

Suffocating Shell of Sexuality: Politics of Lesbian Identity in *Fire*

Rumpa Podder

Full-time Contractual Lecturer, Department of English, Malda College,
Malda, West Bengal - 732101

Received: May 22, 2018

Accepted: July 09, 2018

ABSTRACT

Indian society often considers the issue of homosexuality as a Western 'myth'. Therefore this very society has always considered this as a taboo. Interestingly Bollywood film industry has taken this taboo value attached to this subject as its theme. Moreover, Bollywood films have also tried to embody how the 'heteronormativity' has tried to distort the societal spaces of people with alternative sexual orientation. But this process of distortion in case of a lesbian is completely different from that of a gay. Deepa Mehta's film Fire tries to focus on this process and eventually it becomes the tale of the two radical lesbians who can claim their societal space.

Keywords: Film, Lesbian, Society, Space, Queer.

The LGBT rights movements that had begun with the Stonewall Riot in 1969 when occupants of a gay bar resisted a police raid, get their completion through the long way of Homophile and Gay Liberation Movements and finally through Pride Marches throughout the world. In this long history of movements and protests, the term 'queer' has attained a new dimension as it emerges as the academic wing of LGBT movements. But the term 'queer' which has a highly elastic sense of history, produces, as Annamarie Jagose notes, "nothing but confusion" (79). The confusion arises as the term 'queer' was reclaimed during the period of 1980s by a new generation of political activists involved in LGBT rights organizations like Queer Nation and protest groups such as Act Up and Outrage, though some gay and lesbian cultural activists and critics who adopted the term in the period of 1950s or 60s continue to use it "to describe their particular sense of marginality to both mainstream and minority cultures" (Selden 242). During 1990s queer theory designated a radical rethinking of the relationship between sexuality, subjectivity and its representation. Here this theory takes a crucial turn because it starts to gain impetus from other contemporary theories and develops a critical point of view toward cultural production. Within this arena comes the social construction of sexuality. Therefore, queer theory has always questioned the hegemonic ideology of a heteronormative society; a society which creates a social space leading on to the "means of control, and hence of domination, of power" (Choudhuri 35). This new dimension of queer theory is specifically explained by Tasmin Spargo:

Although in popular usage 'queer' is effectively used as an additional or alternative category, queer theory cannot be read simply as the academic underpinning of this cultural moment. Queer theorists' disenchantment with some aspects of gay and lesbian politics is not simply a rejection of the normativity of those particular categories, but rather derives from a different understanding of identity and power. If queer culture has reclaimed 'queer' as an adjective that contrasts with the relative respectability of 'gay' and 'lesbian', then queer theory could be seen as mobilising 'queer' as a verb that unsettles assumptions about sexed and sexual being and doing. In theory, queer is perpetually at odds with the normal, the norm, whether that is dominant heterosexuality or gay/lesbian identity. It is definitively eccentric, ab-normal (40).

In the 'eccentric' category of queer theory comes the response of the society to the 'identity' of the queer people which creates the hierarchy, violating the societal space of the people with alternative sexual orientation. Whether in educational institutions, workplaces as well as in roads and markets the people with alternative sexual orientation have to pay the price either by remaining aloof the insult or by leaving that place. In the report prepared by Sappho for Equality, a Kolkata based LGBT rights association, it is made very evident how this discrimination works in case of an educated working lesbian woman who has to leave her job only for her sexual orientation:

She was politely asked to leave the company as women employees were not feeling safe with her! When she asked for a written complaint, the boss said that would put her into more trouble and her dues won't be cleared. But how did they come to know about your sexual orientation in the first place? When we asked her this, she answered with a tinge of disbelief still lingering in her voice, 'ours was a different kind of workplace, very creative, very open, we used to work together, share so much of our lives with each other, ask for help, it was a positive kind of atmosphere. So I thought

I too can seek help, I too can talk about my relational issues!' however much creative, positive, open and accepting her work atmosphere was, she learnt her lesson by paying a high price of losing her livelihood as well as self respect. A lesbian is a threat to the womankind, not her male/heterosexual colleagues, or family members or road Romeos, or anyone for that matter whom we see everyday glaring at us as perpetrators from print, electronic and other media (38).

