

Citation information:

Ahmad Hasson, 'Deepa Mehta's 'Fire' : A celebration of sexuality much ahead of its time' (2022) 1(1) Your Voice Magazine 10-13.

Deepa Mehta's 'Fire' : A celebration of sexuality much ahead of its time
- By Ahmad Hasson

The context

'Fire' is a movie by Deepa Mehta representing a dusky narrative, depicting the miserable lives of two women due to the oppression they face in their households, making it a loose representation of several Indian households. The narrative of the movie undeniably revolves around patriarchy and women being oppressed by their partners. Along with this, the movie gives a very strong message, normalising homosexuality with the story of the female protagonists who found love and solace in each other after being abandoned by their husbands. Quoting from the scenes of the movie – "Radha, the female protagonist, being infertile could not procreate and consequently, her partner started visiting a priest to practice celibacy, this had been the course for 13 years". This can be owed to the fact that women are perceived as breeding livestock and those who cannot breed do not deserve the love of their partners. A similar narrative has also been carried forward by the story of Sita the junior female protagonist.

The plot of the movie mimics the lack of an emotion-driven relationship between both the couples. Over the years, the lack of participation of women in the political hemisphere has been observed and it is safe to say that what happens inside the walls of one's house is what replicates itself in the outer hemisphere.

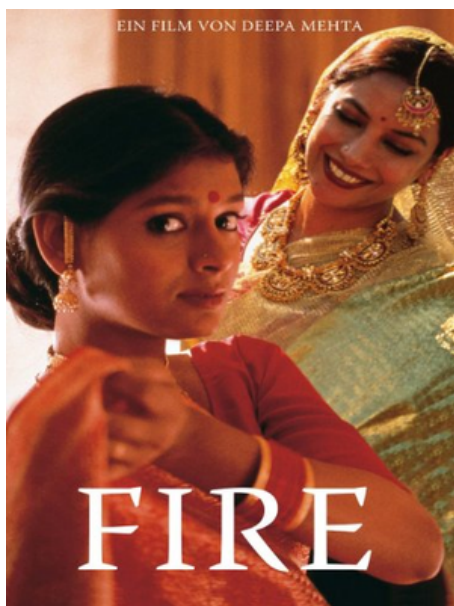


Women have been tied to traditions and customs which have kept them confined to the household work, childbearing and rearing, giving them the position of nothing more than an entity serving their husbands. The history of homosexuality in India has come a long way and has incurred huge development, when Deepa Mehta's 'Fire' screened in 1998 it attracted various protests where Shiv Sena activists vandalised the posters of the movie, whereas contrastingly in 2018 The Supreme Court decriminalised Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code which deals with homosexuality.

The Shiv Sena protests in 1998 lead to issuance of absurd statements like – “If women’s physical needs are fulfilled through lesbian acts, the institution of marriage will collapse and the reproduction of human beings will stop.” The movie through its screenplay sparked a debate on the status of sexuality and homosexuality where both the right and left wing had differing or contrasting opinions.

The taboo of sexuality

Despite all this, expressing sexuality is still a taboo in many societies across the world, and the Indian society and households are still are not open to this conversation leading to familial problems which often are not even exposed outside the realm of the family.



The release of the film even triggered a debate on the violation of human rights within the institution of marriage and in households in general. Through its story line, the movie clearly depicted how the functioning of Indian households violate the “Right to live with human dignity” of different communities, especially women. They are denied to live their life on their own terms, denied affection from their partners due to a mere fact that they can not procreate and are left to burn in flames if made an attempt to realise and show their sexuality. In the narrative of the movie, physical violence upon the wives by their husbands is also witnessed which compromises their right to live with dignity. With due respect to the above, it is also to be noted that “‘The World Human Rights Conference’ in Vienna first recognised gender – based violence as a violation of human rights violation in 1993. The same was declared by ‘United Nations Declaration’ in 1993.” Furthermore, in the narrative of the movie the women are also denied the ‘Right to equality; as gender discrimination clearly enshrines upon them. Procreation of children is commonly considered to be the sole purpose of these housewives who often face various forms of violence for not being able to give birth to male child.



