

Responses to Manushi

SEVERAL letters came to MANUSHI in response to my review of Deepa Mehta's *Fire*. In addition **South Asian Women's Network (SAWNET)** carried a lively discussion on my review on the internet. **SAWNET** emails are being published after informing their authors. I seem to have seriously upset some people with my review. Therefore, I feel it necessary to respond to some salient points of their criticism.

Some more responses will be published in the next issue.

—Madhu Kishwar

Grinding a Personal Axe?

I feel that Madhu Kishwar's article was repetitive, wordy, and unnecessarily long because it seems to me she has a personal axe to grind. Since she owns the platform, she seems to indulge in writing an almost interminable harangue against Deepa Mehta. The hatred jumped off the screen. I would rather she had made her points about India clear, and let the reader judge whether Mehta succeeded or failed. In her zeal to defend India and all things Indian, Kishwar goes to extremes. Anyone of Indian birth who criticises India is seen by her as an enemy, a "self-hater".

Had she simply pointed out the merits and demerits of the film and made factual comparisons about reality in India (and it appears her reality is very different from the reality checks of others of us who also know India first-hand) that would have sufficed for me. I'd have drawn my own conclusions about hating or admiring Mehta and her film.

Manjusree, from SAWNET

Box Office Flop

I think the film was rather poorly made, boring and unimpressive. There was a lot of hype surrounding the film because of its 'controversial' central theme of lesbianism. In the wake of all the antics of the Shiv Sena and its goons and other self-styled upholders of Hindu morality, I don't think many people cared to assess the film critically for the film itself. The article on *Fire* by Madhu Kishwar in MANUSHI 109 was very well written.

For once, I agree with almost

everything that Madhu says: I think the film really did not deserve all the attention it received. In my opinion, the direction was rather clumsy and the movie had absolutely no flow or depth and was rather dull and depressing. Deepa Mehta seems like a confused director with a very superficial understanding of the traditional Indian woman's psychology and sexuality and was in too much of a hurry to get the two women in bed in the film. She seems to have very little feel for the characters or the complexity of the 'situation' from which Radha and Sita (very unconvincingly) emerge as lesbian lovers. I thought that the much-talked of 'scenes' which supposedly had the audience 'queuing up' for tickets were rather vague and dull. I saw the Hindi version in an Ahmedabad theatre with a couple of friends and we just yawned through the film. The hall was almost empty. The two women hardly seemed to have any other aspect to their relationship other than the 'physical.' Shabana and Nandita look far too sophisticated for the class



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of society they represent in the movie—submissive middle class Punjabi wives of restaurant owners in Lajpat Nagar. They also looked very unconvincing in their role of cooks in the family-owned restaurant.

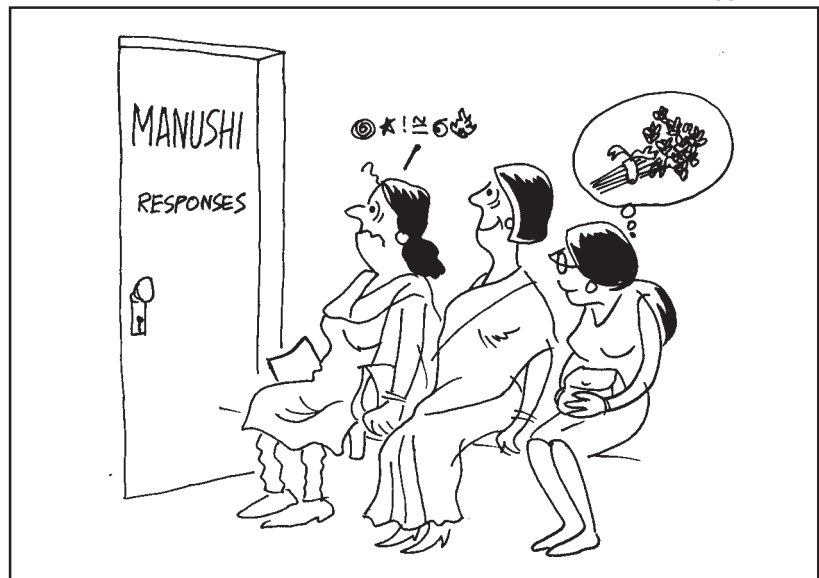
I am quite disappointed that Deepa is being applauded and awarded for such a mediocre piece of work.