Even in the so called 'open' work places, the lesbian identity is highlighted. In the dominant discourse of contemporary cultural studies, the issue of a person's social identity formation is often discussed and in case of a person's 'queer' identity it becomes more important because this, according to Foucault can lead to the "liberation of subjugated voices" (qtd in Ranjan 62). Contemporary theorists consider identity as a fluid and independent category which is never fixed and always multiple constructed out of negotiations with discourses. But the response of the society to this fluidity is essentially constructivist in most of the cases as it takes identity as an 'acquired' quality which 'can' and 'should' be corrected. This is exactly where societal space of such people comes in conflict with their identity which leads to their victimization. Such factors can be measured if we look at the data provided by Durant as Ashutosh Ranjan has mentioned it in his book *Lesbian and Gay Rights*:

He (Durant) found a significant correlation between the number of sexual partners and the frequency of having been threatened or injured with a weapon at school, the number of days that the students did not attend school because they felt unsafe, and the number of times they had been injured in a fight that required medical treatment (32).

These factors seem to combine to cause a multiplicity of problems amongst the LGBT people. These are what sometimes compel them to remain within the closet which is another cultural construct and which decides the societal space of those people. The homosexual, bisexual or transgendered identity of a person, can be said to be rooted within the cultural scene of that society.

Different LGBT liberation movements of 1960s and 70s tried hard to change the scenario which leads to the mobility of the term 'queer'. After the broader impact of globalization especially after 1990s, queer theory comes to redefine the identity of a person with alternative sexual orientation because it shows how social identity is created from the intersectional points of history, race and sexuality. What globalization has done to the people with different sexual orientation is that it has 'comodified' the queer identity (Nayar 173). In case of a third world country like India, this comodification plays a vital role to the LGBT people because their identity as an 'Indian' comes in the conflict with their queer identity. The cultural studies researchers take these intersectional points of queer social identity formation in Indian context because the comodification shapes cultural forms. It is the comodification that Bollywood film industry has taken up in the representation of the LGBT people. During 1970s and 80s the films which project such characters, had a different tendency in case of their acceptance in the society- either they were seen to be the product of mistaken identity only or the society used to take their identity as only a closeted one. But the films that I will discuss in this paper represents a different outlook of the society towards such people; it is not always necessarily a very liberal one, but at least it does not cast them in the traditional binaries of sexual orientation because as an impact of globalisation, the traditional Indian society has been acquainted with the term 'queer' though the response of the right winged activist groups, in support of the 377 of Indian Penal Code which considers homosexuality as an activity "against the order of nature", was quite violent and outraged- "Homosexuality is a crime according to scriptures and is unnatural. People cannot consider themselves to be exclusive of a society" (Wikipedia.org). The disruption of a typical right winged Hindu political party against Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996) or Karan Rajdan's *Girlfriend* (2006) becomes the representative of a typical conservative Indian society. However, this anxiety is not just a religious concern, the strict strictures of the Indian society have made any mention of queer culpable. The Indian society is not aware of the validity of same-sex relationship in ancient and medieval epics like the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*. In the *Mahabharata*, Krishna and Arjuna have been frequently referred to as 'two Krishnas' which goes beyond the traditional dimension of friendship (Dasgupta 3). The references of homosexuality or transgendered identity in those epics help to form new queer identity in Indian context. Rohit K. Dasgupta in his essay 'Queer Sexuality: A cultural Narrative of India's Historical Archive' refers how intimate friendship leads to the way to a homosexual relationship in the *Mahabharata*:

One of the dominant tropes of same-sex love in ancient India is through friendship, often leading to a life of celibacy or the forming of some very intimate relationships. . . . In fact 'Krishna clearly states that Arjuna is more important to him than wives, children or kinsmen- there can be many spouses and sons but there is only one Arjuna, without whom he cannot live'. The *Mahabharata*, one of the most important epics in Hinduism has numerous other examples of same sex 'attachment' (2).

