



There is No Escape: Critical Review of ‘Fire’

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Abstract

This critical review of Deepa Mehta's film 'Fire' meticulously examines the intricate layers of intersectionality, exploring how gender intersects with religion, sexuality, class, law, and media. The analysis unfolds the oppressive forces that entangle the lives of Radha and Sita, highlighting the patriarchal nature of religious institutions that perpetuate gender discrimination. The film's portrayal of sexuality unveils the double standards imposed on women, contrasting the freedom granted to men in expressing their desires. The intersectionality of class further complicates the narrative, illustrating the limited choices of the working class in contrast to the privileges of the upper class. The review concludes by emphasizing that despite Radha and Sita's attempt to escape familial constraints, they remain ensnared in a larger societal framework where discrimination persists through legal, media, and gendered norms. The overarching message is clear: there is no escape from the intersectionality of oppressive forces shaping their lives.

I. Introduction

In a world filled with complex social structures and power dynamics, the discrimination faced by individuals is rarely limited to a single aspect of their identity. Deepa Mehta's film 'Fire' delves into the intricacies of intersectionality, exploring how gender intersects with different institutions, ultimately leaving us with the message that there is no escape from discrimination and oppression.¹ As we analyse the film, it becomes evident that family, as a microcosm of society, reflects the larger structures of power and control. In this review, we will dissect the intersectionality of religion, sexuality, class, and law.

We will also explore the broader implication that, even as they attempt to escape their familial constraints, they are still under the ambit of the overarching family, i.e., society, where prejudice and inequality persist, proving that there is *NO ESCAPE*.

Intersectionality, a concept introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw, has gained significant prominence in sociological discourse. It emphasises that individuals are not shaped by a single axis of identity but by the convergence of various factors such as race, gender, religion, class, and sexuality.² This notion is particularly relevant in the context of gender in India, where women often face multiple layers of discrimination.

II. Religion

Radha and Sita's experiences are directly related to their gender and sexual orientation, and they also intersect with their religious contexts. In this section, we will explore how religion, as an institutional force, systematically formalises and perpetuates gender discrimination. It firmly situates males in positions of dominance while subjecting females to dual-axis discrimination, both as women and as obedient wives.

'Fire' showcases how religion transforms the institution of marriage from a question of desire and togetherness into one focused on duty, reinforcing patriarchal norms. The film uses various elements of Hindu tradition to illustrate this intersectionality. Among these elements is the frequent reference to the *Ramayana*, where the 'trial by fire' (*Agnipariksha*) of Sita exemplifies the patriarchal nature of religion. Throughout the *Ramayana*, the theme of 'Naari Dharma,' involving strict adherence to patriarchal norms, unwavering devotion to household duties, and willingness to sacrifice for the family and society, is emphasized.³

¹ "FIRE (1996) Full Movie." *YouTube*, directed by Deepa Mehta, 2021, youtu.be/Tpuov_shxws. Accessed 2 Sept. 2023.

² Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against

Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, July 1991, p. 1241. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.

³ Tiwari, Aastha. "Revisiting Ramayana and Its Relevance Through a Feminist Lens." *Feminism in India*, May 2020,

Additionally, the *Karva Chauth* ritual in 'Fire' underscores how religion reinforces traditional gender roles, portraying wives as dutiful and submissive, with their primary purpose being to sustain their husbands' lives.

Religion's influence in 'Fire' becomes apparent when Ashok, the elder son, discovers Radha's infertility and embraces celibacy, convinced that "desire is the root of all evil." Under the guidance of his spiritual guru, he strives to transcend all temptation. In contrast, Radha is expected to unquestioningly follow her husband's decision and conform to the wife's role. This disparity in their choices raises a crucial rhetorical question: If the situation were reversed and Ashok were impotent, would Radha be granted the same freedom to choose celibacy? This question leads us to the film's core exploration of power dynamics within marriages. As explained while discussing the instance of *Agnipariksha*, religion emphasises a wife's duty to submit to her husband's desires, fostering a hierarchical view of marriage. In Hinduism, for instance, the Manusmriti describes a wife's duties, emphasising her role in ensuring her husband's contentment and well-being.⁴ Similarly, the Bible interprets the husband-wife relationship as one of submission, with the wife expected to be submissive to the husband.⁵ The impact of these religious beliefs on Radha and Ashok's marriage is evident. Radha's desires and needs are overlooked, as she is expected to fulfil her duties as a wife even when her fulfilment is absent.

Religion imposes duties, but it does so in a deeply gendered manner, proving intersecting discrimination. When Jatin, the younger son, becomes involved in extramarital affairs, Ashok confronts him, underscoring his departure from expected duties. It is important to note that this resistance is illusory because, as a male, he possesses the freedom to deviate from his duties without facing severe consequences. In contrast, Radha and Sita encounter profound resistance when they dare to deviate from their roles as dutiful wives. In the end, the answer to the rhetorical question becomes resoundingly negative. Radha's perceived lack of agency in her marriage and the overwhelming burden of religiously dictated duty underscore the film's critique of how religion can reinforce gender discrimination and suppress women's autonomy.

III. Sexuality

Radha and Sita's lives are further marked by two intersecting factors of discrimination. Firstly, they are women in a patriarchal society, and secondly, they are non-heteronormative. This intersectionality is depicted in 'Fire' in two ways: the patriarchal expression of sexual desire and the impact of non-heterosexual desires on this gender discrimination.