Anu, from SAWNET

Second Rate Writer

I have been conducting some research on arranged marriages, and had to go through a number of articles written by Madhu Kishwar. I can only say that after reading some articles, I found Madhu Kishwar to be an absolutely second-rate writer, who shrieks more often for her point to be heard, than logically arguing it. I have no respect for her as a feminist, and think her writing is too subjective to be progressive. She denounces “western ideas and lifestyles” as if she has ever lived here, attributing her sources to her selective European/American friends. She glorifies Indian traditions, not realising that most of them continue to hold absolute power over women. In other words, she is perpetuating ideologies. (I am not saying that western ideas don’t do that, but they have tried to move much further than the newborn Indian feminist revolution.)

As for *Fire*, I was impressed that a movie could handle such a controversial topic well without the usual X-rated fanfare. The movie is disjointed at times, but the scenes depict authentic middle class backgrounds. I have no complaints about that—I grew up around Delhi. Shabana seems at home with her role, though Nandita is a bit far-fetched. I think the movie had an



important message to convey, and for me that was shock. If we are shocked out our sensibilities then we will think.

Shibani, from SAWNET

Homosexuality in India

I agree with Ms Kishwar that Deepa Mehta’s depiction of Hindu culture is uninformed and shallow. I am equally wary of Macaulay’s children who have mastered the art of somehow psychologically transporting themselves into the western community. They fancy and hate India and the Indians around them. It is also disturbing that it is this segment that speaks for India.

But I don’t quite understand why Ms Kishwar has also chosen to elaborate on the issue of homosexuality in India—because she apparently knows little and cares less about homosexuals. I am not suggesting that she should, but one hardly needs to add to the trouble we already have. Her argument is that India is a tolerant society, we don’t need sermons from the West. To substantiate this she talks of the fate of Oscar Wilde in

intolerant England. I have no doubts regarding her scholarship. I am sure she knows that in that intolerant England Wilde’s preferences were known and tolerated till he chose to make a legal issue of it. Virginia Woolf, her Orlando, and Vita West were tolerated as were so many others in their past. Yet she chooses to contrast this situation with that in India towards Firaq Gorakhpuri and others whose sexual preferences were talked about but tolerated.

Regardless of how a society is structured some level of homosexuality will remain. Ms Kishwar personally knows gay men and women who have not lost their jobs but she must know that homosexuality is a criminal offence in India, you cannot admit being a homosexual and keep a job. She must also know the trauma, the lies, the deceit that go into ensuring that the job is not lost. Her interaction is too wide for her not to know of men and women, particularly women, driven to desperation, to neurosis, to suicide, and of women abused emotionally and physically because of their sexual preferences. So what is she trying to say?

Presumably she shares the opinion that homosexuality is a way of seeking instant sexual gratification. Since such opportunities are available and no one complains if one is quick, clever and discreet, why the fuss? I resent this construction. I find it insulting. It is not just about sex in an alley. It is also not only about sleeping with a same sex partner. It's about waking up together, about having a life together and not having to lie about it.

I am a lesbian woman and I call myself a lesbian even though I neither have a relationship with a woman nor do I seek to have one. I could not reconcile to having such a relationship and having to lie about it, lies necessary to negotiate the tolerance Ms Kishwar talks about, lies required to keep a job in the manner her acquaintances have told to keep theirs. There is need for better understanding. There is need for a change in laws. There is need for space to discuss this.

Returning to the film *Fire* and Ms Kishwar's complaint of the disproportionate coverage by the media. If I recollect correctly much of the discussion was not on the artistic merit of the film or its great technical finesse or Mehta's capabilities as a film director. It was around the question of the permissibility of artistic depiction of sexual choices. There was neither enough time nor concern to discuss the question of a right to sexual preference. But given some space it could have led to a wider debate on the subject.

If she finds it a phoney issue and would like to see the space used for other public issues, I would like to be informed of the great and pressing public concerns that much of the media addresses, aside from the antics of politicians and film stars. I will not quarrel with her personal preferences, only wish that

she had claimed space for issues nearer her heart from the space provided to phonier issues, Monica Lewinsky for one.

Shreya Kishore, via e-mail

Felt Cheated

I live in Berkeley, near San Francisco. I was at the opening of *Fire* in March 1997. The publicity was amazing, there were at least 500 people who had fallen for the hype.

When I came out of the film, I felt I had been cheated. I felt that the film was a caricature and, yes, the sex scenes were so boring. What a shame Shabana Azmi was used for publicity purposes. Deepa Mehta was superficial with her answers. I felt she had no grasp of issues relating to gender, sexuality, or class. She knew there was a market for her film in the West, and used this information to make money.

