Precis 4

Blazing Sirens : The Politics of Queer Visibility in Deepa Mehta's *Fire*

Exactly ten years ago, a group of Indian immigrant businessmen in New York City known as the FIA (the Federation of Indian Associations) denied both SALGA (a New York-based South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association) and Sakhi (an anti-domestic violence women's group) the right to march in the annual New York City India Day parade. The two activist organizations were banned from the parade, which celebrates India's independence from the British in 1947, on the grounds that both groups were, in essence, "anti-national."[1] A year later in 1996, however, the FIA allowed Sakhi to participate while continuing to deny SALGA the right to march. The FIA, as self-styled arbiter of communal and national belonging, thus deemed it appropriate for women to march as "Indian women," even perhaps as "feminist Indian women," but could not envision women marching as "Indian queers" or "Indian lesbians."

This particular configuration of gender, sexuality and nationality was echoed by riots erupting in Bombay and New Delhi prompted by the release of the 1996 film ***Fire***. The film, made by the Indian Canadian director Deepa Mehta (who spent an entire year after the release of the film under 24-hour police protection), depicts a lesbian relationship between two sisters-in-law in a middle class, joint family household in contemporary New Delhi. In December 1998, local theaters in various urban centers in India were stormed by dozens of activists from the Shiv Sena, a Hindu right-wing organization that forms the militant wing of the Hindu nationalist government currently in power. The Shiv Sena justified their actions by claiming that lesbianism is an affront to Hinduism and

[1] The official reason given by the FIA for excluding SALGA and Sakhi was that both groups used the term "South Asian" rather than "Indian" in their names.

"alien to Indian culture."[2] Prior to the riots, the Indian media had made similar criticisms, claiming that the film had "very weak links to the true Indian milieu."[3] In other words, both the mainstream media and the extremist Hindu nationalist movement used the charge of inauthenticity to disavow its queer content.

Whilst issues of transnationalism[4] and disapora[5] may be occasionally called into question given the context of the meta-narrative, this brief paper opts to strip and tease the notion of queer representation and identification; and the construction of lesbian visibility as impure and inauthentic within a hegemonic and (patriarchal) nationalist imaginary. Juxtaposing the controversies surrounding the India Day parade in New York City, and the release of *Fire* in Bombay and New Delhi serve to highlight what Althusser calls the "ideological state apparatus" i.e. how even across continents, both the FIA and the Shiv Sena function as "the law" that which interpellates "India" as Hindu, patriarchal, middle class and ***free of homosexuals***. Furthermore, the conduct of both the FIA and the Shiv Sena makes explicit how hegemonic discourses, position "woman" and "lesbian" as mutually exclusive categories to be disciplined in different ways. Through a strategic referencing to ***Fire***, we will see how the 'woman" can only exist inside the home whereas the "lesbian" must be abject and situated without the household and by extension community and nation.

[2] Quoted in *The Hindu*, 14 December, 1998
[3] Quoted in *The Hindu*, 16 February, 1998
[4] For instance, Ang Lee's 1993 film, *The Wedding Banquet* (which has as its protagonist a gay Taiwanese businessman living in New York) gained huge audiences in Taiwan, the U.S. and other international markets. In his reading of *The Wedding Banquet*, Mark Chiang argues that the film "cannot be read solely from within the frameworks of national culture, either Chinese or American, but must be read across them in a transnational analysis that attends to the local and global."
[5] Fire's counter-hegemonic representation of queer female desire is undercut by its own history of production, distribution, reception and consumption. Funded largely with Canadian money, *Fire* had circulated from 1996 to 1998 mostly at international film festivals in India, Europe and North American and had a lengthy art house release in major U.S. cities. Thus prior to its release in India in November 1998, it was available to a limited audience in India but gained a significant South Asian diasporic viewership as well as a mainstream lesbian and gay audience in the United States and Canada.

My critical inquiry is thus indebted to the theories of Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva as examined in the course and seeks to re-vision the positionality of the Indian (read Asian) queer within these gendered and sexualized discourses. However, I also hope to reconfigure these (Occidental) theories to negotiate for an economy of desire within which to place the lesbian sisters-in-law. I would also problematise Butler's inherently essentialist concepts of identity and re-iteration by examining it in tandem with Aristotelian concepts of identity formation.

