

The controversy over 'Fire': a select dossier (Part II)

A lesbian critique of *Fire* by V. S., from Campaign for Lesbian Rights (PO Box 3526, Lajpat Nagar P.O., New Delhi 110024, India)

Today it has become impossible to separate the politics of protest, sexual rights and artistic expression from the actual images of the controversial film *Fire*, which supposedly is, or is not, about lesbianism, depending upon who is attacking or defending it.

The Canada-based director herself has skilfully adopted the politics of convenience, selling her product through gay and lesbian channels in the West, where the film has received awards and accolades for its supposedly progressive depiction of women rebelling against hetero-patriarchal oppression. However, here at home in India, the director explicitly denied that the film had a lesbian theme, quickly clarified to the press that she was heterosexual, and reportedly said that she would be devastated if her daughter turned out to be lesbian.

The director's hypocrisy, defensiveness and retreat into the safe shelter of her heterosexuality have not deceived Indian lesbians and gays even for a moment. We are well aware that we have been rigorously exploited and commodified as subject matter. The fall-out of the demonstration outside New Delhi's Regal Cinema on 7 December 1998, and the fractures and dissension within the solidarity of those who participated, has been discussed elsewhere in this report. I will restrict myself to a brief comment on my experience of viewing the film itself, which in many ways is as problematic as the Shiv Sena's homophobic assaults on its screenings.

As frame followed frame, I began to experience a sense of growing alienation from the narrative being played out on the screen. This may have been because it swiftly became obvious that the director was alienated from the central dilemma of the non-lesbian lesbian

sisters-in-law around whom the plot is centred. There was absolutely no exploration of the immense frustration and tension that comes from the overwhelming strain of trying to nurture an intimate sexual bond in a crowded household without privacy, autonomy or mobility, as is the case in so many families where doors cannot be locked or separate beds claimed. Most gays and lesbians in the Indian social context will testify to the psychological repercussions of being denied a reasonable space in which to spend sexual time with a lover. Nor does *Fire* attempt to probe the profound guilt, shock, fear, anger, shame, crippling ambivalences and equivocations and other anarchic and threatening emotions that accompany sexual practices generally considered perverted, criminal and taboo.

The critical question of what constitutes the lesbian/gay/transgender/transsexual self (if there is such a thing), and how we work these selves into our daily existence as social and political creatures, a question we queers grapple with all our lives, simply glides past the consciousness of our screen non-lesbian lesbian lovers shackled in their respective sexless and loveless marriages. The sisters-in-law are too busy looking beautiful as they spread saris to dry on their terrace while the exoticized tapestry of congested, ritual-ornamented middle-class life somehow stitches itself into being within the household and in the lanes below. The director carefully keeps our heroines at a lyric distance from the anguish and the euphoria of lesbian social realities, as well as from each other (the brief sex scene was as appealing as watered milk), from their uncaring husbands, and most of all from the excruciating but essential project of claiming some kind of stable selfhood once the layers of illusion, and the illusory protections these offer, are peeled away, violently, unpredictably, and often invisibly.

The director's commitment to inauthenticity becomes even more transparent through her rampant use of 'othering' devices. The film opens and closes with the image of Muslim monuments in imperial marble and common stone the Taj Mahal, a legendary celebration of heterosexual love, and the Sufi dargah [shrine] of Nizamuddin Auliya, a refuge of the destitute and the despairing, as well as of poets and agonized emperors. The director inserts parodic representations of scenes from the Ramayana in various fragmented forms as a comment on the realistic narrative, throughout the film. The characters are further othered by being depicted as victims through class (the blackmailing, masturbating servant who exposes the lesbian love affair to the household), through infirmity (the mute, paralysed, old mother-in-law, privileged witness of the servant's ejaculations) or through the addiction to modes of excess (the brutal younger brother rents out pornographic videos while his oriental mistress dreams about emigrating to the Far East); the tormented elder brother fixates on a guru and arbitrarily imposes Gandhian experiments in celibacy upon his wife). The sisters-in-law are excessive, of course, because they are non-lesbian lesbians.

