

SINCE its release in major film theatres and international festivals, Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* has garnered a great deal of critical attention from political progressives, liberals, and fundamentalists, and has been discussed in several previous issues of MANUSHI. I want to take up some of the issues *Fire* has raised in the aftermath of its release, and also consider its importance for lesbian communities in the process.

Fire is admittedly neither a particularly innovative film aesthetically nor in terms of its subject matter. South Asian lesbian themes have often been seriously treated in independent cinema circles. *Fire's* most compelling point is the manner in which it has become a truly public text, the subject of controversy in the media and among viewers. It focuses on a nascent lesbian relationship in a film intended to reach a mainstream audience. The fact that it has elicited such strong reactions from critics and spectators is perhaps its most notable redeeming quality.

There are generally two arguments directed against the film by progressive and liberal critics. The first is that there have always been South Asian lesbians, both in the realms of the real and the imagined, and that therefore they do not require representation in mainstream popular culture. This argument is made often by many people. This is not, in my view, a valid ground for criticising the entire film. Whether lesbian images have existed or not isn't the point: rather, it is how the image is framed by power.

Certainly, the presence of lesbians in South Asia is a social fact, historically as well as currently. However, *Fire* implicitly brings up the legitimacy of lesbianism as another model of

relationship outside of heterosexual coupling, another mode of female identity outside of prevailing notions of femininity, and the visibility of lesbian issues lifted out of their position of marginality vis-a-vis the mainstream.

It is not a call for validation from the center. Rather, heterogeneous representations are a necessary feature of living in a democracy. I would suggest that to ask a community to be content to simply live out its reality, without creating a space for representation, is an anti-democratic proposal, especially in media-saturated societies where representation in public forums is of

increasing importance for establishing an awareness of diversity. So, if creating lesbian images in a mainstream setting is a significant step for nurturing this awareness, then *Fire* has at least succeeded in opening up the debate.

The other related argument that is used to register opposition against *Fire* is that it allegedly does not deal with an issue of great social importance, and filmmakers should be dealing with more pressing social justice issues instead of concentrating on romantic affairs. Again, this does not constitute a sufficient ground for dismissing the film. I will leave

Still on *Fire*



PHOTO: INDIA TODAY

aside the question of whether lesbian issues have a deep social resonance and are significant to the public interest – I take it for granted that both these assumptions are true.

What is curious is that rarely has a film with a love story as its premise come under attack for failing to address more progressive or politically exigent themes. *Fire* operates within the boundaries of a specific genre – the love story. The formula for a commercial film of this kind invariably hinges on a typical narrative: two people meet and fall in love, face certain obstacles to their union, and after a series of struggles, resolve the situation either through affirming their relationship or dissolving it (though overwhelmingly, most commercial films prefer the happy ending variety). In terms of successfully adhering to the tenets of the genre, *Fire* is perfectly adequate. In the case of other similar romantically oriented films, there is an acknowledgment that the love story is an acceptable device of story-telling, though it has its limits in terms of what is to be expected in the content and form. Why then is there a special demand made on this film to be more socially responsible? Granted, the lesbian relationship itself is superficially handled and unrealistically depicted at times – but *Fire* suffers from inauthenticity in a way that most cinematic treatments of love lack credibility, so it is not unique on this account.

Since *Fire* operates within the widely accepted parameters of the generic love story, I don't think it can be faulted for portraying a personal relationship at the expense of more socially significant themes. In fact, I think the intimate gaze cast on the domestic scene is precisely what unsettles some viewers,

especially the possibility that connections between female household members might be sexualized. Why oppose this sexualized element? After all, no one is as indignant about portrayals of heterosexual adultery within a joint family setting. Such depictions only encourage those who already possess these desires, while those who don't will not feel the need to examine their feelings about it. I don't think *Fire* alone is going to make women self-conscious about their relationships to each other, unless they are insecure about their heterosexuality, or if the story actually brings out sentiments that they have harboured latently, in which case the expression or acknowledgment of the feeling might be a beneficial outcome of seeing the film.

