

# FEMALE REPRESENTATION AND WOMEN'S CINEMA: A READING OF *FIRE*

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**Abstract:** Women representations in the reel world as the weaker sex have only strengthened the idea which has for years been a contested one. This has slowly been assimilated into the Indian psyche. The representation of resilience in women is a rare scene on the silver screen. However, this recurring impression has not only influenced the role of women in the society but has weakened their morale and confidence. However, with the emergence of women directors and women's cinema there has been considerable change in the representation of women on screen. Director Deepa Mehta is one of those bold women who has attempted to depict the various realms of female sexuality through her movie *Fire* which resulted in much furore in the film industry. This paper attempts to look at the representation of female characters in women's cinema with special reference to Deepa Mehta's *Fire*. It also brings out a detailed history of women's cinema.

**Indexed Words:** female representation, women's cinema, Deepa Mehta's *Fire*, women in cinema.

**I. INTRODUCTION:** Women's cinema, as the name suggests, can be ambiguous as to whether it alludes to the movies made for women, by women or of women. This paper has looked into the history of women's cinema which is made by women and an in depth analysis of the movie *Fire*. The history of women's cinema as stated by Ann Kaplan can be divided into four phases starting from 1906 to '30 which was a period when women were confined to their households whereas men were free to exercise their powers on them to the fullest. It was during the early 1980s that the feminist film makers came up with the idea of objectifying women before the camera lens further to be enjoyed and devoured by the gaze of the dominant class on the silver screen as it was popularly called, the 'male gaze'. In the classic cinema one can notice women being featured as wives and mothers and as virgins or whores before marriage. It was later that the vamp came to the fore, the femme fatale. However, with very few women working in the industry, most female characters were found single.

The earliest of the women directors were Alice Guy Blache and Lois Weber. Even though they had to work under the constraints put forth by patriarchy, to be able to be behind the camera as early as the 1920s was a great achievement on their part. By 1915, the suffragette movement had boosted the confidence of women in coming forward in the industry. Some important movies were *Matrimony* (1913) by Blache and *How Men Propose* (1913) and *Where Are My Children?* (1916) by Weber. Although these movies were not completely feminist in their content, as a beginning, they were attempts on the part of these women. "Such ambivalence is typical of this period," says Kaplan (17). The second phase starts from the 1930s to '60s which had a number of important events like the Depression and the Second World War which had actually sidelined women directors. Male auteurs like Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, Fritz Lang and Nicholas Ray established their positions in the industry with their masterpieces. The two women directors who managed to come to the center of public attention were Dorothy Arzner and Ida Lupino. Arzner became an icon for the feminist film theorists with her films like *Christopher Strong* (1932), *Craig's Wife* (1936) and *Dance Girl Dance* (1940). Ida who came to the industry as an actress later set up her own production company with the help of her husband and made five strong films of which two had messages of rape and abortion which were not very popular themes in Hollywood. These directors had marked their presence behind the cameras and established a space in the industry as women directors. However, it is not possible to say that they had not marked any feminist aspect in their direction as early as the 1940s and '50s. In spite of the resistance, they had come up with controversial women themes in their films.

The third phase was marked with an all-round protest from women all over the world. The white European women in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s in Germany, France and Eastern Europe had directors like Marta Meszaros, Mia Zetterling, Marguerite Duras, Margarethe von Trotta, and Helma Sanders Brahm who made exceptional fictional films dealing with women's issues. They battled an unjust patriarchal order and claimed what was due to women. This period from 1960s through 1990 was made remarkable with the presence of more than one woman entering into the academia, contributing to an ideological critique of established white male intellectual tradition. Although the nineteenth century feminists had been able to address the socio-political injustices and inequalities experienced by women they could not lay down theoretical positions or shape an aesthetic criticism based on feminist concepts.

