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**Blazing Passions: A Queer Topography of Desiring Bodies and Transgressive Sexuality in
Deepa Mehta's *Fire***

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Abstract:

Queer writing and cinema emerge as a powerful platform offering an alternative space of existence. In this regard, Deepa Mehta's *Fire* drafts a strong case against the heterocentric parameters to contest the notion of compulsory heterosexuality at the heart of a bourgeois household. The major question arises: how can female same sex desire be located in a domestic setting? The present paper thereby, probes the topography and vicissitudes of female sexual desire that goes against the grain of hetero-patriarchal script, to foreground itself as a viable choice. Such representation of female same-sex relation evolves through oppression, giving suitable reaction, only to show metamorphosis into the state of empowerment. As the two sequestered sisters-in-law in the film turn to each other for emotional and sexual satisfaction, they become each other's savior. In doing so, they actively resist from being projected as mere victims of repression; rather, they become successful in repositioning themselves as agential entities, potent enough to destabilize the status-quo. At the same time, they commendably save themselves from falling into the pit of situational lesbianism by default, as they make active sexual choices and pave the way for queer articulation.

Keywords: Film studies, queer studies, sexuality, sexual desire, sexual choices, resistance, empowerment.

Introduction

Sexuality is much more than a facet of human nature, the seat of pleasure and desire. It has become a principle of explanation, whose effects can be discerned, in different ways,



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in virtually any stage and predicament of human life, shaping our capacity to act and setting the limits to what we can think and do.

—Glover and Kaplan

Sexuality is a composite term that addresses the overall personality of an individual. It has a strong bearing upon the wide display of individual's social conduct and activities, his social standing and identity. In addition to the biological factors, it involves in the psychological, sociological, economical, and spiritual aspects of human life that determine the individual's capacity to act and think. In fact, sexuality to a larger extent is shaped by the cultural expression and requires social valuation. It cuts across several significant relations of power around gender, class and race. The ever-growing interest in the field of sexuality has unlocked an epoch of sexual heterogeneity in which a wide spectrum of sexualities, sexual behaviors and sexual identities could be imagined. In a way, this newly regained perspective on sexuality offers a fertile ground for queer probing endowing the field with a huge gamut for analysis.

Drawing significantly from post-structuralist theory, queer theory begins by challenging the existing monolithic ideals of social norms and taxonomies. It essentially seeks to ruffle the existing theories and beliefs, encourage the formation of new ideas, and foster new ways of seeing and interpreting human experience. For a well known theorist in the field, Annamarie Jagose, "queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire . . . and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilize heterosexuality" (3). In fact, queer theory concerns with plethora of sexual behavior and practices ranging from non-normative forms of sexual expressions to gender bending practices. In doing so, it queries and queers the heteronormative structures through an all-encompassing resistance to norms. Thereof, it seeks to destabilize the essentialist identities of gender and sexuality which are primarily seen as the by-products of social valuation and institutional power.

Narrowing down to the Indian context, the representation of a queer female subject position within a middle class heterosexual familial context is more complex. Either such a



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homoerotic subject position is rendered invisible or is made silent, and thereof, is swept under the carpet by the wielding heteronormative codes. Observing such denial in the scope of queer female desire, a notable queer thinker, Gayatri Gopinath underlines the failure of the nation to ensure “democratic egalitarianism, and dares to envision other possibilities of existence, exterior to dominant systems of logic” (21). Seen as such, queer theory imagines these ‘other possibilities of existence’ and helps to counter the collective oblivion and intentional ignorance inculcated around queer existence.

In fact, such progressive academic scholarship around queer subjectivity and existence is backed by an equally bold celluloid engagement with the queer representation. Released in 1996, Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* remains a pioneer in this connection and qualifies as one of the earliest attempts in circulating queer images in the mainstream Indian cinema. The film essentially projects the vindication of female same-sex experience located in the heart of hetero-patriarchal nationalist culture in which queer female desire is decreed, to quote Gopinath again, as purely ‘impossible’ and ‘unthinkable’ (15). Arguably, by making such a strong political statement and mainstreaming the subject as bold as queer female sexuality, the film was bound to call for the wrath of contemporary conservative cultural consciousness prevalent in the country. Despite much controversy, the film commendably maps the brave new world of queer passions and intimacies. What is more, it offers an opportunity to queer community to transcend familial, social, and religious barriers to claim its true existence.

