

A Study on Re-Defining Womanhood and Subversion of Patriarchal Ideology in the light of Deepa Mehta's Oeuvre *Fire*

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Abstract

As far as Indian concept is concerned Feminism is “an overloaded, problematic term” says Anjum Katyal in his essay “The Metamorphosis of *Rudali*”. It is because, he continues “widely seen as an imported Western concept strongly identified with white bourgeois concerns and issues, the term is often aligned with elite urban intellectualism, and frequently seen as reductive or limiting” (Katyal,2) It is because of this reason many activist and progressive women shy away from labeling them Feminist. For Indian culture, Feminism is a multilayered term and it demands an analysis from the bottom layer. The paper entitled “A Study on Re-defining Womanhood and Subversion of Patriarchal Ideology in the light of Deepa Mehta's Oeuvre *Fire*” seeks how culture roundabout the gender construction and how female sensation being treated in the domestic affairs. The paper studies Indian Feminism in general and analysis the false ideology of women empowerment.

KEYWORDS: Womanhood, patriarchy, feminism, lesbian, tradition, myth.

Feminism has always meant independence of mind, spirit and body. Feminists' effort to end patriarchal domination should be of primary concern precisely because it insists on the eradication of exploitation and oppression in the family context and in all other intimate relationship. The theory is that men and women should be equal politically, economically and socially. The concepts of feminism oscillate from time to time and place to place. Feminism means different things to different people, ranging from wish to change and challenge. The desire to achieve a balanced and saner equality and a respectable individual liberty for women is the aim of feminism. The female categorization as a sex object is vehemently opposed. Women who were troubled by sexism within in the family or their personal lives were attracted to feminism. The goal of feminism became for some to eliminate sexiest oppression by patriarchal society. Mahatma Gandhi said that,

Women are the companion of man, gifted with equal capacities, she has the right to participate in the minute details of the activities of man, and she has the right of freedom and liberty as he. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own place of activity as man is. By sheer force of vicious custom, even the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying superiority over women which they don't reserve and ought not to have. (qtd. inTandon 163)

“Patriarchal ideology”, according to Kate Millet , “exaggerates biological differences between man and women, making certain that men always have the dominant, or ‘masculine’, roles and that women always have subordinate, or ‘feminine ones’ ” (qtd. in Tandon 159). Not only in the biological basis, but also in the psychological functions like intelligence, aptitude and attitude both sex differs. It is interesting fact that women see and analyze things as a whole whereas man is contrary to this aspect. They usually isolate the component part that they are more analytical minded. In the essay “Feminism and Globalization versus Indian Women Empowerment” R.S. Tiwari raised many controversial points such as, men are supposed to have high degree power and they define morality and culture. They are the makers of customs, laws and opinion for women and they termed Lesbianism as an expression of womanhood.

Women are forced to sacrifice many things in the name of family, society etc. They consider women as an object and impose corrupted values and norms of purity upon them. Many superstitious rituals belonged to Indian culture shows this. The myth of Karva Chauth is a very good example which is devised in the film *Fire*. And the re-interpretation of the myth to empower women is equivalent to the feminist movement in West reclaiming the words that have traditionally been used against women. Another values promoted by males are in their interest to ‘chastity’ and ‘feminine worth’. ‘Feminine worth’ is an index of how a woman is valued in the society.

Even though feminist movement were originated in the west, but due to the deterioration of status of women in India and subsequent efforts made during the freedom struggle to pave an equal status, there is a need for feminist studies in India. Feminism in Indian scenario is generally are rejected phenomenon. Most of them view it as ‘moral corruption’. In the Indian context women need to be liberated from their enclosed space so that they can shape a secular identity and realize their claims and rights. There are limitations to the western feminist theory in India because of the cultural contexts. As we have a different history, different ethos, different form of social stratification and more a patriarchal domination it is difficult to practice the western theory. Vrinda Nabar lists factors such as caste, class, economic deprivation, sectarian fragmentedness, size and numbers, over population, the growing power of fundamentalist sources, the sway of superstition, female feticide, and above all, the essential nature of what is broadly termed as Hinduism, which combines to create a situation which defies any easy solution. The western individualism may prove impractical in Indian context because it wheels between faith and dogma.

In India, Feminism is a reaction against suppressing forces and protesting against unjust patriarchal practices. The problems faced by Indian women are real, but Western feminism is not the real solution for them. The educated minority of women is completely divorced from the real interest of majority of women steeped in poverty and lack of education in rural India. They are unemployed, superstitious and victims of different types of exploitation. The Indian women are fully protected by laws; more than in any other country and they are better placed than women in the West. It is time for women to wake up and change must come from them. Preaching the feminist philosophy alone will not solve their problem. Women empowerment doesn’t lie in desolation of

problems but in confronting the same by strong will. It can be through action and reaction. This action includes writing.

Jasbir Jain emphasis on differentiating Indian feminist discourse from the western as their history and agenda differs. The status of women is highly influenced by freedom struggle and partition of the country. She adds that any attempt to redefine freedom should begin with the body and construction of womanhood. In Indian reality feminism is culture specific and the process of socialization is deep rooted in it. Women do have contended with the issues related to epistemology, education, law and religion. Women were the site on which their colonial and imperial strategies worked out. Child marriage, polygamy, sati and widow remarriage became central issues. Women came to symbolize nationhood and came to be treated as custodians of culture. They were promised with selfhood and self identity.