However, the period from 1960s through 1990s saw the theoretical positions established by cine-feminist scholars. The powerful movies directed by a few feminist independent directors like Laura Mulvey and Sally Porter from Britain, Patrici Gruben, Jacqueline Levitin and Cynthia Scott from Canada, Julia Reichert, Barbara Kopple, Barbara Hammer, Ariel Dougherty, and Jan Oxemberg from United States have put in their personal statements combined with the socio-political documentation of aspects of women's lives and oppressions. The styles and expressions of movies were as varied as the themes, ranging from poetic and lyrical works to avant-garde theory films, from narrative films to documentaries. However, the women who had not made any representation in Hollywood during the classic period had managed to find space in the well known European male avant-garde of the 1920s and 1940s. Germaine Dulac is one who stood out in Europe and Maya Deren from America kept the embers of feminism burning during the dark period of 1940s and early 1950s. The conditions were progressing showing a ray of hope in the 1970s and 1980s when women were able to draw strength and inspiration from their foremothers who influenced the theories and practices of films made by white women. The women academics had started to produce scholarship with their involvement with activists and artists. What was

once close to impossible was to alter the imaginary, the fictitious conception of women in the filmic texts. But North American imaginary had already partly attained this with the works of independent feminist film makers.

According to Teresa de Lauretis it is possible to intervene in the symbolic order of film by re-signification and re-appropriation and alter the imaginary. It is a positive sign that even today very strong pioneering and original movies are contributed by many of the film makers mentioned above who were an essential part of the developments that took place in the filmmaking of the 1970s. The fourth phase put forth by Kaplan is that which depicts a decade of multicultural women's films in European and North American contexts.

The 1960s and 1970s feminist rhetoric had popularised a 'we' feeling which was one that had many tones to it. This 'we' did not include the coloured women. In fact, when the white women had come forward to insist on a place for them in the imaginary worlds depicted in the movies and while they developed theories about the suppressive and negative images of white women on screen, it was only recently that the coloured women have been able to state their resistance to the way they have been portrayed on screen. Thus, there came a realization of the neglect of the independent film by women of colour and the ignorance of the issue of race in Hollywood film, with the help of minority theorists and film makers such as Trinh T Minh-ha and Pratibha Parmar.

The 1960s was not really favourable for the minority women to get behind the camera but they did produce a wealth of independent films of many kinds adopting plurality of themes, styles, and ideological perspectives that suited their diversity. However, by the 1990s with a change in the socio-political situation, film making in Hollywood had become difficult with lesser availability of funds and facilities to get behind the camera and to produce films that could challenge the then prevalent dominant culture. As the coloured women started establishing their position behind the camera in the west, which made some effect in the East, women who have had no serious representations other than supporting the male character on screen had slowly started making some serious representations. In Bollywood when women had nothing more to do than being an actress, they began to occupy the space behind the camera. Fatma Begum is considered as the first female film director of India. Fatma stepped into the industry as an actress in 1922 after being trained in plays. She directed her first movie in 1926, *Bulbule Paristan* which came to be known as India's first ever woman directed movie. She founded her own production company, Fatma Film which was later renamed as Victoria –Fatma Films. She had worked with filmmakers like Ardeshir Irani and Nanubhai Desai before founding her own production company.

According to Johnston, feminist cinema should be a reflection of a cinema which tries to project the problems of women from the perspective of women, a cinema that is different in both form and content from the Hollywood cinema. Hollywood cinema as pointed out by Mulvey catered to men satisfying their gaze but a women directed movie would look at its female characters from the perspective of women and render it as a counter cinema to the existing male directed movies where women are objectified and rendered irrelevant in the narrative which is led forward by the male character. If the situation is otherwise then the female character is punished, says Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". In "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema" (1973), Johnston points out how women have been stereotyped since the days of the silent cinema and how the film narrative as a mythic system naturalizes the conventional gender relations. She goes on to emphasize the need for a cinema that challenges such notions and conventions with an aim to entertain. She remarks that "despite the enormous emphasis placed on woman as a spectacle in the cinema, woman as woman is largely absent" (qtd. in Nelmes 271). However, unlike many other contemporaries she does not reject popular cinema as a "dream machine" but embraces its contradictory possibilities. Jill Nelmes writes, "Johnston stresses the importance of developing a film practice that questions and challenges the patriarchal basis of mainstream dominant cinema, calling for a counter-cinema which will have the links with avant-garde and left –wing film" (271). Even though women directors tried to make a change by coming forward with avant-garde films they were termed "difficult" and failed to attract much audience. However, film makers like Mulvey did not recede but did much to help in the understanding of their films by giving handouts and lectures. There were feminists who were of the opinion that avant-garde films were elitist and would not reach a wider female audience as expected. Jill Nelmes voices this concern when she writes: "Mulvey's and Johnston's theories, would be more useful for the development of a feminist film theory than as a guide on how to make feminist films" (273).

