

# Fire: A film which bears witness to Deepa Mehta's courage as an artist

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*The following review of Deepa Mehta's 1996 film Fire was originally published in Sinhalese in Kamkaru Mawatha, the newspaper of the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka, on May 29 and June 12, 1998.*

*The internationally acclaimed film, which was released uncut in India, played for three weeks before Hindu fundamentalist formations denounced it as obscene, immoral and offensive to Indian culture and the Hindu religion, and attempted to have it banned.*

*The extreme right-wing Shiv Sena movement organised demonstrations, forcing the closure of several Bombay and New Delhi cinemas. It issued a statement declaring: "If women's physical needs are fulfilled through lesbian acts, the institution of marriage will collapse and the reproduction of human beings will stop."*

*Members of the organisation stormed cinemas, tearing down posters and smashing windows. Demonstrations were organised outside the home of one of the film's stars. Protesters threatened two actors and a director who publicly defended the film. Mehta also received a number of death threats. The film was withdrawn from cinemas, pending another censorship review, but later re-released uncut. Extreme-right wing elements are still trying to have the film banned.*

*Fire was the first of a trilogy of films by Mehta set in India. Earth, the second in the series, was released in 1998 and the third, Water, was due to begin shooting in Uttar Pradesh early this year. In late January Hindu fundamentalists wrecked her set in Varanasi, claiming that the film, about the plight of poverty-stricken widows in the 1930s, would be anti-Hindu. The Uttar Pradesh government claimed that Mehta was responsible for the disorder and banned production of the film in that state. Mehta has vowed to make the film and plans to resume filming at another location in India later in the year.*

*The World Socialist Web Site is campaigning to defend Mehta (see statement: Oppose Hindu extremist attacks on Indian filmmaker), insisting that fundamental issues of democratic rights and artistic freedom are involved.*

Deepa Mehta's film *Fire*, when it was released in 1997, became a focus of attention of film lovers and critics the world over. Some time ago the film was shown at the Majestic Cinema in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The film, which has India as its background, and is made in English, deals with the development of a loving sexual relationship between two Indian women. The extraordinary courage shown by Mehta who wrote and directed the film has made *Fire* a fascinating artistic experience, and has also won for the director the admiration of art lovers the world over.

The film centres on events in the life of a Hindu family living in the outskirts of Delhi. A character in the film—Jutin, describes this family as a "joint family". In this kind of family, which as a result of the uneven development of India contains feudal social vestiges combined with the bourgeois way of life, the parents, married children and their families all live together under one roof.

The family portrayed in the film consists of an aged bed-ridden mother, her two sons Ashok (Kulbhushan Karbandha) and Jutin (Javed Jaffri) and

their wives. A manservant called Mundu who helps with the household chores also lives in the house. The family depends for its livelihood on the income from a fast-food outlet and a video rental business adjoining the house. The elder son Ashok manages the business while the younger son helps him. Their respective wives, Radha (Shabana Asmi) and Sita (Nandita Das), prepare the food for the fast-food outlet.

Jutin, behind the back of his elder brother, has turned the video rental into a den of illegal transactions where blue films are rented out to young children. Jutin, who is unmarried at the beginning of the film, spends part of the money he acquires this way to maintain a relationship with a woman hairdresser called Julie who has immigrated with her parents to India from Hong Kong.

The elder brother Ashok spends a considerable amount of his income to look after a religious guru whom he closely associates with and is in the habit of visiting regularly. Ashok tries to impress on his family that his obviously eccentric relationship with the guru would help to detach himself from sensual pleasures and ultimately attain "universal truth". When doctors reveal that Radha is unable to bear children, Ashok becomes a "brahmacharin"—one who relies on refraining completely from sex to gain religious and spiritual advancement. Apparently he has turned his wife's incapacity to conceive into a ladder on which to climb up to *moksha* or spiritual freedom. As part of this exercise he forces his wife to lie beside him on the bed so as to prove to himself—according to Gandhian tradition—his "powers of resisting sensual desires". Radha, to all appearance a traditional woman, consents to her husband's demand, but the viewer can clearly sense the burning sense of injustice consuming her.

Jutin's girl friend Julie, who has absorbed bourgeois tastes and habits, will not consent to marry into a traditional "joint-family". When Ashok entreats Jutin to marry, so as to provide the family with a son to carry on the family name, he weds Sita and brings her home while continuing his relationship with Julie. Sita—a cheerful, light hearted, lovable young woman is rather out of place in the sombre and gloomy atmosphere of the traditional household until she manages to build up a friendly relationship with her sister-in-law.