The Blazing Sirens – Radha and Sita

Fire takes place in the middle class neighborhood of Lajpat Nagar, in New Delhi, and tells the story of the burgeoning love and desire that emerges between Radha (played by Shabana Azmi) and her new sister-in-law Sita (played by Nandita Das), in a joint family household. Mehta quickly establishes the familiar familial violences and compulsions that inhabit the household: the women do most of the labor for the family business while their husbands ignore or abuse them. Radha's husband Ashok is tender and attentive, not to Radha, but to his "Affirmative Light" religious guru, who preaches sexual abstinence and spends all his time abstaining from desire. Sita's husband, Jatin, on the other hand is busy indulging in his desires with his "westernized" Chinese girlfriend to attend to Sita. Framing this narrative is the age-old dilemma of tradition versus modernity. Indeed, Mehta's very "naming" (recall Butler) of her heroines underscores her intention.

In Hindu mythology, Radha is the devoted consort of the god Krishna, who is famous for his womanizing, and together Radha and Krishna symbolize an idealized, transcendent heterosexual union. Sita, on the other hand is the famed heroine of the Hindu epic ***Ramayana***, who proves her chastity to her husband, Ram, by immersing herself in fire-thus representing the ideal of wifely devotion and virtue. Not surprisingly, the image of

Sita emerging unscathed from her *agni pariksha*, or trial by fire, is a potent motif throughout the film. For instance, the background noise in their daily lives is the popular serialization of the Ramayana, which plays incessantly on the television. Das' Sita, however, refuses to inhabit the overdetermined role of her legendary namesake given her penchant for donning her husband's jeans (instead of her heavy silk saris), and her willingness to pursue her attraction to Radha.

Conversely, the stultifying effects of "tradition" are embodied in the character of matriarch Biji, the mute, paralysed grandmother who keeps a disapproving eye on the activities of her daughters-in-law. Azmi's Radha thus symbolizes the dilemma – she is the traditional Indian wife caught up in the lures of modernity and pursuit of her own desire against that which she has been taught to respect and revere. It is against such a backdrop that the two women eventually turn to each other for sex, pleasure and emotional sustenance.

Bodies Do Matter/Mehta, Especially if They are Queer (and Indian)

In "Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion", Butler examines ***Paris is Burning*** and questions the use of the camera and its construction of racialised bodies. In so doing, she quotes hooks and questions the efficacy of Livingston's use of the camera in representing alternative bodies and by extension, desires,

> hooks is right to argue that within this culture the ethnographic conceit of a neutral gaze will always be a white gaze, an unmarked white gaze, one which passes its own perspective off as the omniscient, one which presumes and enacts its own perspective as if it were no perspective at all. But what does it mean to think about this camera as an instrument and effect of lesbian desire? […] The camera thus trades on the masculine privilege of the disembodied gaze, the gaze that has the power to produce bodies, but which is itself no body. (136)

She then goes on to critique ***Paris is Burning*** as a "neither an efficacious insurrection nor painful resubordination, but an unstable coexistence of both",

The film attests to the painful pleasures of eroticizing and miming the very norms that weld their power by foreclosing the very reverse-occupations that the children nevertheless perform. This is not an appropriation of dominant culture in order to remain subordinated by its terms, but *an appropriation that seeks to make over the terms of domination, a making over which is itself a kind of agency, a power in and as discourse, in and as performance, which repeats in order to remake*- and sometimes succeeds. (italics mine)

Even as Butler aptly highlights the inadequacies of the camera in presenting non-heteronormative corporealities, she does not seem to offer any alternatives. Whilst her theory on gender-bending performativity as highlighted in Gender Trouble has been crucial in initiating many graduate studies into queer studies, her later-day configurations (such as in Bodies That Matter) run the risk of essentialism. Consider this,

..Hegemonies operate as Gramsci insisted, through rearticulation, but here is where thr accumulated force of a historically entrenched and entrenching rearticulations overwhelms the more fragile effort to build an alternative cultural configuration from or against that more powerful regime […] The citing of the dominant norm does not, in this instance, displace that norm; rather it becomes the means by which that dominant norm is most painfully reiterated as the very desire and the performance it subjects. (133)

This privileging of agency that comes about through "reiteration" is reminiscent of an earlier philosophical move, idealism, the mother or pre-cursor to essentialism. The dangers of uncritically calling to inquiry the basis of such "original" powers is in itself regressive. Is Butler here not resorting to theology that requires an unquestioned precedent? Butler's privileging of iteration through repetition can be potentially disastrous in a project that wishes to recuperate erstwhile invisible bodies. In fact, Butler's notion of lesbian performativity, iteration and re-iteration seems to be

characterized by a sense of shame given that she reads "lesbian" as a term over-determined by heterosexuality, and produced by homophobia. (pg 123-127). This thus forces the crucial question when it comes to taking the theory off the page to the stage - how does one reiterate what has no precedent?

