

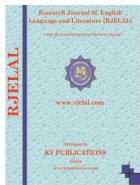


## THE ALLEGORY OF SPECTATORSHIP AND ROLE OF MYTH IN DEEPA MEHTA'S FILM "FIRE"

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### Abstract

Deepa Mehta's film "Fire" is a tale of two vital, beautiful women breaking their patriarchal and cultural obstacles there by acquiring a state of female emancipation and is being born again through the passion they express for each other. Majority of the incidents in the film are coherent. They underlay age old myths and traditions of the nation. Each allegorical frames can be deciphered through contextualizing along with ancient Indian culture.

**Keywords:-** patriarchy, culture, myth, tradition, ancient India

### Introduction

*Fire* is a film that questions tradition. It is a film about women defining their liberation in their own terms. It is the first Indian film with an overt lesbian theme, and its bold offering of an alternative vision for Indian women is extremely threatening to the patriarchal system.

*Fire* opens with a gentle exhortation to 'see what you can't see' and 'see without looking'. The first sequence itself elucidates allegory about spectatorship. An allegory is a narrative technique contrived by the author to make coherent sense on the 'literal' or primary level of signification and at the same time communicate a second correlated order of signification. The mustard field sequence signifies memory and dreamscapes that shapes Radha's selfhood, her relationship with Sita and perhaps her destiny. It signifies a dream land beyond all the limits of land. We can see young Radha along with her parents sitting in the middle of the field.

Now, the camera tilts down and focuses the Kapur family in New Delhi. It is a typical Indian joint family who lives above the store they run together. The joint family is representative of traditional India, wherein the patriarch of the family has his sons and their families living with him, under the same roof. Only the daughters of the family move out when they get married. Therefore, in the joint family system, generations may live together. When the patriarch dies, his eldest son takes his place. The head of the household in *Fire* is Ashok, a pious man who took a vow of celibacy when he realized that his wife, Radha, could not bear children. He religiously follows his spiritual teacher, Swamiji, and dedicates most of his time to learning how to attain enlightenment. Ashok is the quintessential patriarch who, in his piety, sets himself up as better than everyone else, assuming that his struggle to 'seek union with the universal truth' is for the betterment of all 'mankind'.

As always 'joint family' is large and noisy, with parents and children, uncles, aunts and

sometimes cousins, presided over by grandparents together under a single roof. There may be intrigues, secret liaisons, fierce loving and jealous rages. They often squabble each other, usually remain intensely loyal and united together in front of the outside world. As an ideal type, a joint family is one in which brothers remain together even after marriage and bring their wives into parental household. It is governed by the ideals of fraternal loyalty and filial obedience which stipulate common residence and common economic, social and ritual activities. In addition to this core group there may be temporary residents and relatives.

### Elements of Myths in *Fire*

Apart from the traditional allegorical frames, *Fire* also throws light on the complexities of culture and ritual which India holds against emotion and passion of women. There are several myths that are reworked within the film. Mehta uses these myths as the backdrop of her film, but does so by reinterpreting them in ways that might be considered almost sacrilegious. Mehta's attempt to re-work myths provides an extremely empowering vision for Indian women and their reality. She re-worked on the myth of Sita, the myth of Radha, and the myth of Karva Chauth. In order to better understand how these myths have been reconceptualized within the film, it is necessary to examine the different myths individually.

The Goddess Sita was the wife of Rama. She accompanied him on his fourteen year exile in the forest. During their time in the forest, the demon king, Ravana, abducted Sita to his island kingdom of Lanka. A massive battle ensued wherein Rama and his allies fought Ravana and rescued Sita. On their return to Rama's kingdom, the people cast doubts on Sita's chastity, indirectly accusing her of adultery. Rama insisted that Sita undergo a trial by fire by jumping into the flames to prove her purity. Sita complied and emerged unscathed because she was so chaste and pure. However, even though she triumphed over the flames, Rama still banished her to the forest, because of the weight of public opinion.

The myth is first mentioned by Mundu who relates the story in one of his explanations

about why Biji and he are so 'emotional' after supposedly watching the Ramayana. This myth is also enacted in the film through a *Ramleela* that Swamiji and Ashok are attending. It provides the set up for the final scenes of the film wherein Radha has to undergo a similar trial by fire. Fire is considered sacred in the Hindu tradition. Fueled by the myth of the Goddess Sita, fire is also considered the ultimate test of purity in Hindu mythology. Mehta transforms this myth, which has traditionally been used against Indian women to instill fear about their purity and honor. The cultural implications of this myth for many Indian women is that no matter how pure they might be, even the slightest speculation about their honor is enough to banish them from society. Therefore, the myth of the Goddess Sita has often been used to define the role of women in Indian society in extremely narrow terms, with no space for expressive freedom or individual independence.