Jutin cruelly snubs Sita's attempts to build up a close relationship with him. Only when the elder brother reminds him of the necessity of having a son does Jutin condescendingly approach Sita with the intention of having sex. Jutin seems to gloat over the fact that he is only fulfilling his family's wish in having sex with Sita. Needless to say his sexual behavior revolts the spectator. Sita is capable of uncovering the reasons behind the peculiarities in Jutin's behavior only after some time.

The spectator senses the sometimes open and often veiled derision of the two husbands towards their respective wives. The main theme of the film *Fire* is the development of a mutually supportive and affectionate relationship between the two women, a relationship that is gradually transformed into sexual love.

Mundu becomes aware of the nature of the relationship between the two women and informs the master of the house, who then spies on the

women. Radha has to bear the brunt of Ashok's jealous and bitter anger. The seemingly harmonious life of the family is shattered and the two women decide to go away to a distant place and begin life anew on their own. On the day they plan to leave Radha suggests that Sita leave the house first so Radha can "try and explain things" to Ashok.

Radha's attempt to "explain things" to Ashok only leads to a terrible quarrel. It is clear that Ashok, who is deeply disturbed after witnessing the sexual behavior of the two women, is in no mood to listen to Radha's explanations.

The quarrel between Radha and Ashok takes place in the kitchen and Radha's saree unexpectedly catches fire. Ashok who had been asserting all his male authority to substantiate his condemnation of Radha is unable even to raise a hand to put out the flames enveloping her.

It is significant that precisely at this moment the spectator is made aware that the fire enveloping Radha is being transformed (by the maker of the film) into a character of the film—a character with a symbolic significance. No doubt the fact that the film has been named *Fire* also helps the spectator to arrive at this awareness.

According to ancient Hindu tradition, fire or Agni is the constantly present purifying god of the household on whom also falls the task of bearing witness to the chastity of women and accordingly deciding their fates. In the ancient Indian epic *Ramayana* it is the heroine Sita (Rama's wife who had been forcibly taken away by Ravana the king of Lanka and kept in his palace as a prisoner for a considerable time) on her return to Rama's kingdom, has to prove her chastity by "Agni-Pareeksha" (literally a test by fire—the accused is made to enter a fire and emerge unhurt to prove her innocence). Agni does not harm Sita, thus proving her chastity. Similarly in the film, Agni, by not harming Radha establishes her chastity. Agni releases Radha from his flames physically safe and sound, though her blackened saree and smudged face bear traces of the ordeal. Radha is able to meet Sita as previously arranged.

It is clear that the artist herself speaks through Agni. Here it is necessary to emphasise that the artist's unreserved sympathy for Radha also finds full justification in the realistic portrayal of social forces in the film. The film sequence of the "Agni Pareeksha", which carries to a dramatic climax the chain of events in the household—contains within it the ability to passionately involve the viewer in the portrayed situation; and this ability bears witness to the integrity of Deepa Mehta as an artist.

It is obvious that God Agni, in giving his verdict in favor of Radha, has aligned himself with a traditionally frowned upon relationship (between Radha and Sita), rejecting outright the institutionalised relationship between husband and wife (Ashok and Radha). Thus Agni endorses a relationship, which, although not traditionally accepted in class society, is honest, aesthetically appealing and spiritually rich against a dishonest, spiritually bankrupt, institutionalised traditional relationship in class society. Therefore the Agni we come to know in the film *Fire* is a revolutionary god.

The relationship between Radha and Sita, as it is portrayed in the film, wins not only the whole-hearted sympathy of the spectator but also unreserved respect. The great artistic power of *Fire* lies in its ability to make the spectator sympathise and respect a relationship that in ordinary day-to-day life is generally not approved of.

Some critics have described *Fire* as a film that supports lesbianism. *Fire* sympathetically depicts the development of a loving sexual relationship between two women, but the film's success is not simply due to this fact. The film's artistic power lies in its appeal for enlightened, loving and spiritually satisfying relationships between human beings.

The realistic depiction by the film of institutionalised traditional relationships in class society generates within the spectator revulsion and hatred towards such relationships.

