

Normal vs Abnormal Sexual Orientations: A question of inclusion in the film Fire.

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“I have a problem when people say something is real or not real, or normal or abnormal. The meaning of those words for me is very personal and subjective. I have always been confused and never had a clear cut understanding of the meaning of those kind of words”(Tim Burton). Who determines the normality? What is normal or what is abnormal? What is real or what is unreal? The social context that problematizes the defining of the normal and the abnormal, very important are the concepts of sexual orientation and gender identity. Sexual Orientation is an enduring pattern of romantic or sexual attraction to persons of the opposite sex or gender, the same sex or gender, or to both sexes or more than one gender ; the fact of being heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual. Gender identity is a person’s perception of having a particular gender, which may or may not correspond with their birth sex. i.e.,one’s sexual orientation is about who one is attracted to and gender identity is about who one is.

Judith Butler, an American philosopher and gender theorist in her most influential theoretical text of the 1990s, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of identity* (1990) explains gendered identity as a ‘social product’ of repeated ordinary daily activities. The repetition of ‘ordinary activities’ which she emphasized, results the formation of particular concepts and beliefs and in to a social system. This idea of ‘institutionalization’ and ‘habitualization’ is described in the book of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (qtd.in Kundu), *The social construction of reality* (1966).It is these socially constructed realities, that shape the code of conduct, which define the ‘normality’ within the sexual orientation and gender identity.

This socially constructed reality associated with the ‘normal sex’ or ‘straight - sex’ questions all other sexual orientations outside the ‘heterosexuality’. Here becomes relevant the goal of Butler to uncover the assumption “that restrict the meaning of gender to received notions of masculinity and femininity” (2485), where her key insistence is that nothing is natural not even the sexual identity. For her “natural” is actually socially constructed and contingent, therefore it leaves a possibility for “resignification”,and alteration of our daily existence(Butler 2487). However, the support for “masculine hegemony” and “heterosexist power” are deeply written in our psyches as well as into the dominant institution of the socio-political life.

According to Ruth Vanita and Salim Kidwai in *Same – Sex Love in India* Michel Foucault, Liliath Feiderman, David Halperin, have argued that the categorization of ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’ people based on their sexual and emotional preferences was only a late nineteenth century invention in the west.

India had a long tradition of tolerance for all kinds of beliefs faiths philosophies orientations and ways of living. Though India is a deeply religious country it has accepted non-religious communities as well. In ancient India there was a place for all kinds of diverse cultures, arts and literatures; the society was very assimilative. “Sikhandin’s sexchange” in Vyasa’s *Mahabharatha*, the embrace of Shiva and Vishnu in *Bhagavata Purana*, traces out the elements of same sex love relationships (Vanita and Kidwai 31, 69). At once we have purely and strictly religious painting and sculptors like at Konark or at Jagganath Puri temple and at another place we have monuments like Khajuraho which is famous world over for its erotic arts and sculptors; this also includes sculptors with homosexual activities. This shows that not only all types of sexual orientations were there in ancient past but people were so tolerant and broad minded that paintings and sculptors depicting the same-sex love – making were being freely created and displayed. Homosexuality as a sexual preference with same sex persons are may be in minority but they are a reality.

Fire was ahead of its time by taking the controversial topic lesbianism and feminism in equally controversial contexts of religious and sexual setting. The film questions heterosexuality as a political institution which disempowers women. It makes way for male rights of physical, economical and emotional access to women. liberation can only come by overthrowing the stranglehold of Indian tradition.

The film *Fire* questions lunatic guardians of Hindu morality. Seemingly it is a naïve and boring film about two unhappy housewives compelled to seek emotional and sexual satisfaction from each other, because their husbands provide none. But for Deepa Mehta, the film director it raises a political statement intended to combat the maltreatment of women inherent in Indian culture and it also throws a challenge to what she considers as oppressive for women among the Hindu traditionalists. Mehta daringly exposes the image of India as a nation embedded with the tradition of oppression through the recurring ideas of desire, choice, and control. The two heroines of the film is named after the cultural icons Radha and Sita, “the two wronged women of Indian mythology” (qtd.in Kishwar). Mehta entitles the film *Fire*, to draw a parallel between the domestic melodrama in the film and Sita’s agnipariksha in the epic *Ramayana*, to make her audience conscious about the harmful offshoot of the continuing hold of Indian traditions. Though Mehta use the instance of agnipariksha to mock this hold of Indian traditions, she tactically uses the same tool to prove the worthiness of heroine’s new found lesbian love by the end of the film.

“Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” is an essay by Adrienne Rich, essayist and radical feminist which was published in her book *Blood Bread and Poetry*. It was written as an attempt to reinforce the personal and political bonds between women. The fact patriarchy preaches is that heterosexuality is natural and human intrinsic is in check. It is an institution imposed upon many cultures and societies that render women in a subordinate situation. Riche urges women to direct their energies towards other women rather than men and portrays lesbianism as an extension of feminism. She defines lesbian existence as an act of resistance to the institution and also as an individual choice. The tradition has

the tendency to socially exclude non heterosexual orientations by the society. In the film, when Radha declares : “We are so bound by customs and rituals, that someone has just to press the button called ‘tradition’ and I start responding like a trained monkey”, it announces Mehta’s concept of tradition ruling the society.

Riche urges women to direct their energies towards other women rather than men and portrays lesbianism as an extension of feminism. When Sita found the illicit relationship of her husband she tries to withdraw herself and find comfort in her elder sister in law. Mehta tries to bring here the concept of female bonding. She raises the question why cultural system compels women to invest their erotic energies in man.

Michael Warner, a social critic, in 1991 coined the term heteronormativity: the pervasive and invisible norms of heterosexuality embedded as a normative principle in social institutions and theory. Anyone who falls outside this supposed standard is devalued and is often considered as something deviant or strange to be sanctified socially and legally. Normative heterosexual important leading solution of all the women problems. In the film, the mental awakening of the character Radha, from the thirteen years of slumberness is triggered through the character Sita. This is explicitly evident in the conversation between them, and Radha says “ This is unfamiliar for me. The awareness of needs and desires”(Mehta)

It’s not just the content, even the context of *Fire* highlights the hold of heteronormativity. These set of ideas or practices are deconstructed by Mehta. What can be more challenging to patriarchy than women saying , that they don’t need men? Heteronormativity in India has the sole purpose of oppressing homosexuals as a whole. Heteronormative patriarchy takes the final decisions and women cannot detach themselves from their families like their male counterparts. They are shunned and silenced by the prophets of so called “normal” sexual orientations. We are living in a society where normalcy has become very misunderstood.

There are biological as well as psychological reasons which make a person to choose her sexual orientation to be with same sex. One is born with a particular kind of sexual orientation and it is in the genes. It is a natural phenomenon. No conclusive proof is there that homosexual behavior is simply a biological thing but there are other factors like one’s family, friends, society, experiences and desires which decides how one views life and how one acts. This distinction between the biological and environmental instinct is clear in the film, where Radha and Sita born with a heterosexual identity attempted to redefine their sexual orientation; to be more specific through their homosexual acts. It is natural for people to decide what kind of food or life they wish to have. Similarly it should also be natural to decide with whom one wants to have sexual relationship either with opposite sex or with same sex. The question inevitable will arise, do we condemn all heterosexual relationships as oppressive? No. But the absence of the choice within the system of society remains the great unacknowledged reality where for women heterosexuality may not be a “preference” at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized and maintained by force. (Gough). This lacunae of choices becomes the butt of criticism in the film.

“Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups even when they rebel and rise up”(Guha).The attempts to curb the release of the film, itself exemplifies this subjection. Considering the film from a subaltern perspective, Mehta focuses on the promotion for a less suppressed society for both men and women but the society problematizes the acceptance of the ‘deviant’ over the so called straight. Jasbir Jain in her book, *Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture, Subjectivity and Agency* emphasizes the issue of identity, space and freedom. The essay entitled “ A People Without a History” in this book highlights” the freedom to choose and to be recognized as a countable human being”(Jain 3). Mehta tries to substantiate this idea in the film. This questions the fundamentality of the so called dynamic and progressive Indian Constitution which is expected to provide rights and protections to each and every citizen of the country regardless of majority or minority. *Fire* is also a critique on the society who prioritises heterosexuality in terms of procreation. with the yogic interpretation of morality, and Askok’s pursuit of purity as abstinence the idea of heterosexuality is contradicted. For instance Sita sarcastically asks Radha what is that to do with love to have a sexual relationship only to have sons that carry the family name?

To quote Edward Vacek S J Associate Professor of Christian Ethics Western Jesuits School of Theology, “ instead of stocking the usual raging and out of control fires concerning the morality of private homosexual activity,” we should also “ foster sane and productive” approach on the basic human rights of homosexual persons. The idea of heterosexual morality as the sexual morality or the absolute morality should be redefined in this context, because “identity is not something planted inside us to be discovered, but something that’s performatively produced by acts.” – Butler. This paper concludes with an optimistic vision enriched with a notion of inclusion irrespective of the conflicting dichotomies of normality.

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