Not only the traditional Hindu epics, but also the Perso- Arabic traditions that ruled over India due to the Muslim invasions, have references which talk about same-sex relationship. The British attacked the Muslims in particular for being prone to the 'abominable vice' of sodomy. Counter movements were also launched an example being the Urdu poet Firaq Gorakhpuri who in 1936 wrote an essay defending the ghazal and arguing that "homosexual love is natural and universal" (qtd in Vanita 143). The representation of sexual marginalities in ancient India thus establishes a valid point— ancient Indian sensibility at least accommodates different sexual orientation.

The so called modern Indian society often comes into contradiction with such representations. Therefore, when a film is made on the violation of space of a queer subject, it often passes through multiple objections. The hetero-patriarchal Indian society consider this as a threat to masculinity which have not let Raj Amit Kumar's 2014 film *Unfreedom* to get the certificate of the censor board because of its projection of 'uncloseted' lesbian relationship which is very much against Indian sensibility. In a society where the same-sex relation has to pass through several critical lenses, the lesbian protagonists of *Unfreedom* try to be unique in the most pressing issues of their life. The director of this film, Raj Amit Kumar's note is worth mentioning here:

The idea behind *Unfreedom* came from the desire to express the lack of freedom in the socio-economic structure of our contemporary times. . . . The root of these lying in a society based on capitalism, patriarchy and its interrelationship with religion and violence. In a world where mass extermination and discrimination happens in the name of 'identity', such films show that people who are considered as belonging to a certain identity are all unique in their approaches. Particularly, the film examines the struggle of different individuals against violent prejudices- all seeking their own road to what they believe could set them free. (unfreedommovie.com).

With this strong belief to become 'free', the LGBT people gather the courage to come out of the closet. Therefore, the visibility of the queer community in these films becomes important because this helps us to understand that the spaces of 'power' and 'domination' that they create in the society, are occupied by those who align themselves with the mainstream narrative of heteronormativity. Such spaces of power intrude into the marginal narrative of the queer and violate their societal space. Bollywood queer films focus on the subjective position of the sexual minorities in Indian society.

This very position often works with silence and it sometimes becomes the weapon of the 'coming out' narrative in Deepa Mehta's 1996 film *Fire* as well. In *Fire* we can find that when Sita (Nandita Das) tells Radha (Shabana Azmi) that words are not enough to describe their feelings, "*There is no word in our language that can describe what we are, how we feel for each-other.*" But it is the untold words of the two female protagonists of *Fire* that make them lose their societal space. *Fire* for the first time showed that homoeroticism can arise from the women only space with certain mundane activities such as the protagonists oiling each other's hair or making *ladoos* or looking at the city from the rooftop veranda (Gopinath 3). The typical Indian society remains perfectly alright until the lesbian colouring gives the innocent plot its resonance. Gayatri Gopinath opines as the traditional heterosexual Indian society considers women as a 'mother' figure, lesbianism is a severe threat to that notion. Gopinath identifies female queer desire in the traditional society as "impossible," because the figure of the woman is imagined as a symbol of procreative sexuality in both nationalist and diasporic discourses. The position of a female queer diasporic subject is rendered "unthinkable" because non-reproductive sexuality disrupts the notions of home and community that are central to the nationalist and diasporic discourses (Choudhuri 32). The term 'diaspora' has to be referred here because the director of *Fire*, Mehta herself belongs to an Indo-Canadian background. *Fire* thus becomes an embodiment how the diasporic affiliation of a film on lesbian relationship modifies the role of the lesbian couple in it.

For the same reason *Fire* has to face hostility in case of its screening in Indian theatres mentioning it as a threat to Indian sensibilities. The choice of the names of the protagonists after the name of the mythological characters of Sita and Radha becomes another reason of the outrage of Hindu extremist political parties. "There was an unambiguous conflation of "Hindu" and "Indian" in these expressions of moral and ideological outrage, which ranged from fiery rhetoric in the media and public gatherings to vandalizing the theatres that were showing the film between December 1998 and January 1999" (Chaudhuri 10). But the film remains powerful enough to cast an experience of emancipation upon the audience. The symbolic *Agni pariksha* that Radha has to go through to justify her innocence, bears a symbolic proof her relation with Sita is beyond all the outrages of the society. But for this they have to pay a heavy value- they have to lose their societal space by finding a deserted house to live in with the view of an uncertain future. But at least they choose a life to live according to their own will.