The important and positive point that this movie does make is the re-imagining of family relations, and the assertion that certain expressions of desire find their fullest meaning within such a specific social context. I wonder if Sita would have left the household had she come to the realization that she is a lesbian, but not found a lover in the family. The idea that a lesbian relationship is a source of support, and the root of another idea of partnership or family, is a powerful affirmation. Highlighting a relationship, as *Fire* does, instead of foregrounding a personal quest for identity, is also an antidote to individualist rhetoric, which suggests that coming out is the primary instance of crystallizing a sense of self. A relationship can be a good anchor and source of sustenance where sexuality is concerned. The idea of solidarity, rather than the idea of individual struggle, is one of *Fire's* definite strengths.

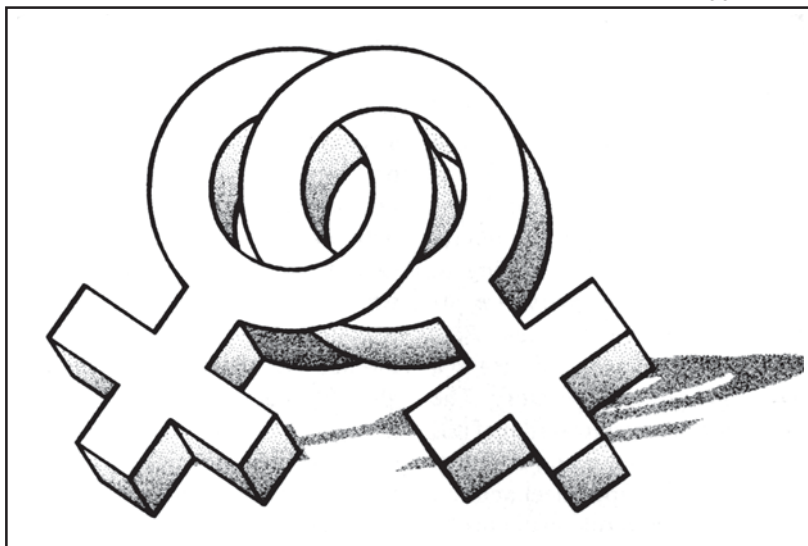
Having said this, I don't believe that *Fire* is a landmark film in its own right. I believe the public reaction alone has made it a subject of controversy, and the international media blitz surrounding it has ensured its reception as a major topic of debate. For those of us who are lesbians, the film is a milestone because it has pushed the politics of same-sex love into the limelight with an unprecedented amount of publicity and hype. Nevertheless, despite the supposedly "progressive" lesbian theme around which it is organized, *Fire* doesn't escape the trap of conforming to preconceived notions about Hindu culture and Indian femininity. The narrative recycles a number of stereotypes popularly consumed as monolithic truths about South Asian life. These myths are not only reinforced in the West, but also within elite sectors of Indian society who imagine they are more modernised and valorise Western ideals, while labeling Indian thought as uniformly backward. I do not know if Mehta brought up these notions deliberately or inadvertently in her film and film-related interviews, but without doubt, they have shaped perceptions of South Asian gender relations a great deal.

First, the movie creates an opposition between duty and desire expressed as wifely duty versus independent female desire. This first myth—that the already subjugated Hindu woman's identity is forever at the crossroads of *dharma* and *kama* — is a familiar feature of discourse centering on Indian women. If a woman's level of agency is measurable only to the extent that she manages to escape "tradition," what is the possibility of using tradition as a ground of liberation through reinterpretation and recasting or, indeed, of claiming

a history of lesbian desire in India as a tradition in its own right, and therefore cancelling out the dichotomy altogether? The idea of contesting dominant traditions, and subverting them through alternative or suppressed traditions, is a more powerful idea than simply making constraint synonymous with historical custom.