Since then many people I have talked to find it hard to agree with my opinion of this film. It was so good to come across your article. I was thinking I should see the film again, to see if I had got it all wrong.

Meeta Rani Jha, California, USA

Family Talk

Just a few comments—it's fairly futile to argue about whether the *Fire* scenes were well-made or not. I found the love scenes sweet, and was very glad that they were not 'titillating' in the penthouse video style! It would be sad indeed if that was the selling point of the movie! And I agree that some parts of the movie were slow, especially the first scene of Radha bathing and dressing her mother-in-law. However, Madhu Kishwar seemed to think that the movie was against children taking care of parents. What I found far more important

was the fact that it was Radha who actually had the duty of taking care of her. Her son did nothing, and yet her mother-in-law had no compunctions about spitting in Radha's face because she had 'dishonoured' the family. Sorry, Madhu, I'll have far more sympathy for the 'children taking care of parents' when

a) Sons pitch in, not just pass on the more tiring chores to their wives.

b) Society permits daughters to take care of their parents. Am I the only one who has seen an old couple neglected because they had no sons, and their daughters were married and not permitted to take care of their parents beyond a certain level because they were then accused of ignoring their parents-in-laws? Nobody ever said anything about a man's duty to his parents-in laws.

I agree the scene of the new couple coming home to a lacklustre *aarti* rather than a full-fledged reception was weird. Actually, the *aarti* was weird too. In my understanding, in India you have the wedding, the initial *aarti* and reception at the groom's place, and the couple goes on a honeymoon only after all the fuss and relatives' coming and going has died down. Nobody takes much notice when they return from that honeymoon. That's how I saw it among my various cousins. Is it very different in other parts of India?

Madhu Kishwar also seems to be irked because, unlike Deepa Mehta, she thought lesbianism was quite accepted in India, and because Deepa Mehta suggested somewhere that Indians don't 'talk' to each other. On the first, well, I was probably growing up in a country that wasn't India, and the South Asian people I interact with here occasionally are definitely not

from that India! Homosexuality was taboo, period! While nobody thumped religious texts, homosexuality was considered ridiculous, weird, sick and perverted. If anyone in my generation in the family had come out as a gay, the family's reactions would have made southern Baptists in the USA proud. Yes, the norms might be very different among the non-bourgeois classes—but guess what, Deepa Mehta was talking about the middle class.

On the second point—well I don't know how often western families 'sit down and talk'. In my nuclear family, we 'talked' a lot, at dinner tables, etc. about movies, politics, news of the day, you name it. We occasionally tried to 'talk' about problems to, albeit never very successfully! On the other hand, an Indian friend tells me in his family they never talked. There were large family gatherings during weddings and other functions—lots of gossip, with women clustering in one corner and men in the other. But his parents never 'talked' beyond stuff like household bills and children's education, and he definitely cannot recall conversations around the dinner table, let alone talks to sort out problems. So there we are—two cases, two extremes. Which of our families is the random error?

And Madhu Kishwar is also indignant about the notion of a joint family being oppressive. Well, I am probably corrupt and westernised, but I have full sympathy for any woman who finds the

notion of being married into a joint family oppressive, and I acquired the attitude from hearing the experiences of my mother, mother-in-law, and other women of that generation who went through that. But what can I say, maybe all Indian women I meet are corrupt and westernised! Does anyone know if Kishwar herself was ever a bride in a joint family?

Bisakha Sen, from SAWNET

Unreasonable Views

One could refute or disagree with most of the points Madhu Kishwar has made but I will restrict myself to some which are particularly unreasonable and unpleasant.

To start with, I have discussed *Fire* with most of my friends here, as well as in India, and not a single