Aim of the Paper

Keeping in tandem with the queer reading, Mehta’s *Fire* has an immense potential to destabilize the normative pattern of everyday life. Her cinematic rendition of the subject “transgresses nearly every sexual, cultural, and familial norm that constitutes India as it is imagined” (Kapur 26). Charting such transgressive intentions, the present paper explores the topography and vicissitudes of female sexual desire which goes against the grain of hetero-patriarchal script. In doing so, it tries to foreground the alternative expression of female libidinal desire as a viable choice in Indian domestic sphere. To further strengthen this line of inquiry, the



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paper addresses a set of questions: To what extent can the joint forces of patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality be restrictive? How intense can a passion be and how long can a body endure the flame of desire? How can female queer sexuality be located in a hetero-patriarchal family order? Above all, how can the female transgression of hetero-patriarchal codes open the route to sexual utopia? These are some of the pertinent questions that envelop the discourse and representation of female sexuality in popular culture, in general, and in Mehta's *Fire*, in particular.

Methodology

The present paper adopts insights from certain notable thinkers in the field of sexuality. The first name that emerges in this context is that of Michel Foucault who brought sexuality out of its purely anatomical domain and related it with power and discourse. Next, it draws ideas from Gayatri Gopinath to map the queer experience as it transverses from an 'impossible' prospect to a 'possible' reality in the Indian context. Furthermore, in order to disrupt the socially sanctioned heteronormative paradigm of sexuality, Judith Butler's views on gender and her performative theory become pertinent here. Under the light of these oft-mentioned sources, the topography of sexually transgressive behavior and practices of the female couple in the film is analyzed through four stages of evolution: oppression, reaction, metamorphosis and empowerment.

Analysis

Notably, Mehta with her progressive vision deconstructs the rhetoric of repression. Wiping away the predictable outcomes of having victimized wives, she rather takes a bold step and emphatically proposes an unconventional choice to her women. To this end, she relocates the queer female desire at the "interstices of the rigidly heterosexual structures, detailing the ways in



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which desire is routed and rooted within the space of the middle-class home” (Gopinath 153). Queering the heterosexual domesticity—traditionally signifying the sanatorium of women’s purity and devotion in Indian national imaginary—both Radha and Sita nurture an alternative circuit of blazing passions. In the process, they address the demands of their desiring bodies through the trope of transgressive sexuality right at the heart of bourgeois joint family. Such representation of female libidinal desire evolves through the maxims of oppression, giving suitable reaction in the course, only to show metamorphosis, and eventually leads to the state of empowerment. However, in the process of charting out these four stages of sexual evolution, it would be significant to discuss certain key events in detail to justify the research questions and make the study more plausible.

1. Oppressive Forces of Hetero-patriarchy

Undeniably, both Radha and Sita are repressed under the dual vectors of oppression propelled by the conjoining impetus of hetero-patriarchal regime which tends to regulate their sexuality, body and labor, and henceforth, their existence. In their working, the patriarchal structures attempt to condition the subjectivities of both the women into ideal, docile and loyal wives having no sexual or bodily needs. In order to consolidate their power, these structures of ‘regulative discourses,’ as Foucault would specify them, perpetuate a heterosexual family model, and thereby, validate compulsory heterosexuality—privileged as normative over the other forms of sexual practices that are considered deviant.

To begin with, Radha is reported to be married for 13 years in the Kapur family. In the nascent stage of her married life, she discovers her infertility and her resulting inability to bear her husband a son to perpetuate his family legacy. Living in a society that harnesses its patriarchal expectations on the female reproductive function and measures woman’s worth in terms of her capacity to produce a male heir, Radha loses her desirability as a wife and a potential mother—the figure that is essentially circulated by postcolonial nationalism.