Another problematic aspect of the film is the link posited between religious symbols and everyday experience. Obviously, religious literature, texts and figures have origins and meanings that are historical and collective in scope, while real life is constantly changing, dynamic, and personalised. Drawing a parallel between symbolic figures and cinema characters (standing in for real, ordinary people) is a tricky move. In the case of India, mythological figures are consistently projected by various social elements as ideals for women to follow, and these figures also become signs of women's oppression in the real world. Although it seems self-evident, it is worth stating that women's position in society is not simply dictated by images of the feminine that predominate in the religious sphere of society. This absurd equation is rarely made in relation to western societies and has more of an antiquated anthropological flavour in terms of deriving meaning about female social roles, but it continues to be used as a legitimate way of "understanding" Indian women!

As Madhu Kishwar's article pointed out, and as Deepa Mehta has said, in *Fire* the characters Sita and Radha are symbolically interpreted as oppressed figures who subvert patriarchal authority by becoming romantically involved with each



other; but conjuring Sita and Radha is not an easy matter. Even if we accept for the moment that Mehta's notion of Radha and Sita is the primary and legitimate one – that they are objects of male exploitation (and in many versions of folklore, they are not!) — we cannot take these two figures as uniform representatives of how Indian female identity is imagined. Certainly, the repertoire of available feminine images extends far beyond the border of women-as-oppressed. Even if we just limit ourselves to Hindu religious narratives, the prominence of Durga, Kali, and Chandi literally point to another story. Of course, neither the images of women-as-oppressed, nor the pantheon of women-as-shakti, project a total relation to the everyday lives of female Indian mortals, who use and are used by the two extreme sets of symbols in complicated ways.

Unfortunately, the tendency to use religious mythology as an explanation of current gender patterns is rampant in popular culture, even though it is largely a false equation. Of course, the use of historical religious texts as yardsticks of contemporary women's social positions is not only limited to discussions of Hinduism. The way a

dominant interpretation of the Koran is taken as a fixed and final commentary on the Muslim woman's roles is equally disconcerting. To make a comparison with a Western example: does anyone seriously suggest that Western women are subjugated today because of the Bible's image of Eve? Is the biblical text really the reason why women don't receive equal pay for equal work, why they are victims of domestic violence, and why they are often deemed biologically fit only to be mothers, not workers?

Myth affects a social psyche, but it is contested and recast dynamically; it isn't the sole source of a discriminatory attitude against women. Religion works in concert or tension with other networks of power which are often "secular" in nature (law, politics, economics) to inform notions of gender. Therefore, to point to the concept of "duty" as conceived in a particular religion in order to explain women's hardships is extremely contentious and questionable. Notions of duty may exert a certain power over woman, but it is not only because of religion that it is valorised – there may be other economic or historical reasons why

it continues its reign, and needs interrogation on those fronts.

For a critical reader of the film, *Fire* highlights these issues productively. In the absence of major media hype, perhaps these different facets of creating popular culture products would have come to light. But as it is, *Fire* has attachments to other controversies that lie outside of its form and content, tied more to the context of its reception. As one example, the filmmaker has done severe damage by opportunistically disowning the lesbian content of the film when it suits her, claiming instead that it is about “women’s choices.” This hebulous strategy has helped her to keep the film open to all kinds of interpretations — and digestible to various audiences — but Mehta’s refusal to take a public stand supportive of lesbians is insulting and demeaning when originally so much of the hype mentioned the same-sex relationship as the film’s core. After all, there is a difference between saying *Fire* is not a lesbian film (as

Mehta has done) versus suggesting it is not *only* a lesbian film, and has multiple possibilities embedded in it. By making the former statement, Mehta has alienated precisely that segment of viewers which has been at the forefront of defending the substance of *Fire* on her behalf, and protecting it from attack by fundamentalists.