Where are the fully fleshed, psychologically convincing individuals in this tableau of two-dimensional pathologies? Where is the reliable index of normalcy, empathetic and balanced articulation, nuanced logic, sensitive descriptions of queer realities? Perhaps as a disempowered minority we simply do not matter to the director except as compelling and profitable subject matter. As a lesbian spectator I found the film so plastic, the aestheticism so deliberate, the satire so laboured, that to argue whether *Fire* is lesbian-themed or not is as circuitous and futile as insisting that a doughnut is defined by its fat ring of fried pastry, not its hole.

Madhu Kishwar Nae outpourings of a self-hating Indian: Deepa Mehta's *Fire*, Manushi, no.109, 1998.

Politics of Fire

The film would have been less irksome to

view if the director had at least given her theme a creative cinematic treatment. From the way she went about promoting *Fire* from the very start, it seems Ms Mehta did not want her film to be judged on aesthetic merit. From the time of its first screening at the Toronto film festival in 1996, she began insisting in carefully planted interviews that *Fire* was not merely a movie to be judged on how well it showed the lives of the characters portrayed. Instead, she introduced the film as a political statement intended to combat the maltreatment of women inherent in Indian culture.

[...]

On other occasions, she let it be known that she deliberately highlighted the colour saffron throughout the film because of its association with Hindu culture. Similarly, she claimed that she named her two heroines after the cultural icons Radha and Sita because they are 'the two wronged women of Indian mythology'. Also, that the idea of 'two goddesses in bed together' was bound to provoke a certain set of people. Repressed wives rejecting their respective spouses and becoming lesbian lovers was bound to have shock value. In the publicity blitz that was organized around this film, Mehta kept announcing that the film was bound to have trouble with Indian viewers and the Indian Censor Board because the film shows how oppressive India's religious and cultural traditions are, and how miserable Indian family life is.

As if that were not enough, the title *Fire* is given an add-on subtitle 'Trial by Fire' in a laboured attempt to link the domestic melodrama in her film to Sita's agnipariksha [trial by fire] in the epic Ramayan. To hammer into our heads that the film is about the harmful, even murderous, effect of the continuing hold of Indian traditions, the film ends with the crudely contrived agnipariksha of Radha to prove the heroine worthy of her new-found lesbian love.

[...]

A crude caricature

If we take her version of the Ramayan seriously, we would be led to believe that there

are only two purposes behind the writing of this popular Hindu epic: (a) to condition women into accepting servility and even death by torture without protest; and (b) to encourage men to be crude and insensitive in their relationships with women, to feel righteous about inflicting insults and cruelties on them and to have no compunction about burning them to death because, after all, they are supposedly following the glorious tradition set by Lord Ram.

Deepa Mehta also let it be known that her ire is not just confined to icons from the epics, but that she also aims to show up poor Mahatma Gandhi as a sexual-moral hypocrite. Gandhi is brought under her critical scrutiny through the character of Radha's husband, Ashok. After Radha fails to bear children, Ashok takes a vow of celibacy under the influence of his guru in his pursuit of moksha [redemption]. This becomes the take-off point for a crude, lifeless and superficial caricature of Mahatma Gandhi's experiment with sexual abstinence. It also offers her an opportunity to ridicule some of the philosophical tenets of Hinduism, for example the quest for moksha. [...]

You don't have to be a Shiv Sainik to feel offended and hurt by the gratuitous insults aimed at Indian culture in this crude caricature. Yet an overwhelming majority of those who saw the film or heard about its contents chose not to be manipulated. I wanted to ignore it as an exercise in self-flagellation by a self-hating Hindu and a self-despising Indian – a very common type among the English-educated elite in India. Some people even mistakenly celebrated this film as groundbreaking. However, by and large, I found that most people I discussed it with found it unexciting, and pretentious. The media reviews, however, were virtually all favourable, even gushy, and on the whole defensive and politically correct. The Censor Board gave it clearance without any tampering or cuts.