By the end of 1970 feminist film theories were well established and women gained more confidence at the realization that society would change. Although by the beginning of the 1970s the focus was on representation in film, by the end of the decade the focus had shifted to the concept of 'pleasure in viewing', which is a common factor of the mainstream cinema, to be retained or denied in film. Feminist film theorists are of the opinion that feminist film theory has to concentrate on building awareness among the women folk of the marginalization of women in a patriarchal society. However, they pointed out the risk of alienating the audience by completely denying the pleasures of mainstream cinema. Annette Kuhn and Ann Kaplan were among the feminists who called for a counter-cinema, a deconstructive cinema that could challenge the mainstream cinema. They emphasized the need for the audience to be more active than passive. They should gain pleasure from learning the changes that can actually be accomplished by them and not from the narrative. However, the worry of alienating the audience by going against the conventional, mainstream cinema was met with the suggestion put forth by Kaplan to manipulate the conventions of mainstream cinema. In Teresa de Lauretis' opinion, "Films are one of the great storehouses of society's stereotypes about women" (qtd. in Blewett 12). Through movies one can construct and break stereotypes.

The movie analyzed here is directed by a female director with themes not discussed by male directors in the industry. Women directors have always focused on the problems of women from a realist perspective rather than glamorizing the issue and the characters.

The movie *Fire* (1996), directed by Deepa Mehta, is the first in the elemental sequence of movies, *Earth* (1998) and *Water* (2005) being the other two. The movie as the name suggests discusses the fire of passion and the fire of purification as mentioned in Hindu mythology where fire purified Sita or was expected to do so when she was asked to take the 'Agni Pareeksha' after her straying out of the Lakshman Rekha and being abducted by Ravana. However, the trial was inevitable. This movie is loosely based on the Urdu short story by Ishmath Chughthai titled "Lihaaf" (The Quilt). Although the short story narrates the life of a woman who seemed to have never known the different colours of her sexuality, it also discusses how the woman is obsessed with this new exploration.

She enters a new realm she had never ventured into even after being married. The movie is a lot different from the short story which takes only the theme from “Lihaaf.”

The movie opens with a family, comprising a mother, daughter and father sitting in the field where the mother narrates the story of some people who used to live on the mountains and wanted to see the sea. The mother tells the girl that one can see what one wants to if they close their eyes and slowly open it. The child tries doing so by closing her eyes and opening them but cannot see anything but the mustard field. This is a clear attempt of making the child imagine what she cannot see and be content with the capacity of her limitless imagination.

The movie then suddenly jumps to the wedding scene of Jatin (Jaaved Jaaffrey) who is shown as least interested in the marriage as he has an affair with a Chinese girl who continues to stay in the relationship but does not want to get bound in wedlock. She and her brother criticize and despise the Indian culture which they find as stifling with too many restrictions bound in tradition. Her brother then goes on showering abuses on the Indian way of life where a woman is confined to the four walls of the house.