Finally, apart from the politics involved in its reception, the ultimate dilemma presented by *Fire* is that, in effect, it is just another love story about emerging female desires, and South Asian lesbian communities deserve more than this. We need more complex dramatic renditions of the politics of same-sex romances, which do not take the confessional moment of coming out as their existential alibi. Gay and lesbian movements in South Asia and in the diaspora have been tackling issues like access to health services, police violence, and challenging negative media images of all marginalised groups.

I don’t want to minimize the value

of coming out. But haven’t we moved beyond the moment of simply dwelling on claiming an individual identity, and into the realm of asserting our solidarities with each other, and creating an oppositional collective of thinkers, activists, leaders, and lovers? Rather than agonizing about whether lesbian existence can be naturalised in the first place, and ending with the promise of same sex love, we need more sophisticated and serious portraits of our lives, narratives that have other points of departure: Stories that *start* with normalising our constructions of partnership and community, and the daily psychological negotiations involved in relationships with each other and society. In this sense, the post-*Fire* scenario – as in what happens once women like Sita and Radha actually begin the work of forging and sustaining their relationship — is a much more intriguing prospect for future cinematic representation.

Rima Banerji, Canada

More on *Fire*

I write in response to your article on *Fire* in MANUSHI 109. As a lesbian who grew up in India and has experienced plenty of lesbophobia and racism in various countries (including homophobic violence in London) I am frequently in a position where I have to explain that India is a complex place, with a wide range of attitudes, and that some of my “traditional” relatives and friends have never viciously attacked my sexuality, despite my openness. Stereotyping Hindu culture as “repressed” creates obvious problems. However, it remains

equally important not to ignore sexist, homophobic prejudice in the forms it does take.

While I agree that the portrayal of the family in *Fire* is often rather inauthentic in its isolation from the rest of the community and in the portrayal of class/gender roles, I did not read the film simply as a denunciation of Hindu tradition. I read it more as a struggle between women’s sense of self and men’s control of it and insensitivity towards it. I read the lesbian awakening not as a desperate reaction, but as an opening up to expression of a sexuality already

potentially there, a shift brought about by doubt. However, I was afraid that it would be interpreted as a simple reaction, a fill-in for heterosexual disappointment — especially as the film did not make this distinction very clear. I also felt that the shift in Radha was portrayed too early. We saw only a rough drawing, even some of the details were sketchy, and we missed out on possible crucial, more accurate nuances. This also applies to her lover’s more straightforward approach and the significance of that ease of self already existing in an Indian context.

I sensed, too, that there was a contradiction in the idea of “duty”. Radha, to me, remained a “dutiful” or responsible person to the end, deeply caring towards her ideals; but the ideals were transformed, and “duty” itself as an ideal was discarded or, rather, transformed. Integrity or duty to oneself now had a meaning that was both changed and retained. In this sense, the film remained very Hindu or Indian to me—though at certain levels, this contradiction was over-simplified. I feel that the self/other contradiction is crucial in India, but how it gets laid out, traversed, “resolved” and changes form can be misrepresented, especially to Western viewers.

True there was lack of integrity and compassion in various portrayals. For example, the attitude towards Mundu, which, despite its insistence on non-obliteration of men’s sexual needs, I saw as crude and patronising. It was sexist towards the mother-in-law, and unfair to lesbian rights, or even religious choice, as shown in the choice of a non-Hindu, Muslim space as refuge or threshold. All this seemed to arise out of an abiding but transformed (more universal), secular, personal, women’s Hinduism, which could console western viewers about the continuing dangers and internal, self-correcting strengths of Hinduism, at the same time as it discarded contemporary institutionalised, male defined Hinduism. The defensive presentation of this powerful internal complexity for western viewers was, I feel, linked to the way that the film didn’t ring quite true—Radha’s conflicts and solutions were never quite “authentic”, the