However, in the film, the two women defy society's ideas about how they should be living their lives. Although Radha starts out in the mold of the Goddess Sita, by being the dutiful and traditional housewife, she comes into her own by the end of the film. Not only does Radha go through a trial by fire that is very similar to the Goddess Sita's ordeal, but she emerges triumphant and pure. Therefore, the fire is used to sanction the union of the two women. Radha's victorious emergence from the flames can discern pure from impure works to place the two women in a space of righteous morality even as they reject society's ideas about morality and forge their own path together. This myth which underlies the entire film is used to sanction their choices.

In Hindu mythology, Radha was the consort of the God Krishna. Although Radha was married to another cow herder, she was Krishna's constant companion. Therefore, Radha may be seen as the epitomic woman, the ultimate consort and seducer. However, the love that she and Krishna shared is also used to symbolize the mutual love between God and the human soul. The mythological Radha is embodied in the character of Sita in the film. She is the one who acts on her desires, and takes the initiative with the character of Radha in the film. Although she is married to Jatin,

she is in effect, Radha's constant companion. Mehta has interchanged the names of her two main characters with the mythological figures they represent. It is the character of Radha who embodies the Goddess Sita while the character Sita is the one who embodies the mythical Radha. Mehta is making a very important statement by inter-changing the names of the two women. Mehta intimates that the two characters are different parts of a united whole. However, by bringing them together, Mehta allows for fluidity between different and multiple possibilities. The pure and the desirous are no longer separate or incompatible. They are two aspects of one. This interpretation questions the original myths.

Karva Chauth is the day when Hindu women fast for the long life of their husbands. The story behind this day is retold by Radha in the film in a surreal re-enactment. It is the story of a prince who is very handsome and proud. For this, he is cursed with a million needles that prick him all over his body. His faithful wife, the queen, spends one year painstakingly taking out each needle from his body. Finally, there are only two left, one on each eyelid. Just then, her maid servant comes and tells her that a holy man has come to meet her. The queen goes to pay her respects to the holy man, telling the maid servant to continue the job. When the maid servant takes out the final needles from his eyes, the king awakens and mistakenly thinks it is the maid servant who has faithfully been serving him the whole year. He makes her his queen and demotes the queen to the status of a maid. The holy man who has watched the entire exchange tells the queen to fast all day without food or water until the moon rises in order to break the spell the king is under. So the queen fasts, and at the end of the fast, the king realizes the error he has made and demotes the maid servant back to her original status and takes the queen into his arms and reinstates her to the throne. The story is visualized by Mundu, who sees himself as the king, Radha as the queen, Sita as the maid, Ashok as the holy man and Jatin as a servant diligently fanning the king. The entire scene is in a comedic light. Radha concludes the scene by commenting, "So now you know why we fast? To prove how loyal and devoted we are to our

husbands" (*Fire* 1996). Ignoring Biji's bell Sita comments against all these traditions.

Mehta uses Sita's character effectively to comment on age-old Indian myths that are oppressive to women. By doing so and in her insistence that we can find other choices, she expands the dialogue, breaking out of the conventional myths and traditions. The reinterpretation of myth to empower women is a very powerful device in *Fire*. It is the equivalent of the feminist movement in the West reclaiming words that have traditionally been used against women. Or the feminist practice of reclaiming the stories of women's lives.

Similar to the reinterpretation of myths in *Fire*, the film also provides audiences with new interpretations of old traditions. The film deconstructs various Indian customs and rearticulates them in an empowering light for the benefit of Indian women. *Fire* highlights the spaces of intimacy between women that already exist within many Indian traditions. It celebrates the connection and bonding between women, making it sacred. It is an old Indian custom for women to oil each other's hair. This tradition allows for the creation of a woman-only space. The ritual provides a space in which women are allowed to touch each other freely. The film demonstrates the erotic nature of the custom. When Sita asks Radha to put oil in her hair, both women are extremely aware of the sensuousness of the act as Radha lovingly caresses Sita's hair. Another tradition that the film reworks is that of dancing with partners of the same sex. This practice has been very common on the Indian stage and came into being because physical contact between members of the opposite sex was not allowed. It is common in Indian households for the same reasons. The activity is re-enacted in the film when Radha and Sita dance together. Yet another custom that the film re-interprets is that of wearing bangles. The exchange of bangles, of dressing each other is constantly enacted by young girls and women who are considered to be platonic friends within the culture. At different points in the film, we see Radha and Sita cooking in the family take-out store. This everyday scene often becomes imbued with sensual energy as they claim the space

as their own and the two exchange intimacies from bangles to myths about the effects of certain spices on sexual prowess. Their ability to enact such exchanges in public might seem extremely daring in a Western context which acknowledges the existence of homosexuality. However, in an Indian context, that completely silences the possibility of homosexuality; their interaction is given the cloak of innocence, even as the film strives to give that reality a voice.