One would have thought this would be interpreted as a sign of the cultural maturity of the Indian public. It was, after all, not too long ago that people in Western Europe and North America faced hostility, social ostracism, and even threats to life and limb when

suspected of homosexual inclinations. Long after writers like Oscar Wilde were jailed and hounded as criminals for their sexual orientation, this harassment continued. It has not yet fully ended. It took many decades for homosexuals to organize themselves as a political force, an articulate vote bank to counter this social hostility, before western societies began to yield a limited space for assertion of a homosexual identity or open discussion on this subject.

Homosexuality in India

By contrast, our society has no comparable history of persecuting homosexuals. In every culture and society throughout history, there are people who attempt every anatomically possible form of sexual stimulation and gratification. The difference in patterns of sexual expression among societies derives from their history, culture, present circumstances and power relations. These factors also determine whether their actual patterns of sexual behaviour are open or hidden.

In India, homosexuality has usually been treated as one of the many expressions of human sexuality.

[...]

India, despite more than two centuries of western influence and indoctrination, has still not become homophobic. While there is pressure on all to get married, this has not resulted in the extinction of sexual engagement with persons of the same gender. A space for bisexuality usually remains. There is relatively less of a demand here that people acquire a unidimensional frozen sexual identity.

I personally know any number of gay men and women, many of them in high profile professions. Not one has been fired from his or her job or been made the butt of public ridicule. Male homosexuals do get fleeced by the police who use the Victorian anti-gay laws to extort bribes from gay men found cruising in public places. But to the best of my knowledge, there have been only stray public attacks on gays after they have begun openly organizing themselves around their sexual identity. Some years back, when two police-

women from a small town in Madhya Pradesh got married to each other in a public ceremony with the full support of their respective families, the entire national press rallied around their right to sexual-marital choice after it was found that their police bosses had suspended them.

Likewise, most of those who saw *Fire* expressed no shock or horror at the open portrayal of a lesbian relationship. A small handful of Shiv Sainiks in Bombay and an even smaller number in Delhi disrupted the screening of the film at a couple of theatres. This disruption instantly became big national and international news. The vast majority of viewers in India, including influential public figures, resolutely defended the film's right to be screened, including those like me who had disliked the film. Yet that defence did not get as much notice as the antics of a few thugs. Why? Because liberal, tolerant behaviour does not conform to the studiously cultivated stereotype about India held not only by many westerners but also by westernized Indians like Deepa Mehta.
[...]

Poor Indian culture!

Thus, for Mehta, liberation can only come by overthrowing the stranglehold of Indian tradition. For example, Sita declares, after a love making session with her sister-in law Radha, 'There is no word in our language to say what we are to each other'. In other words, because Ms Mehta could not find the verbal counterparts to the English word 'lesbian' in any of the Indian languages, it is proof that the Indian languages are supposedly incapable of expressing modern sensibilities and desires. Indian culture is incapable of coping with something so supposedly 'new' and 'radical' such as two women caressing, fondling and obtaining sexual satisfaction from each other. Hence the need and compulsion to write this 'script of rebellion' in English. Mehta says in her various interviews that she attempted to get Hindi translations of the script but was satisfied with none. She cites two sentences as examples of the profundities in the script that

were untranslatable. 'The concept of duty is over rated', and 'The Swamiji's testicles have grown too big for his loin cloth'.

By this time the viewer is puzzled into asking what is Mehta's version of Indian tradition? Is it true that Sita's unfair banishment and agnipariksha is the most dominant aspect of Indian gender traditions? Are not Shiv and Parvati in Indian tradition the most popular archetypes of happy, blissful conjugality, including euphoric joy in sexual union, the most celebrated couple of Indian mythology? After all, the supposedly traditional Indian woman keeps fasts on Monday to pray to be blessed with a Shiv-like husband – not for an incarnation of Ram. I have rarely, if ever, heard a woman wish for a Ram-like husband.