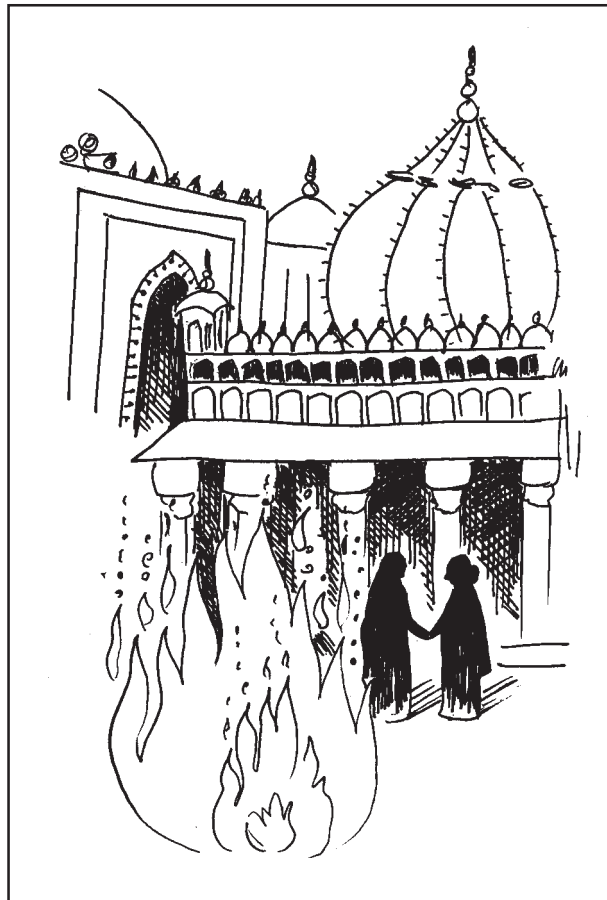
one of them perceived it as undermining Hinduism or Indian culture. Indeed, such situations can apply to any religious community in South Asia. Most of us know men like Ashok and Jatin. Ashok's reverence for his guru is not unusual. You object to the performances of the Ramayan. Would you have preferred the Mahabharat, with Draupadi's predicament, or any other religious text? I doubt it.

Your statement that Indian men's "inverted racism" allows them to accept insults from western women but that they would not take it from an "ethnic Chinese" smacks of racism. As a matter of fact both men and women are capable of accepting abominable behaviour from their spouses/partners and it has nothing whatsoever to do with race.

Your comment that "from the start the film's marketing has insisted that a lesbian affair is a liberating break away from a bad heterosexual relationship" does not seem plausible. I seem to have missed it in all the reviews and interviews, both in the print and the electronic media.

There are several other points I disagree with but what has shocked and disturbed me most are two of your observations which one does not expect from MANUSHI.

First, your remark that "while Hindu spaces and symbols are sites of oppression the one and only happy outing as a family is also in a garden built around a Muslim monument." Hundreds of people enjoy the Lodhi



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Gardens but I don't think it has a religious connotation for anyone.

Second, I have met people of all faiths at Nizamuddin's Dargah so there's nothing particularly sinister or offensive about Radha and Nita taking shelter there. A gurdwara may have been equally good but why should you prefer that?

Isn't it fortunate that the Shiv Sena, or other such groups, did not share your views. Otherwise there may have been bloodshed instead of just damaged cinema halls.

As a longtime subscriber I do expect more balanced views in
MANUSHI.

Ruby Ghuznavi, via e-mail

From a German Researcher

Madhu Kishwar's article on the *Fire* movie is linked to a number of questions which bother me, too. That's why I feel the need to write. I am a German research scholar working on modern South Asian history. After seeing this movie, I understood why this movie had stirred up a controversy. Naturally, a number of people were expected to feel uncomfortable with it and Madhu Kishwar's article eventually proved it. It was for me, however, difficult to understand why you thought that you are the person who is able to understand Indian tradition and therefore, you will teach the rest of mankind by presenting them with diverse counter arguments. Understanding India is difficult for all who are engaged in this enterprise.

You were right in saying that the West needs to do a lot vis-à-vis overcoming its homophobia. Indeed, the individual is far from being liberated in the West as we have a number of examples which show that homosexuals and heterosexuals are not treated as equals. Even today, homosexuals

are not allowed to marry or rather the heterosexual monogamous marriage is encouraged by the state as the ideal life-style. That only shows that we in the West have still a long way to go. However, you painted a picture of the West when it was still in its infancy a hundred years ago. At that point, the West also did not provide a model for a just society just as India is no model society today.

Some homosexual acts were taken by Madhu Kiswhar as a proof of the fact that India was not homophobic. Nicely said! But I would like to ask you how many open gay couples and individuals do you personally know? I would be delighted if you knew some but are you aware that the majority (nearly 80 per cent) get married as they had no other role model and alternative? I would suggest that you visit Nehru Park in New Delhi on a Sunday evening and ask those men cruising around whether they will get married one day. If the reply is in the affirmative, the you need to ask why. I imagine that the picture of the Hindu middle classes that emerges will tell quite a different story from the one you project. They are seeped in the *Hum Aapke Hai Kaun* culture. Perhaps the homophobic remarks of your former prime minister, Narasimha Rao, on pages 55 and 273 of his book *The Insider* could substantiate my point. I agree with you that the norms of the Victorian age are not the basis for a good society. But I also hope that you did not mean to justify the attacks of the Shiv Sainiks in the final paragraph of your article. As I understand the problem, self-respect stems from a firm belief in one's abilities and a corresponding confidence which

enables one to listen to criticism without feeling immediately insulted.