Mehta in a move that flagrantly deviates from Butler, opts not for reiteration but re-presentation. In fact, it is in her desire to deviate from (in)visibility politics that caused furore. Instead of quelling lesbian desire and restoring the familiar trope of heteronormativity, Mehta allows for the two heroines to escape from the patriarchal, heterosexual economy into the desiring arms of each other. In fact, in a radical move, she even foregrounds the heroines' bravery and chastity, evidenced by her treatment of the finale scenes. The two are caught in bed by Ashok, who in a fit of anger hits Radha who then knocks over a boiling pot, causing her long sari to catch fire. In that moment, the audience is lulled into a sense of impending doom as we expect that such lesbian desires will be deemed as "unholy", "unclean" or "inauthentic" and thus be purged by fire, especially given the repeated use of Sita's trial by fire as motif. However, as an overt break from reiterated norms, Mehta has Radha ***survive*** the trial by fire – thereby symbolically attesting to her innocence and by extension acknowledging lesbian desire as a pure and chaste act.

Given Mehta's strategies of re-presentation, Butler's Occidental "melancholic reiteration" theory seems to fall short as a recuperative strategy for queer identities. In fact, Butler's constant negation of identity politics seems to find her in tenuous grounds. Her inability or reluctance to root for a certain formative grounding seems to reduce her theories to mere self-referential formalist philosophical debates instead of usable, active recuperative strategies.

When the All seeing Eye/I is not the All Seeing Eye/I

In Powers of Horror, Kristeva writes of the abject,

> We may call it a border, abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it- on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger.

Indeed, if the abject can be defined as the place where meaning collapses, then Mehta's Fire is rich fertile ground to begin our analysis. But I get ahead of myself. Let us take it from the opening scene of the film where we are given a brief plenitudinal scene with the protagonist Radha's memory/fantasy of herself as a young girl, sitting beside her parents in a wide open field of yellow flowers. Her mother urges the young Radha to "see the ocean" lying just beyond the landlocked field: "What you can't see you can see, you just have to see without looking." This scene, with its exhortation to 'see' without looking, to 'see' differently, recurs and resonates throughout the film, and suggests an analogy with the ways in which ***Fire*** interrogates the notion that the proper location of lesbianism is within a politics of (in)visibility in the public sphere.

In what can be read as yet brilliant framing move, Mehta through this opening scene also warns the audience to look beyond what is purely "reiterated" or "norm-ally seen' but to allow for the phantasmic powers of the obscene/unseen. Indeed after Ashok spies the two women naked in bed together, Sita comments to Radha, "There is no word in our language to describe what we are to each other," to which Radha responds, "You're right; perhaps seeing is less complicated."

U.S. film critics, most notably Roger Ebert, have taken this exchange (as well as Mehta's own pronouncement in the press notes that "Indians don't talk about sex") as proof of the West's cultural superiority and advanced politicization: "Lesbianism is so outside the experience of these Hindus that their language even lacks a work for it."[6] Indeed, almost all mainstream U.S. reviewers stress the failure of "these Hindus" to articulate lesbianism intelligibly, which in turn signifies the failure of the non-West to progress toward the organization of sexuality and gender prevalent in the West.[7] To these critics, ironically, lesbian or gay identity becomes intelligible and indeed desirable when and where it can be incorporated into this developmental narrative of modernity which will not be examined at length in this paper. What will be developed further, drawing from Kristeva, is an examination of how abjection and invisibility had actually served to cloak these two heroines and if the heroines of Fire can be read as the monstrous feminine- precisely having been given this charge of abjection.