“Selfhood is not imagined as an abstract concept, but the struggle for space begins with the physical existence and the right to ownership” (Jain 31). In addition, women’s body is controlled by patriarchal morality only enclosing the role of wife and mother. Female sexuality is viewed as a threat, marriage is an institution believed to be sacramental in which procreation heightens women’s status. If a woman attempt to seek selfhood or project subjectivity she has to deconstruct the received notions regarding a so called ‘good woman’. Women sometimes act as a machine, right from the moment of birth, she is only a body she can enjoy sex with her husband and take pleasure in her pregnancy. Jain quotes motherhood as “one of the cultural imposition which deny women a personhood”. Even if life is born out of a sexual act, motherhood itself erases both sexuality and selfhood. Eternal mother does not give life, she demands sacrifice.

Shortly, Indian feminism does not attempt to acquire make strength or masculine virtues. It uses tradition for reinterpreting relationship. Deepa Mehta envisions her film *Fire* as one that challenges the oppressive traditions and it reworks on some age-old myths that have often been used to oppress Indian women and reclaims them in a feminist voice.

Fire opens with a gentle exhortation to ‘see what you can’t see’ and ‘see without looking’. The first sequence itself elucidates allegory about spectatorship. An allegory is a narrative technique contrived by the author to make coherent sense on the ‘literal’ or primary level of signification and at the same time communicate a second correlated order of signification. The mustard field sequence signifies memory and dreamscapes that shapes the elder daughter-in-law Radha’s selfhood and her relationship with Sita, the younger daughter-in-law of the family and perhaps their destiny. It signifies a dream land beyond all the limits of land. The head of the household in *Fire* is Ashok, a pious man who took a vow of celibacy when he realized that his wife, Radha, could not bear children. He religiously follows his spiritual teacher, Swamiji, and dedicates most of his time to learning how to attain enlightenment. Ashok is the quintessential patriarch who, in his piety, sets himself up as better than everyone else, assuming that his struggle to ‘seek union with the universal truth’ is for the betterment of all ‘mankind’. Radha has long ago accepted her fate in the loveless marriage. Her fate is to embody the role of the traditional Indian housewife, one who places her duty to her husband and family above everything else. Her days consist of taking care of Biji, Ashok’s and Jatin’s mother, who

has suffered from a stroke and cannot speak, taking care of the household, as well as helping out in the store. Radha has learned to suppress her yearning for more, just as she has learned to repress her childhood desire to see the ocean someday. Jatin is Ashok's brother. He is caught between his love for his Chinese mistress, Julie and what his family members expect of him. Sita is true romantic. She cannot understand her husband's dismissiveness with her in the beginning.

As Sita comes to know the situation with Jatin's mistress, she begins to question her role within the family. Radha is the one person within the household who treats her with care and love, and slowly Sita falls in love with her sister-in-law. Sita represents the modern Indian woman who has had many old traditions and cultural norms programmed into her but do not really understand why she must be bound by them. As she reflects on herself, "Isn't it amazing? We're so bound by customs and rituals. Somebody just has to press my button . . . this button marked tradition, and I start responding like a trained monkey" (*Fire*). She envisions a different way of being and wants to question everything, including the taboo on loving her beloved Radha.

Biji represents the old order. She is the keeper of tradition. She has a bell that she uses to summon people, as well as to express her displeasure at what is happening around her as she has lost her speech.

Mundu, the servant of the house, resents his position of subservience within the household, thus, he retaliates by watching adult films, instead of the religious films he is supposed to be showing Biji. This act of defiance is also coupled with his masturbating to the adult films whenever he is left alone with Biji. He knows that Biji can never tell the other family members what he is doing. Mundu therefore, takes his pleasure where he can, disregarding any ideas about respect for elders, which is a cornerstone of Indian culture. The very thought of his actions would be sacrilegious to most Indians, but he does not really care as long as he can get away with it. A review by James Berardinelli says:

Fire is less a story of lesbian love than it is a statement of female emancipation. This is the tale of two vital, beautiful women breaking their cultural obstacles and being reborn through the passion they express for each other. Their relationship is forbidden, but it is by giving in to their feelings that they find the strength to defy their husbands and turn their backs on tradition.

As Sita begins to fall in love with Radha, she takes the initiative in moving the relationship from a platonic relationship to a sexual one, by kissing Radha on the mouth. Radha is surprised at first, but Sita's kiss awakens a long-repressed desire in Radha. As the tension builds between them, the two women begin to enjoy their secret and continue to take care of each other. Mehta uses Sita's character effectively to comment on age-old Indian myths that are oppressive to women. By doing so and in her insistence that we can find other choices, she expands the dialogue, breaking out of the conventional myths and traditions. The reinterpretation of myth to empower women is a very powerful device in *Fire*. It is the equivalent of the feminist movement in the West reclaiming words that have traditionally been used against women.

In yet another scene that uses Indian customs to release the sexual energy between the women, Sita offers to massage Radha's feet on the family picnic. Massaging your elders' feet is a very old tradition of respect. However, the tradition is reinterpreted as Sita touches Radha in sensual ways in the presence of Ashok and Jatin. The two women exchange sensual looks while Ashok remains unaware of about what is going on with his 'good family'. Here, Mehta devices the technique of verbal irony i.e. speaker implies differ sharply from what the speaker ostensibly expressed. By highlighting the erotic nature of the tradition, Mehta provides us with a new reading.

CONCLUSION

Fire is a film that questions tradition. It is a film about women defining their liberation in their own terms. It is the first Indian film with an overt lesbian theme, and its bold offering of an alternative vision for Indian women is extremely threatening to the patriarchal system. In *Fire*, Deepa Mehta has woven together Indian traditions and many of the most powerful myths in Hindu mythology. However, the true strength of the film comes from her ability to take the old and the familiar and interpret it in new and empowering ways.

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