Taking her bareness as a cue and a means to punish his wife’s incapacity, Ashok starts following a swami who encourages him to embrace ascetic existence. This way, he shrewdly turns “a misfortune into an opportunity” (*Fire* 1:26:01). To fulfill his vow of celibacy, he



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completely suspends all kind of sexual contact with his wife. With such dismissal, he thwarts Radha of all sorts of pleasurable intimate arrangements and gains a complete control of her sexuality through the rhetoric of repression. In doing so, he employs her body as a tool to test his sexual temptation. To this end, he enacts a play of incitement and suppression of desires by making his desiring wife to lie beside him in his labored nightly rituals. Viewed as such, Radha's spousal worth and sexual competence get abated to become a mere spiritual test and a medium to reach the ultimate truth for her husband.

While Radha suffers the brunt of her husband's stern patriarchal values and his religious proclivities, Sita is oppressed by her husband's extra-marital engagement with a young, Americanized Chinese girlfriend, Julie. At the very outset, the film betrays the coldness and aloofness in the relation of the newlyweds when they are on their honeymoon at the Taj Mahal—the epitome of heterosexual matrimonial love. Later, when the couple enters the household it becomes apparent that Jatin has married Sita only to fulfill his familial obligation and not out of his desire for the latter. Even after his marriage Jatin frequently visits Julie and spends night with her. What is more, Jatin consummates his marriage in a very rough and perfunctory manner, hardly showing any signs of tenderness or affection and this leaves the young wife in distaste.

As a matter of fact, the 'regulative discourses' in patriarchal system envision the body of a female in the complex matrix of reproducer and propagator of nation-state. Working on the similar lines, Sita's body is assigned with reproductive competency and is expected to produce a male heir. In order to exploit the potency of his wife, Jatin manipulates her body to lend him partial sexual satisfaction and handles her as a mere baby making machine. Seen as such, legitimate procreative sexuality "becomes a social compulsion" which has to be discharged "as a familial and community duty" (Menon 33). Perhaps, this aspect turns sex between the newlyweds into a labored practice; a part of marriage ritual, an act of duty to procreate without any pleasure or emotion involved.

In this manner, the sexuality of both Radha and Sita becomes trapped in the inexorable dictums of 'regulative discourses' of compulsive marriage that, insinuated by compulsory heterosexuality, cast them in the context of duty, sacrifice and motherhood. Both the women are



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essentially rendered as gendered subjects whose bodies get inadvertently drawn in the quaint sexual economy exercised in this particular bourgeois heterosexual household.

2. Reaction from Within

In such a distressing scheme of (non) sexual arrangements, the marital bed for both the women evinces the spells of abjection and loneliness, to which each of them responds differently. Racked with guilt over her infertility, Radha endures her fate with fortitude. Observing the tenets of *pativrata dharma*, she unquestionably helps Ashok to attain his destiny. In turn, she does not register any apparent sign of her husband's insensitivity towards her. It can be argued that Radha's complete resignation, to a larger extent, springs from the gender conditioning she received over the years. With such naturalization of Radha's gender performativity, the views of Butler become crucial as she avers, "femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment" (Routledge 23). Viewed as such, Radha is 'disciplined' and 'regulated' into her gender-specific role of an obedient wife through repetitive denial of her sexuality. In the process, she is 'punished' (oppressed) for her incapacity which again she is conditioned to accept in silence (reaction).

Despite her resignation, she is, however, not able to control her sadness that gnaws her from within. The enforced celibacy of Radha leaves her desiring body sexually parched and emotionally void. She inwardly yearns for someone to emotionally connect with. In fact, her inner vacuity gets reiterated in her dreams from childhood in which she envisions herself in the mustard fields and desires to see the ocean. In this connection, the ideas of Carl Gustav Jung can prove noteworthy as he interprets, "the dream gives us a true picture of the subjective state, while the conscious mind denies that this state exists" (5). Perhaps, for Radha who mostly lives in denial, her dreaming desires lay bare the vortex of latent desires repressed in her subconscious mind. For thirteen long years, she has led a quiet, mechanical and passionless life, and worked diligently all day around the house. As a corollary, she seems to have lost interest in dressing-up and hardly looks at herself in the mirror. Mehta's camera strategically focuses on her appearance: how her complexion lacks color, how her expressions seem blank, and how smile



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seems to evade her lips completely. Though Radha hardly verbalizes her unquenched desires and true feelings, it is her eyes and the metaphors through which she sometimes speaks that betray her inner vacuity. Her dismal state of affairs makes her to compare her marriage, her life, her existence to “boiled rice” that are “bland, unappetizing and useless” (*Fire* 00:30:33).