The brutal and revolting nature of the sexual relationship bound up with institutionalised traditional marriage in class society is powerfully

revealed through Jutin's sexual attitude towards his wife. The mental agony undergone by Radha in having to lie beside Ashok in bed so as to provide him with an opportunity to prove to himself his powers of resisting sensual pleasures is powerfully conveyed through Shabana Asmi's sensitive and controlled acting.

The two brothers consider the nursing of their aged, bed-ridden mother to be the duty of their wives. We never see Jutin speak a gentle word to his mother. Radha nurses her mother-in-law like one fulfilling a ritual.

The family depicted in *Fire* is fundamentally an economic unit, bound together by an enfeebled system of mutual social duties and it easily succumbs to the pressures borne out of its contradictions.

The film's appeal is certainly not for unconventional relationships against conventional ones. The sexual relationship between Jutin and Julie—though unconventional is also depicted as one devoid of love, gentleness and beauty—merely seeking the gratification of brutal sexual instincts. The maker of the film has consciously sought to contrast the loving sexual relationship developing between Radha and Sita with the sexual relationship existing between Jutin and Julie. That the film's appeal is for enlightened, loving and spiritually satisfying relationships between human beings is crystal clear.

In an interview published in the *Sunday Leader* on March 8, 1998 Deepa Mehta said it had become an unpleasant task for her to counter interpretations of *Fire* as a film that idealised and promoted lesbianism.

"I love the film *Fire*. I am proud of my film. The questions you raise prompted by your middle class upbringing forces me to defend *Fire*. This is a situation I do not like at all. I am not obliged to defend any thing in the film *Fire*. The question here is not whether one chooses to engage in homosexual and heterosexual relationships or whether one chooses to engage in only heterosexual relationships. The question is the necessity to choose a life of dignity and self-fulfillment.

"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."

The performance of a folk play based on the mythical Rama-Sita story in the film also helps deepen the spectator's understanding of the destructive results of the oppression of women in class society. This kind of folk play has long been part of the traditional social life of the Indian masses and lays bare their thoughts and feelings. In the play Rama says: "Agni bore witness to your [Sita's] chastity. Even so, I have to banish you." A woman in the film viewing the folk play cries as Sita is banished. It is not difficult to understand that she is in some way identifying herself with Sita.

The servant Mundu represents another facet of life in bourgeois society. He is even more oppressed—economically, socially and culturally—than the two women, Radha and Sita, who belong to a relatively better off layer of middle class society. Through Mundu's character is depicted the intellectual and emotional retardedness, as well as certain psychological maladies, produced in man by the outmoded bourgeois social system.

The talents of actors and actresses have contributed much towards the artistic power of the film. Shabana Asmi and Nandita Das not only bring to life the characters they portray but also accomplish the difficult task of winning the viewer's sympathy and respect for a sexual relationship between two women.

*Fire* also enables the spectator to breathe in the social atmosphere of an Indian suburb. The folk play *Rama and Sita*, and the marriage procession (Radha and Sita watch it from the balcony of their house) that takes to the streets at night enlivened by song and dance deserve special mention. Radha and Sita, dressed in gleaming colorful sarees with necklaces and bangles to match, are a visual treat. India has inherited not only a tradition of repressing sensual desires and seeking *Moksha*, but also a tradition of

refined aesthetic enjoyment of life.

The film sequence of an early morning backed up with appropriate music by A.R. Rahman is also memorable. As night fades, along the motorway bathed in early morning light, an unending line of vehicles including three-wheelers and motor cycles speed towards the town. Not only the motorway and the vehicles but also the advertisements put up on the sides of the motorway bespeak the pathetic attempt by an underdeveloped backward nation to ape the developed bourgeois countries. As the neighborhood emerges from its slumbers we see Mundu covering himself with a sheet of cloth seated on the doorstep waiting for the milkman to arrive. The light in the sky thickens as if pregnant, not only with secrets carried on from by-gone days, but also with a new life striving to be born.

Radha and Sita as we see them at the end of the film are clearly marked by the harrowing experiences they have been through. Radha's sad and discolored face speaks volumes of the deep hurt and humiliation embedded in her heart. Sita's usually cheerful face is unsmiling and grave. The old dilapidated building where the two women meet each other is made even more gloomy and doleful by an unexpected downpour. The spectator is left in no doubt that the road ahead for the two women will not be an easy and smooth one.



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