The movie revolves around the lesbian relationship that arises between the daughters-in-law of a family who have been ignored completely; the older brother pledges himself to divinity and is found busy with the affairs of the ashram of a Swamy and the younger brother is found spending his time with his girlfriend Julie. The wife of the younger brother, Sita (Nandita Das) is presented as a girl with a modern outlook. As soon as she is brought home after the wedding she changes into the pants of her husband and switches on the tape recorder playing an English disco song. She also fakes smoking which prognosticates the role she is going to take up in the relationship which she is about to establish between herself and her sister-in-law, Radha (Shabana Azmi). Instead of calling her ‘Bhaabhi’ (which means sister –in- law Hindi) she addresses her as Radha. The choice of names of the characters is interesting as both have been lifted from the Hindu scriptures. Sita, is symbolic of purity and fidelity whereas Radha is symbolic of the eternal love for Krishna. In fact it is Sita who elevates Radha into the realm of knowing those desires which she has probably not known even with her husband. When asked by Sita as to why she could not have a child, Radha explains that the doctors said she does not have eggs in her ovary as per the doctor’s opinion. Just as her womb is barren so is her sex life. She has adjusted her life to the monotonous chores of the family and their take away food business which is run jointly by the brothers along with the sale of video tapes to special customers. These video tapes are often sneaked upstairs by the servant Mundu who uses it to masturbate in front of the old mother Biji whose care is entrusted in his hands. Whenever someone walks in, he quickly changes the channel to show the ‘Agni Pareeksha’ scene or the fire purification scene from the *Ramayana*. One can also see how the servant has a crush on the elder ‘Bahu’(daughter-in-law) Radha whom he finds very attractive, docile and well behaved. However, when he is caught by Radha masturbating in front of their mother she sees to it that he is fired. But sensing the danger of the situation, the servant who had his doubts about the lesbian relationship of these daughters-in –law, confides in the master. The older brother comes home early one night only to see both women in bed together. One day Sita kisses Radha and the next day Radha dresses her hair and soon they are in each other’s arms. The ladies make love whenever the two brothers are away from home. The big brother, Radha’s husband Ashok (Kulbhushan Karbandha), is celibate and a committed disciple of the Swamy whom Sita rather mockingly exclaims should be taken as a partner by him. He tests his temptation by lying close to his wife and not making love to her, which she finds very painful. On one occasion she refuses to lie beside him and he reminds her that it is her duty to do so being his wife.

It is sad to note that when Jatin seems to continue his extramarital affair Ashok does not feel that the family’s image will be tampered. But Radha’s relationship with Sita makes him furious enough to question her about her indifference to the family’s reputation. This is one scene where one gets to see Radha turning into a different person, a woman who is capable of asking for her rightful position as a wife and understanding the failure of Ashok to acknowledge her sexuality and the needs of her body for the last thirteen years.

Mundu is used to picking sex tapes from Jatin’s cassette shop which he watches in Biji’s presence and masturbates. One day Radha and Sita take themselves off from the daily chores and go out to the Nizamudheen shrine. It is Radha who catches him red handed with the sex tape taken from the video cassette shop. Mundu tries to justify his action by saying that he works really hard through the day and needs some sort of recreation. When he finds that he will not be forgiven by the family he threatens Radha that he will reveal her relationship with Sita to Ashok which will not only be a dishonour to the family but a grave sin before the public. Sita and Radha are shown to have used no makeup when they are at home. However, when they come close to each other Sita encourages Radha to use lipstick and deck herself up as a partner would probably do so. On more than one occasion one may take note of the scene where there is a connection brought in with the characters massaging the feet of their loved ones. It is in a way hinting at the relationship that falls beneath the text of the film.

The first instance is when Jatin is found massaging the feet of Julie confessing that he cannot live without her. Another instance is of Sita massaging the feet of Radha at the picnic. The third and final instance is when Ashok is found massaging the feet of Swami who is listening to a disciple reading out the passage of Agni pareeksha (Trial by Fire) of Sita from the *Ramayana*. This scene is also poignant because on more than one occasion one can notice this episode being mentioned or shown in the movie hinting or probably justifying the nature of the relationships existing in the family. It is at this moment that Mundu comes looking for Ashok to alert him of the physical relationship between Radha and Sita. When he goes home he is shocked to find them naked in each other’s arms. The women decide to run away from the family to live together. Sita sets out first and decides to wait at the Nizamudheen shrine where Radha is supposed to reach after settling the situation at home. When Radha goes to Biji she spits on her face exactly like how she had spat on Mundu’s face showing her resentment and refusing to acknowledge their bodily needs. Ashok who had been testing his resolution to stay celibate loses his control when he tries visualizing the scene he found Radha and Sita in. He is sexually aroused and in order to test himself he seeks Radha’s help who refuses to assist him. He keeps reminding her of her duty as a wife and tries taunting Radha into obeying. However, she is determined not to help him and informs him of her decision to leave him and join Sita. She openly admits that she desires Sita and that she wishes to leave.