To begin this project, we must first situate the depiction of queer female desire at the interstices of rigidly heterosexual structures as illustrated in ***Fire*** for the definition of the abject requires precisely this location to situate the loss of meaning. This abject or lesbian **desire** interestingly is routed and rooted in the space of the home. Indeed, whilst there are many different "varieties" of desire explored in the film, only the women's lesbian desire can be defined in Krsiteva's terms as ***abject.*** In the film, men in the family access pleasure and fantasy through "escape hatches" from the strictures of conjugal heterosexual domesticity. Ashok, for instance, immerses himself within the homosociality of religious discipleship. Jatin trades in porn videos and escapes into sex with his exotically "other" Chinese girlfriend, while the servant Mundu (who nurses an unrequited love for Radha) masturbates to pilfered porn videos in front of Biji. Male desire, blocked by the officially sanctioned gender and class arrangements of the home, nevertheless emerges and is gratified.

[6] Roger Ebert, "*Fire* Strikes at Indian Repression," *Chicago Sun Times*, 17 September 1997, 38.
[7] See Margaret McGurk, "Tradition Broken in Indian Tale of Forbidden Love," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 16 January 1998, W26; and Bill Morrison, "Women on the Verge of a Cinematic Breakthrough," *News and Observer* (Raleigh, N.C.), 21 November 1997, WUP10.

Radha and Sita, however, are shut out of such economies of desire; they, like Biji, must mutely witness men's pleasure, fantasies and desire while being denied their own. For Radha and Sita, this queer desire or abject desire becomes a means of extricating oneself from patriarchal heteronormativity by creating alternative circuits of pleasure and fantasy. While some critics suggest that ***Fire's*** depiction of lesbian sexuality capitulates to the familiar notion of lesbianism as merely a reaction to failed heterosexual marriages,[8] I would argue that, at least in the middle class urban Indian context that Mehta details, it is from within the very fissures of rigid heteronormativity that queer female desire emerges. The attraction between Radha and Sita is enabled by those spaces of female homosociality that are sanctioned by normative sexual and gender arrangements. Whether rubbing oil into each other's hair, or massaging each other's feet during a family picnic, the women exploit the permeable relation and slippages between female homosociality and female homoeroticism. Similarly, *karva chauth*, a North Indian ritual in which "dutiful" wives fast at home to ensure their husbands' well-being, is transformed from a female homosocial activity into an intensely homoerotic one, as the two women dress up in silk saris and gold jewelry for each other's pleasure.

By depicting the privatized, seemingly sanitized "domestic" space as a site of intense female homerotic pleasure and practice, ***Fire*** interrogates the teleological Euro-American narrative according to which lesbian sexuality must emerge from a private, domestic sphere into a public, (in)visible, subjectivity. In fact, ***Fire*** seems to suggest that female homoerotic desire looks and functions differently in an Indian context than in Euro-American social and historical formations. Thus one critic's assessment that ***Fire's*** depiction of lesbian sexuality is "extremely tame by Western standards" must be read as symptomatic of the very narrative that the film reiterates and revises.[9] As highlighted above, in a brave recuperative strategy, Mehta celebrates this abject lesbian desire by

[8] Ginu Kamani, "Interview with Deepa Mehta," in *Trikone Magazine* 4:4 (October 1997): 11-13.
[9] Brian D. Johnson, "Forbidden Flames," *McLeans's Magazine*, 29 September 1997, 86.

having the women escape the confines of the household rather than continue to exist within it.

Fire's representation of female homoerotic desire within the home and its rejection of the image of Sita as the ideal Hindu woman challenge contemporary Hindu nationalist ideologies that rely upon Hindu women's sexual purity and sanctity as a means of ensuring group solidarity and vilifying Muslim minorities. Queer desire in the film functions (albeit obliquely) as a modality through which the women resist a complicity with the project of Hindu nationalism and its attendant gender and sexual hierarchies. Within the film's logic, the women's abjection and their escaping heterosexuality is synonymous with escaping the violence of Hindu nationalism: the few moments where the two women are seen together outside the home take place within explicitly non-Hindu spaces such mosques and tombs. Indeed the film ends with a shot of the two women in an Islamic shrine, having finally left the confines of the household[10].

