fall in love with men (and vice versa) because of painful encounters with homosexuality. To this extent the film would seem to fold back into a homophobic interpretive scheme by implying that Radha and Sita would not have fallen in love had their husbands loved them. While not all viewers are likely to subscribe to this interpretation, it cannot

be doubted that the film would have been truly subversive had even one of the husbands loved their wives.

However, the final reconciliation with the two women coming to terms with their relationship happens through a chance encounter with yet another 'stigmatized deviance'. Radha catches Mundu masturbating in front of a sexually explicit tape while Bibiji watches in distress. (This was the reason why Bibiji rang the bell violently each time Mundu offered to take her upstairs to show her the Ramayana on video). This grotesquely funny spectacle is disrupted by Radha's unexpected entry. A shocked and repulsed Radha slaps Mundu and threatens to throw him out. Mundu retaliates by threatening to divulge the "hanky panky" between her and "madam Sita". Radha is torn not so much by fear of being exposed but more by an inability to distinguish her own predicament from that of Mundu's. Mundu was being selfish by thinking only of his own desires. Was she doing the same? Finally, it is Radha's unapologetic acceptance of her own desires that reconciles her to her relationship with Sita and provides the impetus to leave Ashok. She tells him:

"... Do you know that without desire I was dead? Without desire there is no point in living. And you know what else? I desire to live. I desire Sita. I desire her warmth, her compassion and her body. I desire to live again."

Radha's walking out of the house is impeded by her saree catching fire. She manages to escape as Ashok chooses to save Bibiji and not Radha. Surviving the literal "trial by fire", Radha is reunited with Sita. In contrast to the protagonist of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, it is not Sita who undergoes the trial by fire. In a metaphoric reversal the trial by *Fire* is for Sita and not by her. Like her mythical namesake, Radha surmounts innumerable obstacles to be united with her lover. Yet the symbology is not just that of a Hindu mythical terrain but also that of Sufi Islam. Radha and Sita are reunited at the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin famed for his intense and homoerotic bond with the legendary poet Amir Khusro. The film ends with the women in embrace within this symbolic space. It is unlikely that *Fire* will go down in cinematic history as a great film. It is a film that is significant more for its content than its treatment. The story, characters and plot are neither rich nor textured. The sights and sounds of Lajpat Nagar lack depth and nuances. The mimetic quality of realism that the film adopts works to its detriment. Even the tropes of Hindu cultural practices remain direct and uncomplicated. Perhaps, the most trite mythical reference is the very literal 'agni pariksha' with its oft-repeated resonances of sati and dowry murders. With the exception of the performances of its protagonists, the film is

unlikely to improve on second viewing.

Yet *Fire's* place in the history of Indian cinema is assured. It will remain a pioneering film in that it casts gender as a construction involving factors far more complex, fluid and abstract than biology would have us believe. Thereby it counters simple biological definitions of male and female that are frequently used to justify homophobia.

Moreover, the film dares to re-work the heterosexist myth that women in love must remain invisible onscreen. Reflecting upon the cinematic invisibility of lesbian women, Terry Castle in the *Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern culture*, writes that "The lesbian is never with us, it seems, but always somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind, a wanderer in the dusk, a lost soul, a tragic mistake, a pale denizen of the night." She is the "apparitional lesbian" who resides in the world of vapors.

Female bonding (whether homosocial or homoerotic) have been largely absent from the Indian film screen. They have existed either as suggestions or in fleeting moments only to disappear into the margins. *Fire* is the first film to bring women in love out of the margins into the mainstream and provide a body to the shadow-like liminal lesbian of film narrative in India. For those in the audience waiting to see women in love, they need no longer read against the grain.