The fire that catches her saree is symbolic of the fire Sita had to walk through to prove fidelity to her husband Rama in the *Ramayana*. (Fig:1)



Fig.1

Here, she walks away proving her desires and her action as one that is justifiable which probably cannot be accepted by patriarchy but acceptable to women folk. When Jatin's relationship with Julie can be justified, Ashok's wife, Radha is not forgiven for her desires and thoughts. Radha chooses to walk away from her marriage and join Sita, who as promised, waits for Radha at the Nizamudheen Shrine. The movie concludes showing the first scene with which the movie begins. The same mustard field where a girl is seen sitting with her family trying to visualize the ocean is shown when the movie ends but this time the girl is able to see the ocean.

The movie shows the hypocrisy of the patriarchal world where men get away with what they do or find a reason to justify their actions but women would either have to take the burden of accusations and curses upon themselves or be bold enough to walk out of the families where they had till date existed as an unwanted entity. In spite of continuing his relationship with his girlfriend after marriage, Jatin blackmails Sita emotionally when she refuses to have intercourse with him. He tells her that she could either leave him and lead her life on her own terms or get pregnant and be engaged with a baby and motherhood like every other Indian wife. However, he adds to it saying that the status of a divorced woman is a miserable one. She chooses to leave him and hopes to lead a good life with Radha who cares for her more than her own husband. Jatin's attempts to make Sita heteronormal can be noticed here. Adrienne Rich in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" writes:

Heterosexuality has been forcibly and subliminally imposed on women. Yet everywhere women have resisted it, often at the cost of physical torture, imprisonment, psychosurgery, social ostracism, and extreme poverty. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" was named as one of the "crimes against women" by the Brussels International Tribunal on Crimes against Women in 1976. (241)

Here too one can witness the desperate wives sharing their feelings with each other disheartened at the fact that they are being ignored by their husbands. On one occasion when Sita says that her mother used to say that without a man a woman's life is like plain boiled rice which is bland and tasteless, Radha retorts to this saying that she likes plain rice. However, when one tries to look at the position of these women from the perspective of patriarchy they will not be able to justify their act but, when conceived from the viewpoint of a woman whose sexuality and existence are totally ignored, one will be able to identify with the fire of passion that arouses both sexes alike. And the fire of purification that the scriptures celebrate sidelining the emotions of a woman can be better understood as another convenient construction of the dominant class. Chatterji in, "The Evolution of Representing Female Sexuality in Hindi Cinema 1991-2010" comments:

Deepa Mehta's *Fire* is an exception, but it is made by a diaspora woman director who lives and works out of the country and who has a different way of looking at life and women within and outside India. Popular films depict women represented as a shadow of male desire. If there is the rare event of a 'good' woman who does desire, she is co-opted in the heteronormative monogamy of marriage, as one has seen Karishma Kapoor doing with that subversive kiss in *Raja Hindustani*. (191)

However, Indian women directors have overcome that categorization and proved themselves worthy of being equated at the same level as that of male directors. Shoma Chatterji further points out the movies directed by Zoya Akhtar and Kiran Rao who directed movies outside the concerns of women issues which had once earned them the label 'women director'. Chatterji writes:

A new breed of gutsy women have redefined and reconstructed themselves as directors per se, stripping off the 'women' prefix to tackle issues that have a wider audience base and subjects. Aparna Sen stepped out of the 'women directors' ghetto with films such as *The Japanese Wife* and *Aarshinagar*. She has successfully transcended the gender barrier ("No Gender" ).