Even, Sita’s married life has no respite. The young couple lacks the robust intimacy and vivacity often found in the newlyweds. In such a scenario, Sita tries to observe and process things. At first, she patiently waits for Jatin when he goes out to spend his nights with Julie. But when this pattern continues for a longer stretch, she feels forsaken. Instead of suffering silently like Radha, she asserts her desire to break away from the ‘regulative discourses’ of the binding traditions and wishes to run away. Furthermore, twice in the film she destabilizes the expression of naturalized heterosexual femininity and fixed maxims of gender roles by sporting male attire and mannerisms as she slips effortlessly into Jatin’s clothes. Later, when Jatin establishes sexual relation with her, though by force, she expects him to show some affection. Denied of any desired response from him, she unflinchingly confronts him and exposes his affair with Julie in his face. But Jatin’s infidelity does not afflict or dampens her spirit. Rather, with her transgressive approach, she attempts to exploit the “gaps opened up in regulatory norms” which occur “in the process of their [norms’] self repetition” (Butler, Routledge 22). Thereby, she remains bold and becomes a precipitator of the change to come.

3. Metamorphosis and Formation of Queer Kinship

Undeniably, both the women, projected as traditional Indian wives, are caught in the web of patriarchy, and suffer sexual and cultural repression. Fastened by the common thread of dissatisfying marriages, frustration and loneliness, both spend their time either slaving in the hot kitchen for family take-out food business or take care of their incapacitate mother-in-law. In such an excruciatingly painful and dismal scenario, the two devise a way out of their physical, psychological and sexual repression through homosocial involvement. To achieve the desired end, they trigger a phase of metamorphosis in the present state of affairs.

In case of Radha, it is essentially Sita who acts as a catalyst. She predominantly propels Radha’s transition into a new existence in which her dreaming desires could be realized. As the



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younger sister-in-law enters the household, her progressive and non-conformist views shake docile and conformist Radha out of rigid patriarchal mould. Like in any normal middle class family, Radha is drawn towards her younger counterpart by virtue of their shared domestic duties exercised largely on domestic ground. Understandably, as Sita assists Radha to break her cocoon and evolve into a new self, in turn she herself also undergoes a few changes. Although bold and unconventional, Sita still tries to work out her marriage with Jatin but in vain. The newlywed is repetitively shot waiting on terrace for her husband, and each time she encounters the other suffering soul—Radha. Denied of any consolation elsewhere, Sita falls back on her for comfort. Par conséquent, the two try to understand their respective predicament, extending warmth and emotional tenderness—the conducive ground for a romantic inclination to bloom.

In this process of forging a deep bond amidst themselves, both the women revolutionize the familial space of their heterosexual home into an interstitial passage to articulate the dynamic growth of their respective personalities. The familiar places like terrace and kitchen gain a new currency as these women spaces spawn the germinating ground for erotic exchange, primarily featured through lingering glances and holding hands, though only to offer consolation, at first. Perhaps, in the masquerade of seeing and looking, all the family members could look at their growing amicability, but fail to notice the force of their brewing passion for each other.

As a matter of fact, the budding transgressive tendencies of the duo shortly become apparent and they lend first tangible expression to their ignited desires in full view. This first border crossing moment arrives when Sita kisses Radha, straight on her lips, out of the impulse that stems naturally from effect of the care and affection she procures from her. This first expression of the forbidden intimacy affects both of them. As far as Sita is concerned, a happy and content look frames her face. This fact makes Shohini Ghosh wonder if Sita has started seeing without looking; whether she cries in euphoria. (84). On the contrary, Radha becomes unsettled. In fact, the next shot has Radha captured in a close-up, standing before the washroom mirror as she touches her lips with the sound of running water in the background. This present reality then gets melted into her childhood dream sequence. The trope of mustard fields is invoked on screen signifying the adult Radha's ignited desires.