Similarly, if voluntary celibacy has been glorified as an aid to spiritual quest in one part of Indian tradition, there is a parallel tradition of spiritual quest via sexual union at a level of sophistication rare in most other cultures. Not too long ago, the West saw such Indian expressions of sexuality as evidence of decadence and immorality. Today, the western-educated elite wants to liberate 'sexually repressed' Indians by importing for us their recently discovered fashionable western versions of sexual freedom.

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The truth is that, in most Indian families, even when sexual overtones develop in the relationship of two women situated as are Radha and Sita, no one generally gets upset about it provided people don't go around flaunting their sexual engagement with each other. I have known of any number of such relations in very ordinary, traditional families. Given that in a gender-segregated society like ours, women spend a lot more time with each other than they do with men, such close bonding is fairly routine. Indians, by and large, are not horrified at witnessing physical affection between two people of the same gender. Two women friends or female relatives sleeping together in the same bed, hugging, massaging each other's hair or bodies is seen as a normal occurrence and even encouraged in preference to similar signs of physical affection between men and women. Such physical affection between women is not ordinarily

interpreted as a sure sign or proof of lesbian love.

An agit-prop film

By crudely pushing the Radha-Sita relationship into the lesbian mould, Ms Mehta has done a big disservice to the cause of women. She could have portrayed their relationship to be as ambiguous as was her own mother's relationship to her sisters-in-law who apparently were the main source of emotional sustenance in the early years of her mother's marriage.

However, an agit-prop film cannot afford to leave anything to the audience's imagination. I suspect that the net result of this political tract of a film, determined to create programmed individuals, will be to make many women in India far more self-conscious than earlier in their relationships with other women. There is a danger that many of those exposed to this controversy will learn to view all such signs of affection through the prism of homosexuality. As a consequence, many will feel inhibited in expressing physical fondness for other women for fear of being permanently branded as lesbians.

[...]

Neo-colonial reformers

This device of professing sympathy for the 'oppressed' Indian women in order to condemn the traditions and culture of all Indians has a greater than two centuries-old history. After the establishment of pax-Britannica in India, and the emergence of a new class of natives who began to challenge the legitimacy of the British Raj, oppressed Indian women became a favourite prop of our colonial rulers and missionaries. Customs like purdah, child-marriage, and the ban on widow remarriage prevalent among certain castes and communities became the universal symbols of the uncivilized nature of Indian society.

In their reforming zeal, the British conveniently forgot that some of these customs were confined to a segment of upper caste Hindus in certain regions of India. For example, even their own census had recorded that

the custom of child marriage and the ban on widow remarriage affected no more than 10% of British India's castes and communities. The rest had uncomplicated, traditional ways of divorce and easy acceptance of remarriage for women. Nothing the Indians did escaped condemnation.

For example, the British delighted in expressing their outrage at north Indian Brahmins and certain upper castes because of their oppressive sexual norms for women. At the same time, they were outraged for directly opposite reasons with some other communities which followed much freer sexual norms than their own. The women of matrilineal communities of the south were condemned as immoral and promiscuous because they exercised the right to change spouses at their discretion, without much ceremony or any permission from any religious authority.

[...]

The British mesmerized themselves and many educated Indians into believing that the British were here on a civilizing mission to reform Indians and make them fit for the modern world. Nothing was spared. We were declared uncivilized because we worshipped false gods and exercised the freedom to invent new gods. We were condemned for seeing divinity in rivers, trees, air, water, sun, moon and even stones, rocks and mountains, monkeys and snakes.

Rediscovering tradition?

Deepa Mehta inherits this tradition of using outrage over the plight of Indian women as a means to attack not only contemporary Indian culture but also as a way to demean and caricature Hindu family life.

[...]

All this only goes to show is that those who wish to engage in creative reform of our traditions must be people who understand our traditions, who are deeply involved in, and concerned about, the well-being of the society they wish to reform rather than those who descend on us as attacking outsiders. Such efforts can only aggravate the sense of inferiority among our people who have had to bear centuries of brutal attack by foreign in-

vaders. We need to heal those wounds, not inflict new ones that hold up our own people to undeserved caricature and ridicule.