But it is pathetic to know that even today movies like, *Lipstick Under My Burka* had to undergo such an ordeal from the censor board which decided to hold back the movie from being released saying that the movie is a female oriented one. An article that appeared in *The Hindustan Times* by Radika Bhirani titled "A 'Cloak of Culture' Veils Women's Sexual Desire in Hindi cinema", discusses the details of the incident of having turned down the certificate to this film which treats the inner desires of four feisty women. The problem pointed out here is that the movie is too "lady oriented". Radika has quoted the thoughts of film historian SMM Ausaja who very disappointedly voices in the conservative attitude of the Indian censor board. She says: "While our art and literature are so progressive, it is paradoxical how our cinema has not progressed" (Cloak of Culture). She further goes on to say: "People have become so judgmental, and they don't want to listen to contrary view. I am optimistic about things until there's a radical shift in the ideological levels of those in power. We have to remove this cloak of culture to let cinema flourish by global standards"(Cloak of Culture). This article shows how the women directed movies cannot possibly establish itself as a counter culture with such attitude

maintained by the Indian society. However, the film has managed to get a release but with an 'Adult' certification. The women directed movies invoke a sense of threat that "challenges the status quo" says the director Alankrita Shrivastava in her article in *The Guardian*. She elaborates her feelings and thoughts when she first conceived the idea of *Lipstick Under My Burkha*:

The film tells the story of four feisty women in a small town in India who try to steal a piece of freedom from within the confines of their restrained lives. I never imagined that my feminist politics would rattle the board so much that they would refuse to let the film be shown. It came as a shock – and yet, when viewed in the context of the status of women in India and the representation of women in popular Indian culture, it perhaps shouldn't have done. The popular Indian cinema narrative is dominated by the male gaze. Women are objectified, there to fulfill the desires of men, or they play simply peripheral, subservient parts. Women are either heroic or pure-like goddesses- or they are vamps, to be shamed and discarded. There is very little space for realistic portrayals of ordinary women who laugh and cry, who are flawed and funny, who have desires and dreams of their own. Women who are struggling to gain agency over their own lives and bodies. In short, real women [sic] (*Guardian*).

The industry needs more directors like Alankrita Shrivastava who can represent female issues, thoughts and needs with more vigor than many others who do it for sheer entertainment. Shrivastava mentions that: "[A]s a woman, and filmmaker, I have decided that I will not shut up. I refuse to be silenced. I will not be discouraged. I will fight to ensure that *Lipstick Under My Burkha* is released in India. And will continue to make "lady oriented "films as long as I can" (*Guardian*).

**II. CONCLUSION:** Thus the agitation that has set out for a rightful representation for women directed movies will definitely bring out more movies which speak of women and their problems from their perspectives. However, there needs a mentioning of the movies that have brought out the need and the problems faced by women which they tackle more often with the female bonding. This element is found missing in male directed movies. The female bonding depicted in these movies directed by men does not make these characters resilient to their problems. The viewers over the years have been familiar with buddy movies like *Zindagi Na Milenge Dobara* (2011), *Delhi Belly* (2011), *Dostana* (2008), *Rang De Basanti* (2006), *Dil Chahta Hai* (2001), *Hera Pheri* (2000), *Andaaz Apna Apna* (1994) and *Sholay* (1975). However, this list continues with the male camaraderie being stronger, sharing their anxieties, obsessions and thoughts about women, sexuality and spending some fun time with their friends drinking, eating and relaxing.

In a country where one may speak eloquently of rights and duties, it is surprising to see that women do not share equal rights with men when it comes to freedom of expression. Sen continues in the same article about the hindrances the movie *Lipstick Under My Burkha* had to face at the censor board: "The minute a woman asserts her sexuality, people have a problem and refuse to accept it." Sen's daughter is one of the four women starring in the movie.

Women no longer play the role of wife, mother, beloved or vamp as in the yester years. With women's cinema giving glimpses of the potential women have there is significant change in the portrayal of women. Actresses no longer shy away from doing bold characters which have helped in redefining and projecting a realistic view of women in the present scenario.

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