The journey of the relationship between Radha and Sita from homosocial to homoerotic is essentially an outcome of the indifferent attitude that they get from their husbands. The director, too, herself has refused to impose any lesbian colouring to this film directly in an interview published in the *Sunday Leader* on March 8, 1998- “This film does not speak for lesbianism. It is also not necessary for me to play down the lesbian relationship between the two women; but my film does not say if one is caught in a bad marriage relationship one should begin a homo-sexual relationship. I am not a feminist who downgrades men. I think men are as important as women.” But this complicates the societal space of the female protagonists more complicated because they have to leave their house being accused of their homoerotic relationship. Here the lesbian theories form affinities with that of the feminism instead of the gays. But the traditional feminist theories assume homosexuality as norm and lesbianism as a deviation. But the feminist movements of the 1990s emerged as a movement of the lesbian wings too; what the gay liberationists of the 1960s and 70s had said, becomes their motto as well as Annamarie Jagose opines that the association of the lesbianism with feminist movements helps to confront the role that heterosexual society demands from a female-

Lesbians continued to organise— at first covertly, and then directly—their challenge to the institutionalised homophobia and sexism of the women's and gay liberation movements. In the 1990s, when feminism is routinely understood to include a commitment to opposing homophobia, it might seem logical that the women's movement would consider lesbian demands for recognition and equality as quintessentially feminist (50).

But Radha and Sita's demand for recognition to claim their societal space never comes to mould them in the 'butch femme' model of homosexual relationship. Both of them dress up in colourful sarees with necklaces and bangles to match; both of them keep fast for *karwa chauth* and both of them initially act submissive to their husbands. Therefore, the traditional Indian society can never imagine that even such submissive housewives can 'come out' to be lesbians; that even women can be homosexuals. In their coming out, they break the shackles and here they form affinities with the *Radicalesbians*, the New York based group of the lesbians who consider the lesbian identity as natural 'unconscious' feminist because its automatic inclination is to other women rather than men (Nayar 195). The dark, rainy atmosphere and the deserted house at the end of the film bear the significance that the protagonists probably can never get back their societal space. And the violation of their societal space is the outcome of the apparent 'shock' that they give to the society with their lesbian feminist identity.

References:

1. Choudhuri, Sucheta Mallick. *Transgressive Territories: Queer Space in Indian Fiction and Film*. Diss. U Iowa, 2009. Iowa Research Online. Web. 18 February 2018.
2. Dasgupta, Rohit K. “A Cultural Narrative of India's Historical Archive”. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies* 3.4 (2011): n. pag. Web. 20 January 2018.
3. ---. “The Queer Rhetoric in Bollywood: A Case of Mistaken Identity”. *A Journal of Queer Studies*. Web. 9 April 2018.
4. Fire. Dir. Deepa Mehta. Perf. Shabana Azmi, Nandita Das and Javed Jafri. *Zeitgeist Films*, 1996. Film.
5. Foucault, Michel. “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias”. Web. 16 June 2018.
6. Gopinath, Gayatri. “Queering Bollywood: Alternative Sexualities in Popular Indian Cinema”. [Davis?]: [U California?], n.d. Web. 17 April, 2018.
7. Jagose, Annamarie. *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. New York: New York U P, 2005. Print.
8. Nayar, Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*. Noida: Pearson, 2010. 183-199. Print.
9. Ranjan, Ashutosh. *Lesbian and Gay Rights: Ethics, Movement And Politics*. Delhi: Medhashri Publications, 2010. Print.
10. Spargo, Tasmin. *Foucault and the Queer Theory*. Cambridge: Icon Books: New York: Totem Books, 2000. Print.
11. Wijegunasingha, Piyaseeli. “Fire: A Film that Bears Witness to Deepa Mehta's Courage as an Artist”. *World Socialist Web Site*. Web. 20 March 2018.