When people are constantly subject to humiliation and unmerited attack, they lose their sense of self-respect and often even start transforming their behaviour into that of the stereotyped image projected of them. This may be what happened to some Blacks in America. The behaviour of our Shiv Sainiks, Bajrang Dalis, and other members of the Sangh Parivar, shows that a similar loss of self-respect is coming to inflict a large number of Indians as well. We would do well to remember that a people without self-respect do become dangerous—both to themselves and to others. In that sense, the likes of Deepa Mehta are indeed playing with fire, in a way not very different from the Shiv Sena's fireworks. The politics of both is based on cashing in on, or stoking the sense of, inferiority among the Hindus.

[...]

Fire! Fire! It's the Lesbians! by S. L., Campaign for Lesbian Rights

A personal account

(Two of the women who initiated and organized the protest against the Shiv Sena's attacks on *Fire* write about the demonstration that took place outside the Regal Theatre on 7 December 1998 and the repercussions that ultimately led to the formation of the Campaign for Lesbian Rights.)

By the morning of 8 December it had all happened. The word lesbian was on the front pages of every newspaper I picked up in Delhi. LESBIAN. It looked odd and out-of-place. Why was a word like that being tossed around? A word so loaded with fear, embarrassment, prejudice, a word shrouded in silence, a whisper that spoke of an identity that must be hidden from others, that frightening word that dare not cross any threshold, was on that winter morning landing at the doorstep of millions of households in many parts of the country. At my colleagues' door. At my parents'. At their neighbours'. At my landlord's. My neighbour was going to read it.

The Mother Dairy man was going to read it. The woman in the workshop. My sister-in-law... They were all going to pick up their morning newspaper and stare at a word they had possibly not seen earlier in print, and never given much thought to, and wonder what it was doing on Page One. And Three. And in editorials. And in letters to editors. And in Special Features. Not just that day but for days and weeks and weeks after 8 December.

The word lesbian was all over the media, and everyone had something to say about it. And they did so with what could well be called gay abandon: many of them were vituperative gems. Amongst my favourites was one by Swapan Dasgupta, a deputy editor with *India Today*, who rode out in full homophobic glory to attack the militant gay movement, which has hitherto operated as website extensions of a disagreeable trend in the West. He was outraged that anyone dared claim that lesbianism is part of Indian heritage when, in his opinion, it is actually an IPC-defined offence along the lines of thievery, deceit and murder. It is sickening that he should have seen no folly in using a western framework like the Indian Penal Code (IPC – framed by the British during the Raj) to tell us that our identities are not Indian. Lesbians should not be seen and definitely nor heard.

As we piled printed page on page into our clippings file, we were left feeling a little bewildered. It took just one poster, one banner and a few scared but brave women in a public protest of 80 other slogans and posters and hundreds of people to generate all this public discussion and media glare. One brave act of holding up a poster that said Indian and Lesbian had caused such a hul-chul, such journalistic diarrhoea. Why did the mere announcement of one's existence cause such a cacophony?

We are supposed to have been dwelling in comfortable silence for so many centuries. Silence about our existence, a conspiracy of silence. A social pact. Don't let us know! Don't let your family know who you are and how you live, nor many of your friends, certainly nor co-workers, nor your boss, and also neighbours, nor to mention (neither last nor

least) your landlords; never, never speak about who you are and how you live. Silence. That will protect you. It does not matter that none of the rites-of-passage of your life will ever be acknowledged, let alone celebrated. That you must hide your love and happiness as well as your heartbreak and loneliness in wells of silence. How can this silence, which is not self-chosen, ever be empowering?

[...]