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Soon, the mutual understanding and female bonding of the two women culminate into the emotional expression of physical desire as their bodies get intimated into the renewed economy of female libidinal desire. This essentially happens on the auspicious day of karvachauth. As Shohini Ghosh observes, the ritual in the current context “is subverted and reconstituted, rendered meaningless and infused with new meaning” (90). To begin with, the ritual foregrounds a subtle change in Radha’s appearance who, now beams with radiance and looks happier. Secondly, during the observance of the ritual Sita emphatically declares, “I am sure we can find choices” (*Fire* 00:47:40). The word ‘choices’ here implicitly carries the weight of sexual undertones in Foucauldian terms. These ‘choices’ allude to ‘sexual choices’ and suggests a better chance at ‘creative way of living’ with a scope to find ‘sexual utopia.’ Finally, in the absence of Jatin, it primarily comes down to Radha to assume the role of a spouse to help Sita to break her fast by offering her a glass of water.

By now, the topography of the blazing passions of the two women is laden with the seeds of resistance as their desiring bodies enact in unison to give in to their transgressive demands. Otherwise, how long their bodies could have resisted the flame of desire? The intensity of their passion turns them into border jumpers who cross the line of permissible compulsory heterosexuality. Arguably, passion for Mehta, “can erupt in the most unlikely places, unlikely circumstances, and between the most unlikely people” (Kamani 12). In the present case, it erupts between two sisters-in-law who transcend the limits of their dissatisfying marriages in a middle class heterosexual household.

On the night of karvachauth, the two lovers finally consummate their queer desires. After making love, Radha is captured wearing her *salwar* lying on the floor. Perhaps, this act of re-dressing on Radha’s part becomes crucial to the understanding of changed dynamics of their relationship. The normal relation between two sisters-in-law drawn by homosocial affinity now culminates into queer kinship. Furthermore, Sita, who is still in bed, demands assurance from Radha, “did we do anything wrong?” But Radha dismisses Sita’s doubt (*Fire* 00:54:58). The country where any form of sexual perversity comes under the scrutiny of contemporary



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homophobic attitudes, such an emphatic declaration from the female quarter challenges the disciplinary strategies of hetero-patriarchal set-up. The following day, the two happy lovers seal their queer kinship by exchanging bangles in a ritual of love.

As the popular saying goes by: nothing touched by fire remains the same. Similarly, the fire of love ignited in Radha and Sita transforms their lives forever. Intended touches, lingering glances, meaningful smiles now adorn their happy faces. The servant of the house, Mundu, could notice their eventual metamorphosis, concluding: “Even Radha Bhaabi looks like a heroine. Now there are two heroines in one kitchen” (*Fire* 00:56:25). In fact, the inner happiness finds its manifestation in physical terms and through their transgressive act the two begin to feel empowered.

4. Transgression bringing Empowerment

The transgressive tendencies and practices of Radha and Sita stem from their will to live and thrive. In fact, this survival instinct becomes instrumental in bringing about their empowerment which is materialized by queering several fronts: home space, gender, gender roles, and compulsory heterosexuality.

Perhaps, the ecstatic phase of emotional and sexual fulfillment that Radha and Sita enjoy after their consummation poses a significant question: How can female queer sexuality be located in a hetero-patriarchal family order especially in Indian setting? In fact, going by the patriarchal logic, as Gopinath avers, “non-heterosexual Indian woman occupies a space of impossibility, in that she is not only excluded from the various ‘home’ spaces that the ‘woman’ is enjoined to inhabit and symbolize but, quite literally, simply cannot be imagined” (18). It follows then a queer female subjectivity cannot claim the home space, and by default, is seen as an outsider. On the contrary, Mehta ingeniously devises the queer female intimacy in such a way that it thoroughly permeates the middle class home space rather being extrinsic to it. With each passing day Radha and Sita turn their quotidian household chores into pleasurable pursuits. In fact, the director’s camera candidly steals such moments of their newfound love and depicts how smartly the two employ their apparently homosocial activities as subterfuge for deeper sexual involvement. With such a calculated display of daily affairs, they completely revolutionize the



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domestic arena, by reconfiguring ‘impossible’ and ‘unimagined’ prospects into ‘possible’ and ‘imagined’ realities.