The social uproar

'Fire' screened in the late 1990's gives out a very strong message – A human should have total autonomy on something as personal as their sexuality. Being in love, Sita and Radha are fascinated in the movie, they constantly try to find time to spend with each other while hiding their relationship from their families, and being unsure of how correct their actions were. "This form of love is new to them, as Radha tells Sita – "this isn't familiar to me, this awareness of needs and desires." However, this is the only part about the movie which is unsettling, the notion that these women get to explore their sexualities as a consequence of the unhappiness arising from their failed marriages. The movie also portrays how women are denied control over their sexualities, and in case they decide to explore their sexualities, they are shunned from the society and are subjected to personal attacks and name calling.

The movie very beautifully and aptly pointed out the notions of Homosexuality and lesbianism. The Indian society does not explain the relation of lesbianism and having autonomus control on ones sexuality, it is a new concept and is not considered normal because traditional Indian households have never been vocal neither have most of the members of families had conversations about their desires and sexuality.

The movie depicts a harsh reality of gender discrimination based on sexual desires in the Indian society. While the slightest expression of sexual desires from the female protagonists were regarded as dishonourable, the male protagonist, Jatin had the liberty to seek sexual satisfaction outside marriage. The movie gives out a very boisterous message, one's sexuality is their own, when a man finds it easy to seek salvation outside his unhappy marriage, a woman too can break the norms and traditions. Two females can seek companionship and love each other and so can two men.

Parting words

Although homosexuality is a very important concept 'Fire' deals with, the movie essentially is an example of how dangerous traditions and cultures are, advancing the notion that regardless the gender, everyone in society is controlled by the web of traditions and cultures, women being the most oppressed, the fact can not be denied that these traditions even oppress the oppressor which is highlighted by the plot where Jatin argues with his brother on him being married to Sita against his will, just for the sake of carrying forward the family's lineage.

About the author



Ahmad Hasson is a fourth year PhD researcher at University of Sussex Law School. Ahmad's interest lies in gender and sexuality studies concerning South East Asia. Ahmed's research is on the Swara practices of Pashtun women in Pakistan. Ahmad is a prolific columnist in a number of notable dailies in Pakistan.

Citation information:

Raghavi and Ragi, 'The Transness Of Intimacies And Desires: Can You Love Me Like This Now?' (2022) 1(1) Your Voice Magazine 113-16.

The Transness Of Intimacies And Desires: Can You Love Me Like This Now?

- By Raghavi & Ragi

"They say nothing lasts forever but they're just scared it will last longer than they can love it"

— Ocean Vuong, **On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous**

From the click-clack opening sound of tiffin boxes during a recess spent alone in first grade, to the bubbles bursting in the shower as we try to scrub ourselves out of our skin – we don't realize how lonely we are till we start craving the closure whose possibility was erased before it could be interpreted.

Our existence juxtaposes to reveal a silhouette of voids when forcefully confronted with flirtations by those closest to us. Our isolation feeds off the whispers of classmates gushing about first loves, first touches, first kisses.

Our longing follows the journey of a peachy crush bruised by a breakup, patched up by a band-aid, then split open as an indefinite parting of ways. Our friends make promises to never trust anyone in search of love again, while we hold the shards of trust that were broken before it could form. There's common ground in everything we longed for but forever seem to lack. Sylvia framed it for all of us: "Am I living half alive?"

The conversation around sexuality and intimacy within the queer community rarely transcends beyond homonormativity. Gender nonconformity and transness are reduced through the chism of medicalization. Transgender and intersex folks are restricted to their identities, bodies, and appearances and every form of academic and artistic discussion or expression does the same.