Michael Schied, Berlin

Madhu Kishwar responds...

I have always been puzzled and surprised that most highly educated women respond to my articles only when they deal with issues like sex, marriage, dowry and relationships with men. Over the years, I have written on a variety of other subjects that are important to both women and men such as India's farm policy, economic reforms, ethnic conflicts, sanitation, health and education. Such articles have hardly ever been subjects of animated debate within women's groups. I rarely get comments from them on these issues. However, even the most innocuous of my articles that refers in some way or other to domestic and emotional melodramas and marital or sexual relations evokes a large volume of extremely animated and agitated responses from them.

In the same issue in which my review of *Fire* appeared, MANUSHI gave cover story status to Dr. Subbarao's exposé of our nuclear establishment in order to draw attention to the very serious risks and dangers posed by our nuclear plants which are like deadly time bombs waiting for a major disaster to happen. Yet, his article drew far fewer responses than my far less important review of *Fire*. What does it tell us about the preoccupations of the educated elite women of India?

Most of the responses to my review of *Fire* are from Indian women living in North America who are associated with universities. If the most educated among our overseas women continue to restrict their concerns to gender relations in the domestic realm alone, is it not likely

that women will remain marginalised in social and political affairs?

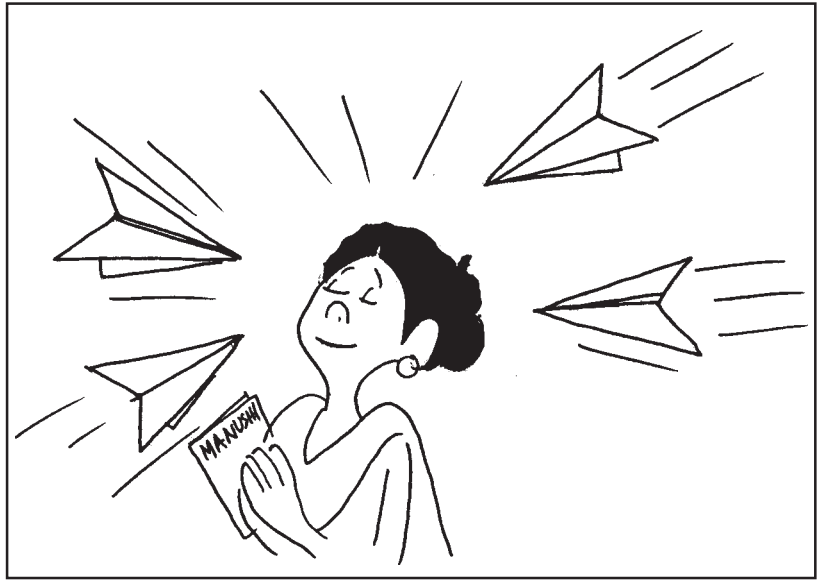
As to the specific points raised in the responses:

Shibani says "Madhu Kishwar denounces western ideas and life styles, as if she has ever lived here, attributing her sources to her selective European/American friends. She glorifies Indian traditions, not realizing they hold absolute power over women."

I may not have lived in any western country but I have spent a good deal of time over the last twenty years travelling in the West as well as other parts of the world. In the process I have interacted very closely with western women and men and developed numerous close and long standing friendships. Therefore, I am not ignorant about life in the West, nor the many advantages it offers.

I am not even a nationalist leave alone a xenophobic one. I enjoy my visits to the West and admire numerous aspects of western culture especially their determination to work out solutions to problems they face, including those they themselves have created. Even when they make mistakes, they are less likely to stop at blaming others, as we are prone to do. Instead, they focus on trying to fix things. I also draw a lot of inspiration from the more thoughtful western feminist thinkers and their quest for selfhood.

However, it is the copycat variety of feminism of their Indian counterparts that I find hard to deal with, just as I get depressed to see how in every field we the english educated elite in India continue to be intellectually enslaved to the West. Many Indian feminists, especially those living in the West, seem to be caught in a time-warp. They are still stuck at raising



questions which western feminists dealt with in the 1970s. Since then feminists in the West have moved on to many more substantial political issues and concerns.