However, in the eyes of many critics, the queer intimacy between the sisters-in-law essentially emerges in the home space as a retaliatory mechanism to counter their unpleasant heterosexual marriages. Thereof, it becomes the case of situational lesbianism where they have each other as the only choices in the limited space of domesticity. In order to mitigate the effect of such a claim, the earnest opinion of Gopinath can again be recalled for support. Gopinath observes that in the middle class urban milieu which the film depicts, “it is precisely within the cracks and fissures of rigidly heteronormative arrangements that queer female desire can emerge” (153). Even, R. Raj Rao, a renowned queer activist re-echoes somewhat the similar idea as he deems how specific “situations often serve as a catalyst to help people discover their true sexuality” (68). Arguably, until Radha and Sita meet each other, they remain oblivious to their capacity to love a woman. As the two become a part of middle class heterosexual family unit, the insensitivity of their respective husbands merely widens those pre-existing fissures and draw them closer, “creating their own circuit of pleasure, desire, and fantasy” (Gopinath 153). Moreover, they always had another option in Mundu, who again is sexually deprived and, given his gender, could have been a workable alternative within heterosexual paradigm. But none of them considers him a valid sexual partner. It can be inferred that Radha-Sita relationship is inherently informed by desire, mutual respect, and understanding and thereby, they are not in the need of any side kick.

After queering the domestic sphere, both the women attempt to disrupt the normative coding of gender. This predominantly happens in one of the most electrifying sequences featuring the same-sex couples in a drag performance to the accompaniment of a Bollywood song. During the performance, Radha is shown dressed as femme-heroine and Sita acts as a butch-hero. According to Butler, the butch-femme role play primarily replicates “heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames” and thereby, bring these frames ‘into relief’ as “utterly constructed” (Gender 31). She believes that such role play flouts the claim of gender as original and lays bare how gender is scripted and performed. When contextualized in Butler’s line of



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thought, the cross-dressed Sita clearly disrupts the hoax of a distinct, natural correspondence among biological sex, gender behavior and sexual inclination. Undoubtedly, the queer couple strategically ‘replicates’ the ‘heterosexual’ Bollywood love duet in the ‘non-heterosexual frames’ and queers the normative understanding of gender.

In addition to re-configuring home space and gender, Radha and Sita next contest the gendering process. Arguably, the more intimate the two women become, the more confident they look. What is more, Radha also is bemused by her gradual transformation into empowerment and regaining sexual agency. As a matter of fact, the fulfillment of her libidinal desires unwinds her gender conditioning. Radha devises a way to break, as Butler would call it, the ‘mould’ or the ‘grid’ that casts a subject into a gendered position through a corresponding conditioning. By breaking this norm, she “unlearns the compulsions of duty, traditional expectations, and compulsory heterosexuality” (Ghosh 97). Most importantly, she learns to confront her husband and shoves in his face, “the concept of duty is overrated” (*Fire* 01:05:10). At the other end, Sita, more empowered than ever, also has a showdown with Jatin whom she slaps in retaliation. Persisting in the similar fashion, Radha as well as Sita finally refuse their bodies to be abused by their husbands to test their temptation or perform husbandly duties of procreation, respectively. Seen as such, the new relation they forge undeniably revitalizes the respective lives of both Radha and Sita as they shift the power equation in their favor in the family.

Finally, this re-inscription of female sexual pleasure encourages Radha and Sita to question the validity of compulsory heterosexuality. In fact, Butler’s theory of performativity becomes indispensable in this regard. She propounds, “in its efforts to naturalize itself as the original, heterosexuality must be understood as a compulsive and compulsory repetition that can only produce the effect of its own originality” (*Inside/Out* 21). What is more, this repetition requires to be “instituted again and again” (*Inside/Out* 24). Viewed as such, the ‘sexual choice’ of Radha and Sita is materialized through ‘repetition’ albeit for a very different performative purpose; the frequent sessions of queer intimacy and pleasure, in fact, ‘de-institute’ the potency of conjugal procreative heterosexuality altogether.