Indeed, Fire provides fertile ground to read Kristeva's abjection theory – Radha is the abomination to the traditional Hindu woman owing to her inability to reproduce- "no eggs" she exclaims in one scene. It is her body that is objectionable not Ashok's. It is also to read the romantic development between the two women as a differentiated type of incest taboo. Indeed, it must be no coincidence that these women are sisters-in-law! In fact, the characterization of Sita as the younger more impetuous complement to the mature and maternal Radha is a loaded signifier. However, Mehta's construction breaks from Kristeva's abject in precisely this respect,

Kristeva argues that all individuals experience abjection at their earliest attempts to break away from the mother [and] sees the mother-child relation as one marked by conflict: the

[10] It is precisely *Fire*'s implicit critique of Hindu nationalism that prompted the Shiv Sena to ransack theaters showing the film in December, 1998; as one Shiv Sena member said of the film's depiction of the two women having sex, "this scene is a direct attack on our Hindu culture and civilization.

child struggles to break free but the mother is reluctant to release it. Because of the "instability of the symbolic function" in relation to the most crucial area-"the prohibition placed on the maternal body (as a defence against auto-eroticism and incest taboo), [she further] argues that the maternal body becomes a site of conflicting desires. (The Monstrous Feminine, 11)

Mehta's Radha character bears a strong resemblance to the maternal figure in question, however what makes Radha even more doubly abject is in her ***inability*** to fulfil her role as the maternal mother. However, she unwittingly fulfils this over-determined role when she becomes sexually involved with Sita. In fat, it is arguable that Sita's attraction to Radha is ***precisely*** this lure of maternal comfort. The child rather than wanting to break away from the mother wants to re-recuperate her position of plenitudinal jouissance – and in Fire, what is abjectionable is the fact that these women do succeed in recuperating what is typically read as "loss" in psychoanalytic terms when a subject gets interpellated into the realm of the Symbolic. It is this curious breaking of the incest taboo that makes this women's passion all the more monstrous and decadent but also all the more powerful in its abjection.

Unsurprisingly, Indian liberals both within India as well as in the diaspora, have been quick to counter the charge of perversion and obscenity leveled at the film. This liberal humanist defense argues that the film is not about lesbianism at all, given that it refuses to name its heroines as lesbians; rather, this argument holds, lesbian desire in the film functions allegorically, and merely stands in for larger, more important issues such as women's emancipation as a whole.[11]

The problematic nature of this liberal humanist defense of ***Fire*** was particularly evident at a screening of Mehta's new film ***Earth.*** Mehta was supposed to be present at the event but was unable to do so since she had flown to India to defend ***Fire*** from the Shiv Sena

[11] "Attacks on Fire Due to Lack of Vision, Says Sathyu," *Times of India,* 3 February, 1999.

attacks. Mehta's producer, David Hamilton, apologized for the director's absence and alluded to the *Fire* controversy by suggesting that the film had raised the ire of Hindu nationalists because of the way it addressed issues of "artistic freedom, choice, and women's equality." Hamilton was at least in part taking his cue from the filmmaker Deepa Mehta herself, who has repeatedly defended the film by arguing that "the lesbian relationship in the film is merely a symbol of an extreme choice my heroines make…it is not a lesbian film…rather, I think of it as humanistic."[12]

These are curious evaluations of the outburst against ***Fire*** given that the Shiv Sena has directed their outrage very specifically at the lesbian relationship between the two women, and worse still, at the fact that the film locates this lesbian relationship within the confines of Hindu familial domesticity. As Bal Thackeray, the leader of the Shiv Sena, complained recently, "why is it that lesbianism is shown in a Hindu family? Why are the names of the heroines Radha and Sita and not Shabana or Saira?"[13] In the same vein, a senior government official in Maharashtra offered the following argument as justification for the banning of the film: "if women's physical needs get fulfilled through lesbian acts, the institution of marriage will collapse, and the reproduction of human beings will stop."[14] As both these comments amply demonstrate, the extreme anxiety that the film provokes among the Hindu right stems is a recognition of one – that the film is no more re-iteration of norms but re-presented a decisive breakaway from heteronormativity and two- that the representation of abjectionable queer desire in the home poses a huge threat to the Hindu nationalist project. But herein lies the precise power of the abject- its ability to continually threaten and instill the sense of perpetual danger and as such constantly push boundaries and force the margins to be frontier as embodied by these two fiery blazing sirens, Radha and Sita.

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[12] *BBC News Online*, DATE?
[13] "Thackeray's Terms," *The Hindu*, 14 December, 1998. Radha and Sita, as I discussed, are names drawn from Hindu mythology while "Shabana" and "Saira" function in Thackeray's statement as generic Muslim names as well as specific references to Shabana Azmi (the star of the film) and to the wife of actor Dilip Kumar, who was vocal in his support of the film.
[14] *BBC News Online*, 9 December 1998.

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