It is not by chance that the feminist movement in India has failed to alleviate even one of the problems it has raised in the last few decades, be it dowry, female infanticide, domestic violence, or women's economic and political marginalisation. By contrast, feminists in the West have had relatively greater success in altering the power balance in part because they didn't operate with borrowed, poorly digested, inappropriate ideas.

Shibani, I also feel you use the word "tradition" as though it is *ipso facto* a pejorative. We need to distinguish between life denying and life affirming traditions, between those that protect and strengthen women and those that harm them. I am neither pro-tradition, nor anti-modern. I like to look at the concrete facts in each instance and decide which aspect of our traditions deserves to be cherished and which need amendment or outright rejection. Even a cursory glance through a

MANUSHI issue will tell you that it doesn't exist to glorify traditions but to subject them to critical scrutiny. I may err in my judgement but not in intent. We believe that a healthy society is one which understands and respects its past while building its future. Those who despise everything about their past do indeed turn to self hatred.

Manjusree says: "In her zeal to defend India and all things Indian. Madhu Kishwar goes to extremes. Anyone who criticises India is seen as an enemy and a 'self hater'."

Only someone altogether unfamiliar with my writing in MANUSHI and elsewhere over the last twenty years would make such an absurd statement. It is widely recognised as a forum whose very *raison d'etre* is subjecting our society, culture, economy and polity to a thorough going critical evaluation—not as a mere intellectual, academic exercise but with a view to bringing about necessary and required changes. Even with regard to critiquing the familial oppression of women in India, MANUSHI is acknowledged to have played a pioneering role that continues into the present.

Over the years I, along with many others, have written innumerable articles on the problems women face in family life, the discrimination they are subjected to, the violence inflicted on them. Not once have we faced hostility or attack from our numerous male readers though we have been forthright in criticising male behaviour. However, the moment any of us, especially me, dares point out some of the positive aspects of Indian family life, or attempts to analyse some of our customs and rituals without indulging in a simplistic attack, we receive a barrage of hostility from a section of feminists as happened over my stand on dowry, property rights, the Shah Bano controversy and several other issues.

Even our 10th anniversary volume entitled *Women Bhakt Poets* was received with hostility by important voices from feminist groups when it was first released in 1988. We were accused of turning into fundamentalists, of glorifying oppressive religious traditions, of encouraging women to accept patriarchal subjugation. It is only later, after some male left intellectuals re-evaluated the bhakti-sufi tradition as positive legacies, and when western universities began treating these as intellectually fashionable subjects and grants became available for studying such religio-cultural movements, that we were no longer abused for exploring the positive aspects of our bhakti heritage from women.

I also wonder if all those who are upset with my review of *Fire* would have had the same positive reaction to *Fire* had the film been made by an American. I believe it would have been condemned soundly as being a projection of racist stereotypes.

Bisakha Sen asks, "Has Madhu Kishwar ever been 'a bride in a joint family'."

I chose to remain unmarried because domesticity — even of the pleasant variety — is not what I want. In my own circle of family and friends, there are about as many good, bad and indifferent marriages. In some of these joint families brides are not oppressed, but even pampered. Many of my women friends and relatives tell me that they would not have been able to pursue their professions after the birth of their children except for the support of their joint family.

I also know several joint families where young brides have gotten a raw deal. I have witnessed at close quarters how some of my aunts have been oppressed by their in-laws and husbands just as I know of an equal, if not larger, number of female relatives who are tyrannical as daughters-in-law and who give a very rough time to their husbands. I also know of many mothers-in-law who have a very close and caring relationship with their daughters-in-

law. I have witnessed a good number of very dignified marriages.

In short, joint families are not always uniformly oppressive, just as nuclear families do not necessarily result in greater bargaining power for women. In fact, even in *Fire*, the joint family is not the source of oppression. Radha's (Shabana's) mother-in-law requires *sewa* because she has been bedridden, but she is hardly a source of tyranny. Her brother-in-law Jatin also does not seem to be the cause of Radha's unhappiness. His wife Sita (Nandita Das), who is the latest addition to the joint family becomes a source of love and support. She brings much joy into Radha's life with or without their sexual involvement. Almost all of Radha's problems are related to the insensitivity of her husband towards her which would not be any different even if they were living in a nuclear family.

"Ms. Kishwar knows little and cares less about homosexuals... Homosexuality is a criminal offence in India. You cannot admit to being a homosexual and keep a job... Madhu Kishwar doesn't know the trauma of lies and deceit women have to go through them desperation, neurosis, suicide...", Shreya Kishore.