links between her “before” and “after” selves both made sense and didn’t (though her own link with her more easy-going lover made sense in terms of big-sisterly affection, compassion, shared oppression and desire) and her family were in many ways mythical (in the sense of class community and gender roles, for example). The conflicts and bridgings and transformations in Indian society became somewhat fabricated for a Western viewing (instead of being a more accurate, recognisable reflection) and hence retained unintended gaps which were bothersome rather than careful. The values embraced by the film were mostly “safe” and both the positive and negative stereotypes of India would “make sense” and seem “authentic” to western views — even the “surprise” of Indian women’s liberation would ultimately “make sense” in terms of “human nature” and “Indian or Hindu character.” The translation happened early, in the film’s own language of structural detail.

Radha’s sense of duty was seen in relation to her immediate family and to herself and her own principles, but not very concretely in relation to the outer world or

community. That missing level could have provided some of the necessary links and more of a sense of realness—but even that authenticity could have remained weak if the details remained unrealistic and defensive. Nonetheless, the women’s pleasure and commitment to each other and to their lesbianism was inspiring (if mythical in helpful and unhelpful ways)—something that

we do need, despite dangers of becoming too prescriptive.

I should add that I don’t have a problem with exposing the sexual moral hypocrisy of a self-centred person, Gandhian or not. I also disagree that “Indian men... certainly don’t take such shit from an ethnic Chinese woman or father-in-law” or that Jatin’s response to the Chinese man about Indians being “a very complex people” was devoid of any intended irony, or indeed that being called “chinki” is a minor problem.

To return to the question of integrity, then, I do not see Deepa Mehta’s comments about India’s history of lesbianism as being utterly contradictory to the film—as a Hindu woman like Radha can reach into herself to find her own lesbianism. The interesting point is, rather, how to understand where acceptance of sexuality slips into denunciation and suppression transforms into awareness. It is true that there is much gay practice in India and it is equally true that there is much silence around it and that silence can often equal suppression (though it can also allow growth or proliferation). Hence, I feel deeply disappointed when you turn homophobia into almost a phony

issue in the Indian context and fail to see it as an “important and meaningful public” one. But perhaps you would not have made such comparisons about a more complex and skillful treatment of the silencing of sexuality in India. Though I can’t help feeling, in the light of some of your previous writing, that you tend to downplay the importance of open sexual choice, compared to other types of personal/public choices.

In making a very clear divide between sexual and other physical intimacy, calling the eroticism of lesbian hair-massage melodramatic (an unintendedly homophobic intervention on your part?), and in seeing the sex scenes in *Fire* as boring rather than erotic (instead of leaving these definitions more open to interpretation), I feel you fail to appreciate adequately the connections, gaps and severing in

intimacy/sexuality, as well as in the public/private and the importance of personal choice in such definitions. As an Indian lesbian, I understand that issues of personal choice, right to privacy, “coming out” and right to public speech are complex in India, both helped and hindered deeply by issues of mutual respect (and that the details obviously cannot be identical to those in the West). These choices, whether supported or not, are always context-related.

It would be interesting to discuss issues of public/private sexuality and expression further in MANUSHI, and not make a non-issue out of them. Also, we need a discussion of the isolation and pain caused and continued by the silencing and what is being done about this in an Indian context (e.g. self-help groups like Sangini). Meanwhile, this is an open letter to

you, which I am sharing with other women, too. You referred to “*Naya Gharvas*” in MANUSHI 98. I couldn’t find it – would you let me know the page number?

Mita Datta, USA

Naya Gharvas appeared in MANUSHI 19. We regret the error. You can order that issue from MANUSHI. The same story is also included in another MANUSHI publication, **The Dilemma and Other Stories** by **Vijaydan Detha**.

Issues relating to sexuality have been discussed in MANUSHI before. The subject is no taboo with us. I would only like to see the discussion move beyond simplistic and misleading stereotypes. We hope people like you will contribute to bringing new and more complex dimensions to this discussion.

Madhu Kishwar □