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This brings the study close to pose the final question: how the female transgression of hetero-patriarchal codes can open the route to sexual utopia? To address this question, it would be necessary to take into account the film's climactic sequence. After the exposure of the sexual involvement of Radha and Sita, the two women finally decide to walk off the house. Sita leaves first only to wait for the other at the shrine. However, before leaving Radha has a final confrontation with Ashok. As a voice of 'regulative discourses,' Ashok vainly attempts to intimidate her into submission by hurling insults, forcing kisses, and casting warnings. It is here that Radha outpours her pent up desires, unflinchingly:

Without desire I was dead. Without desire there is no point in living. . . I desire Sita. I desire her warmth, her compassion, her body. I desire to live again. (*Fire* 01:38:48)

After Radha's assertion of her desire to love and be loved, Radha's sari catches fire bringing in the literal and metaphorical execution of *agni pariksha*. The screen then shortly fades into white followed by the shot of young Radha, amidst mustard fields, who exclaims in joy: "I can see the ocean" (*Fire* 01:41:31). In fact, this final dream sequence confirms the ultimate revelation for Radha for whom the trial by fire truly becomes instrumental in bringing about her liberation from the patriarchal clutches, oppressive household duties and dummy heterosexual marriage. The fire metaphorically "burns away and cleanses Radha of the repressive notion of womanhood that she has been borne up until this point" (Banerjee 35). Like a phoenix, she is born out of her own ashes to claim a new subjectivity. The following shot catches bruised and half-burnt Radha arriving at the shrine where the lovers unite in embrace.

Arguably, in Foucauldian terms, both Radha and Sita employ their sexuality "to discover or invent new relations" (Lotringer 369). They in fact, install their 'sexual choice' to precipitate 'a change of existence.' However, it is being an outlaw—a transgressor—that the real resistance to the established order of things can be posed. These transgressive tendencies, in turn, become the harbinger of greater change. To this end, both the women leave the house and renounce their wifely duties imposed by the patriarchal family order. As they give themselves another chance at



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life together on their own terms, they embark on a new journey. This quest for self fulfillment opens for them the route to sexual utopia—an ideal and unbogoted place of sexual bliss—leading to what Foucault calls ‘creative way of living.’

Conclusion

Interestingly, as the preceding analysis unfolds, Mehta challenges the nationalist construction of women’s bodies and sexuality as imperatively heterosexual and controlled by men through the depiction of queer female desire and pleasure. She generates and regenerates the subjectivity of both the oppressed Radha and Sita, first through transgression, and then by complete transformation. What remains noteworthy is, nowhere in the text are the two women depicted under the rhetoric of victimization. Rather, Mehta’s visualization conceives them as agential figures who transform their confining enclosures into interstitial passage as they subvert patriarchal national discourse of unified identity and fixed sexual behavior. In the pursuit of their blazing passions, the two sisters-in-law not only transgress the hetero-patriarchal code of marriage, but also trespass gender roles and resort to butch-femme role playing. Finally, they circumcise the bond of kinship and involve in incest queering the middle class home space in Indian setting.

As a matter of fact, the paper has attempted to map the transgressive behavior and practices of the two sisters-in-law. It explores how the sexuality of the two evolves through four stages as discussed above. Though the present paper does not offer an exhaustive evaluation of all the aspects concerning queer female desire, yet it endeavors to address a few pertinent questions around the issue. To achieve its purpose, it probes the restrictive role of hetero-patriarchal regime, the nature of passion, implications for locating queer female desire in the home space, and the possibility of female sexual transgression leading to sexual utopia. What is more, in her attempt to represent queer female desire, Mehta in the capacity of a diasporic filmmaker, does not label the two ‘performers’ into any fixed category of sexual experience. Rather, her female characters through the topography of their desiring bodies and transgressive sexuality “challenge the status quo by daring to imagine a future where their relationship is a non issue” (Guné 59). As Foucault believes, it is “the reality of the body and the intensity of its



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pleasures” that truly matters (vii). Thereby, such a perspective marks the beginning of a promising future—a sexual utopia— where the same sex couples can eventually find choices, free will and self sufficiency to support and love each other.

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