Indeed, I am no authority on homosexual life in India. Yes, I know that homosexuality is listed as an offence in the Indian Penal Code enacted by the British in 1860. We have failed to scrap or amend this law in post independence India just as our legislatures have failed to amend all other outdated, anti people laws including the Police Act, the Municipal laws and so on.

However, it is absolutely wrong to say that "you cannot admit being a homosexual and keep a job." I know any number of



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homosexuals who hold varied positions in and outside the government. Hardly anyone has been harassed, leave alone fired from their jobs. Gay networks operate widely in India. They bring out and circulate their newsletters openly. To the best of my knowledge, their members have never been publicly attacked or lost jobs.

The trauma of lies and deceit you say lesbian women have to go through is more within the family rather than in the public realm. This too varies from family to family. There are families in which women are far more harshly dealt with for associating with men, or for having an affair with a man, or wanting to marry a man of their choice. These families would often, I believe, be far more likely to overlook their sexual engagement with other women.

Without doubt, there are families which treat homosexuality as an abhorrent aberration. But that is not the standard response of Indian society because our tradition (a word you despise) does not treat it either as a moral or a criminal offence. Homophobia is a legacy of our colonial past, not our traditional past. This is not to deny that there are oppressive aspects in our cultural tradition. There are plenty. But let us attack our traditions for their actual faults and shortcomings rather than despise them for the shortcomings of other cultures which we out of ignorance impose on our own.

There is an unfortunate tendency among many feminists to assume that all the problems women face in the West must be the common burden of women everywhere else. They also mistakenly anticipate that feminists in India will be attacked in the same way and for the same reasons as



western feminists. But our society has baffled those expectations. For example, women's organisations in India have not faced the kind of ridicule and aggression western feminists had to deal with. On the contrary, they have received lot of support from men.

I know numerous gay men and lesbian women in India who have not faced any attacks in public nor have they been persecuted by their families. This is not to deny that some other women have had bitter experiences with their families on this account, just as many women find their families very supportive when they go for love marriages while others are attacked, ostracised and punished for making their own choice.

The important point is that in the public sphere there are no campaigns or attacks against homosexuals in India, nor have they faced persecution in jobs, as has often happened in many western countries. An easy way to verify this would be to do a survey of Indian newspapers and magazines.

In all these years, I do not remember having seen even one hostile or critical article regarding gays in India. Gays have received mostly positive coverage in the Indian media. Some recently started radio programmes such as *Kaam ki Baat* which respond to sex related questions of their listeners always give very emphatic, sensible, informative and assuring answers to men and women who are struggling with their gay or bisexual orientation. As for family response, it varies enormously in India because our culture is not as homogenised as are some others.

Ruby Ghuznavi charges me with "imbalanced criticism" and asks why I am making such a fuss over the two heroines of Fire meeting in Nizamuddin Dargah.

I have myself visited Nizamuddin and many other dargahs several times. The point I made was simply this: What do you make of a film in which Hindu symbols, spaces, homes, rituals and values are all without exception

projected as oppressive whereas any break from oppression comes only in non-Hindu spaces? Nizamuddin Dargah is not a likely place where two middle class Hindu women would choose to meet after walking out on their respective husbands. They are more likely to choose a restaurant or a hotel or some such place where they can spend the night safely. Its only to give the film a naïve melodramatic end that a filmy *agnipariksha* is enacted, followed by thunder, lightning and rain as the backdrop for uniting these two female lovers in a picturesque dargah.

Manjushree further says "Madhu Kishwar has a personal axe to grind. Her hatred jumped off the screen."

I firmly believe that anyone who feels the need to settle personal scores through their public interventions (by way of writing or otherwise) is actually unfit for public life. If what I wrote sounds like I have a personal axe to grind then I obviously failed in my task and my mission.

I also take this occasion to raise some other related issues that have been on mind for a while.

I have never known of an American or a European who came to India to study or write on European history or literature. Nor of a European film maker who came and lived in India or China for several years and then want to a Bombay film studio to make a film about life in an American suburb. Even ancient travellers like the Chinese Hsiuen Tsang who visited India in the 7th century did not use his writing skills to describe China to Indians. Instead, he wrote a text



to document and analyse what he experienced and witnessed in India. A British writer like Forster spent barely two years of his life in India. Yet he produced the great classic *A Passage to India* which tries to delve deep into the civilisational crisis the Indians were experiencing as a result of British rule.