In yet another scene that uses Indian customs to release the sexual energy between the women, Sita offers to massage Radha's feet on the family picnic. Massaging your elders' feet is a very old tradition of respect. However, the tradition is reinterpreted as Sita touches Radha in sensual ways in the presence of Ashok and Jatin. The two women exchange sensual looks while Ashok remains unaware of about what is going on with his 'good family'. Here, Mehta devices the technique of verbal irony i.e. speaker implies differ sharply from what the speaker ostensibly expressed. By highlighting the erotic nature of the tradition, Mehta provides us with a new reading.

Towards the end of the film, the events begin to gather momentum. Mundu who is watching Radha and Sita together through the peephole, decides to tell Ashok about them. He goes to the ashram where Ashok is and brings him home. Ashok asks Mundu to leave the house for what he has done, and then goes up to the room to see for himself. Ashok walks in on Radha and Sita making love. There is a long silence as none of them speak. He then leaves the room. As Radha and Sita get dressed, Sita says that they are leaving right away and comments that she is glad that Ashok found them. Radha asks Sita to leave right away, saying that she will join her as soon as she can. Sita does not want to leave without Radha, and reminds her that she does not owe Ashok anything. But Radha says that she cannot leave without talking to Ashok. She is resolute, "I need to tell him that my leaving has everything to do with me" (Fire 1996). She pleads with Sita to go ahead without her, saying that she will follow, "Knowing that you're out there, waiting for me... it'll help me to finally leave. Please" (Fire 1996). So Sita packs her bags, and

leaves in the pouring rain, telling Radha that she will be waiting for her at the Nizammuddin shrine. Biji calls for Radha with her bell and then spits on her face to show her utter contempt for what Radha has done. Ashok however, discovers that he has an erection just thinking about Radha and Sita together. He comes to Radha and asks her to come and lie with him in order to test him. Radha tells him that she is done with all of that and that she is leaving. Ashok reminds her that, "Desire brings ruin" (Fire 1996). However, Radha questions him for the first time in their many years of marriage together, she said him "You know what, without desire, I was dead. Without desire there's no point in living. You know what else? I desire to live. I desire Sita. I desire her warmth, her compassion, her body. I desire to live again" (Fire 1996).

Ashok slaps her and calls her a prostitute. He cannot believe the woman she has become. He thinks that she should be begging his forgiveness, instead she is challenging him. He forcibly kisses her, saying, "You want passion?" (Fire 1996). In the struggle and in his final pushing her away, Radha's saree catches fire on the stove behind her. Ashok watches her battle the flames, but does not move to help her. He then picks up Biji and carries her downstairs, abandoning Radha to her fate in the flames. As we watch Radha being surrounded by flames, we are reminded of the myth of the Goddess Sita who had to go through a trial by fire to prove her purity.

In the next shot, Sita is waiting in the rain at the shrine. The shrine is isolated. It is the place where Sita had prayed that they would be together forever and she waits for Radha there, not knowing if they will be united again. Radha comes to her, clothes all torn and disheveled. She was like the Goddess Sita who has come out of the flames alive and pure. Sita goes to her and takes her in her arms, finally getting the answer to her prayers. As the camera pulls out, we leave them in an embrace in the midst of the shrine. They have chosen each other, but in doing so, have stepped out of all tradition and conventional society. This ending is ambiguous, albeit hopeful, for we do not know what might lie ahead of the two lovers who have found liberation in each other.

Perhaps the greatest break with tradition in *Fire* is the very premise of the film. Mehta's story questions centuries of Indian philosophy and tradition; hence it was labeled as a 'revolutionary film'. As quoted by Azmi,

There were spontaneous protests by not only women's organizations, film bodies and cultural organizations but by diverse group ranging from housing rights activists, healthcare workers, academics, students, journalists and audience. There were hundreds of letters to the editors and on the internet condemning Shiv Sens's attempt to establish might over right. (Ghosh 59)

In *Fire*, Deepa Mehta has woven together Indian traditions and many of the most powerful myths in Hindu mythology. However, the true strength of the film comes from her ability to take the old and the familiar and interpret it in new and empowering ways.

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