On 7 December, we were breaking that social contract. Some of us were taking great personal risks in holding up those posters in the middle of a sea of candles, in the face of flashing cameras. Interestingly, some of the individuals and groups who had joined in to protest the attack on freedom of speech and expression and democratic rights were upset and vitriolic about the same freedoms being extended to a minority in a peaceful and democratic public protest. We were severely criticized both before and after: why did we have to be visible, how did we dare to use the word lesbian, why were we insisting *Fire* had anything to do with lesbianism when the filmmaker herself was denying it, why were we breaking The Silence? Why were we talking about People Like Us, who should never be seen, even by candle-light?

We heard that someone had called lesbianism 'contagious'. How I wish sexuality could truly be contagious. I would have had an entirely homosexual family by now, and need not have worried about them finding out. (Maybe even my landlord could catch it, and then I wouldn't have to worry about being evicted.)

Some fellow feminists went to the extent of saying that we were misguided. Why did we choose to identify with a word like lesbian, which was not even Indian, which held no relevance in a country like India. This, even as we were discussing democratic rights, imported into my country as recently as 50 years ago.

A couple of days after the demonstration, the Delhi Times carried an interview with the man who had planned the attack on the Regal Theatre, Jai Bhagwan Goel of the Shiv Sena. The interviewer asked him categorically why the film had been attacked and he replied

simply: because it portrayed lesbianism. There it was. The word no one on our side dared to say. A son of the soil pronouncing the word to condemn two women and pronounce judgement on Indian culture. Obviously, while importing lesbianism we also got this rabid brand of homophobia free.

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Democracy for all: emergency for you

Preparing the press release for the protest was an exercise in tightrope walking. We were organizing the protest in two days, we had very little infrastructure, even less money. We were coordinating as broadbased a group as we could get together. Clearly, there was general public outrage. The protest was waiting to happen, and when we took the initiative, everyone said 'yes, of course we'll be there'.

But what were we to say collectively to the press? Why exactly were we protesting?

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So, even as organizers prepared for the demonstration and worked to mount a response in solidarity with other groups, there was conflict among us. There were protests from some about the use of the word lesbian in the press statement. There was pressure to speak instead of women-women relationships. There were problems with the word sexuality. We might as well have been playing protest-protest in Uncle Bal's backyard. There was an assertion that the person on the street was not ready to hear these words. There was a presumption that if we talked about freedoms and rights, then lesbians would join in without ever questioning the utter irony of it: where are the freedoms and rights to speech and expression for sexual minorities?

Lesbians are an invisible minority, goes the argument, why discuss them? We are fighting serious fundamental issues here, don't drag the L word into all this. Actually, filmmakers, especially NRIs, are numerically a smaller minority. Yet it was everyone's concern, to come out and protest. Someone asked, post-demonstration, if a lesbian was to be attacked tomorrow and her freedom of expression denied on the basis of her sexuality, how many of those protesting

fascist attacks on freedom today would come out openly in her support? How many would need to announce their heterosexuality before speaking out in defence of lesbian/gay rights? On 8 December, no one felt the need to say to the press, I am not a filmmaker, but I feel Deepa Mehta has a right to creative expression.

We have heard several progressive groups fighting for the rights of the dispossessed, the voiceless, the minorities, calling lesbianism a personal choice. We have to work with these groups in the hope that they will examine the unfortunate and demeaning dismissal in those two words. It is homophobia trying to dress itself in liberal drag, and therefore it is all the more difficult to combat. My silences had not protected me. Yours will not protect you. Audre Lorde

In this hallowed land of silences, where could the Indian Lesbian find a voice? The seed of the Campaign for Lesbian Rights was sown when we were mobilizing for the protest: a small, vocal, non-funded group we approached put forward a startling condition for participating. If this protest is about democratic rights you'll find enough allies, but unless it is specifically about lesbianism, we will not join. It was startling because I was listening to two men articulating this... I thought, are there women who will speak our too?

There were. Not many, admittedly, but soon it was clear that if we brought up the issue, there were several who were going to support us. Somewhere the realization was beginning to dawn that the moment to speak up was at our doorstep.

[...]