Why is it that many of the Indian academics from the social sciences who go and live in the West, including some of our well known writers and film makers, still end up writing about or filming the poverty and misery of India? I know of only a few exceptions—Vikram Seth and A.K. Ramanujan – who used their years in the West to grapple with its own culture on its terms and won accolades from the westerners for their masterly grasp of aspects of western literature and the western way of life. Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* demonstrates not only Seth's mastery of many western verse forms but also his supreme self confidence in holding a mirror to the West, poking good-humoured fun at the idiosyncrasies of their culture.

There is not a hint of malice in that mirthful critique. He writes as an amused observer—someone who has been able to fully partake of and even enjoy that culture. His is not a critique of someone standing apart as an outsider launching a satirical attack. Which is why his western readers joined Seth in laughing at themselves with him—and even honoured him for subjecting their kinks to such charming ridicule.

A.K. Ramanujan made his name in America as a teacher of classical English and European literature. He

simultaneously translated and interpreted many important Sanskrit and other classical Indian texts and folktales. He was a respected figure in mainstream American academia and did not remain marginalised in any ghetto of South Asian studies. Gayatri Spivak can be added to this list, for she too has made her mark in mainstream European literary studies rather than become an NRI expert on Bengali literature—though she could have done that with authority.

The latest addition to this exceptional group is Shekhar Kapur who has dared make a much lauded film about Queen Elizabeth.

But most other Indian scholars in the humanities and even film makers, especially those who identify themselves as feminists, stay obsessed with “studying” and critiquing India. They focus on scholarships and jobs in South Asian Studies departments. The topics for research they choose more often than not focus on the atrocities, brutalities, wounds and traumas of Indian society—both real and imagined.

I have often wondered what could be that the reason for this obsession? Is it a question of feeding the market demand? If you write about India's "wounded civilization", and the "despised untouchables" you are more likely to get a western publisher than if you have written a book on Indian music. If NRI social scientists chose to work on the history, politics literature or social movements of western societies they would be judged by far more rigorous scholarly criteria. But when it comes to India or other neglected third world countries there are fewer people in the West interested or concerned about those issues. Any mumbo-jumbo by a "representative of the indigenous culture" has an advantage in multi-cultural oriented studies—especially, if they are smart enough to pick on topics which are fashionable and fit into stereotypes of Indian society.

Western universities are filled with such NRI experts who will descend on India for a few days after every major riot or tragedy so that they can get enough material for presenting a new paper in a forthcoming conference. But gestures of compassion like money for relief work or starting a village school more often than not come from altogether another set of NRIs—computer scientists, doctors, professionals and businessmen who have successfully competed with westerners on their turf and made a respectable place for themselves in those societies. They have no pretensions of being India "experts" but want to stay connected in a useful way with their families and ancestral land. In other words, we are dealing with two sets of responses of emigrants to the problems of India—encashing on India's misery or using the money they earn in foreign lands to help people in the land of their birth. □

ERRATA

We apologise for several inadvertent errors that occurred in our interview with Manubhai Shah in MANUSHI 111.

- We spelt his name wrong once as Manubahi.
- We also twice misnamed his organisation Consumer Education Research Centre (CERC) as CREC.
- We misidentified Janardan Pujari who at that time was actually Minister of State, Ministry of Finance, Government of India. The questions he was asked on LIC were asked in parliament.
- We mistakenly indicated that Mr. Shah might have anticipated becoming Managing Director of Arvind Mills had he chosen not to leave Arvind Mills. This, he informs us, is inconceivable because Arvind Mills is family owned and a family member has always occupied the post.
- Section 80-G(5) of the Income Tax Act is recognition as a Public Charitable Trust and Section 35 (1) (iii) is recognition of an organisation as a Research Institute in the Social Sciences. This was unclear in the article.

We had sent the final, edited draft of his interview to Manubhai with the request that he correct any errors he found in it. However, the interview was sent back, without any corrections, by Manubhai's office. He was travelling during that period and did not get the opportunity to read or correct it.

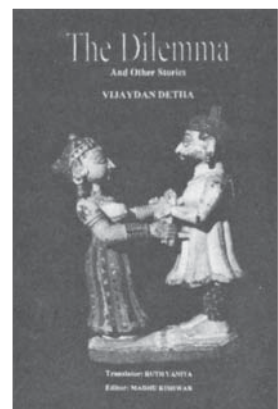
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and Other Stories

By Vijaydan Detha

Translator: Ruth Vanita

Editor: Madhu Kishwar



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