A. Sexual desire is patriarchal

In 'Fire,' we see the representation of how the concept of sexuality and desire is inherently gendered. Women are depicted as the objects of desire, while men are portrayed as the subjects, the desiring individuals. There are many instances in the film that show this disparity. For example, Jatin, the younger son in the family, is involved in an extramarital affair with his Chinese girlfriend. The family is aware of this, but he seems to enjoy a certain level of liberty to practise his sexuality (desire) openly. On the other hand, when the daughters-in-law attempt to explore or experiment with their sexual desires, then they are considered spit-worthy, "sinners," and "shameless whores." This shows the glaring double standards that persist in society, where men are granted the freedom to pursue their sexual desires while women's sexuality is suppressed and regulated as they are the "bearers of family honour and purity."⁶ Furthermore, women's desires are only limited to procreation, where they are expected to "bear sons" and assist the desires of men. This is evident from the scene where Jatin tells Sita that "[he] cannot stop seeing Julie" but can give a child to Sita to keep her occupied as if he is doing a favour on her so that her life does not turn into misery.

B. Intersectionality of homoerotic relationships

As pointed out by Snigdha Madhuri in her thesis, the film exposes how patriarchal discourses construct home and family as "fundamentally heterosexual and heteronormative spaces." Consequently, individuals who do not conform to these norms, including those identifying as LGBT, queer, and trans, find themselves disavowed, marginalised, and subjected to punishment.⁷

feminisminindia.com/2020/04/10/revisiting-ramayana-relevance-feminist-lens.

⁴ Full 9th Chapter of Manusmriti.

eweb.furman.edu/~ateipen/ReligionA45/protected/manusmriti.htm.

⁵ "The Top Bible Verses About Husband and Wife in Scripture." *Biblestudytools*,

www.biblestudytools.com/topical-verses/bible-verses-about-husband-and-wife.

⁶ Nepal, Adweeti, et al. "Factors That Determine Women's Autonomy to Make Decisions About Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Nepal: A Cross-sectional Study." *PLOS Global Public Health*, Jan. 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0000832>.

⁷ Alexander, M. Jacqui. "Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas." *Feminist Review* 48 (1994): 5-23. Print.

These disparities are represented in Ashok's denial of Radha and Sita's homoerotic relationship. When Ashok discovers their relationship, his response epitomises the rejection faced by non-heteronormative individuals within a patriarchal framework. He reproaches Radha, stating, "Look, Radha, what I saw in the bedroom is the sin in the eyes of God and man; maybe Swamiji can help you; help us. Desire brings ruin." This statement not only condemns their relationship but also reinforces the societal perspective that views non-heteronormative desires as sinful and destructive.

The film also employs powerful symbolism to depict the punishment and displacement faced by non-heteronormative subjects. When Radha criticises Ashok for his celibacy and refuses to conform to his expectations, he physically pushes her away. In a turn of events, Radha ends up being caught in a kitchen fire. Importantly, Ashok does not attempt to rescue her, emphasising his rejection of her not only as a wife but also as a non-heteronormative individual.

IV. Class

With the character of Mundu, the film showcases how class-identity interacts with sexuality. Switching off the Ramayana, Mundu runs pornographic videos and masturbates in front of Biji because it is the only way he can express his sexual pleasure. In contrast, Jatin, having class privilege, can practise his sexuality openly through his affair with Julie. Mundu's behaviour shows the limited choice the working-class people have, where their freedom is restricted due to their socio-economic condition and the heavy burden of work.

Furthermore, when Mundu is caught by Radha and reveals that he got this tape from Jatin's collection, the act has differing consequences for both characters. Mundu is highly condemned and asked to leave the house. However, Jatin, who is also at fault, is least apologetic and escapes liability with very minimal condemnation. This shows how class difference complicates with sexuality, where the lower class has a limited scope of expression, perpetuating the power dominance of the upper class.

V. Escape: A Mirage of Freedom

Towards the end of the film, Radha and Sita have escaped their family, but have they escaped their oppression? As discussed earlier, the family, as a microcosm of society, is just one piece of a larger puzzle.

Beyond the confines of their homes, Radha and Sita are still connected to the overarching family and society itself, where various institutions like law and media work in concert to compound their difficulties.

Deeksha Sanyal's analysis of personal laws effectively highlights how the institution of law "reinforce[s] the idea of family as a patriarchal [and] heterosexual institution." These laws, as Sanyal argues, fail to acknowledge alternative models of chosen families and the diverse intimacies that coexist in India.⁸ The discrimination against Radha and Sita for being homosexuals would begin at the most fundamental level—the absence of legal recognition of their relationship. Furthermore, they may face legal consequences for their sexual relationship under Section 377 of the IPC, which defines all non-procreational sexual activities between adults as "carnal intercourse against the order of nature," thereby subjecting them to penalization.⁹ Apart from criminalization, Radha and Sita would be deprived of the 'civil rights' of marriage, adoption, and inheritance.

In addition to the legal struggles, the intersectionality of media with gender and sexuality would further add to their troubles. Media, encompassing various forms such as television, advertising, and the press, holds a significant influence on shaping societal norms and perceptions. As demonstrated by Autumn in his thesis, the advertisements in magazines and television are inherently gendered, portraying women in stereotypical roles, legitimising patriarchy and gender oppression.¹⁰ Furthermore, the media's limited representation of queer, transgender, and gender-diverse (TGD) individuals exacerbates the marginalisation of those who do not conform to heteronormative standards. Television programs, as a subset of media, consistently portray heterosexuality as the prevailing standard, relegating TGD individuals to the periphery or even to caricature stereotypes.¹¹ This leads to the erasure of their humanisation subjecting them to the added layers of societal denial.

VI. Conclusion and Outcome

In 'Fire,' we have explored the intersectionality of religion, sexuality, class, law, media, and gender. These layers of intersectionality highlight that experiences are not the result of a single axis of identity; rather, they result from the interplay of various societal institutions.

⁸ Sanyal, Deeksha. "How Can Families Be Imagined Beyond Kinship and Marriage?" *Economic and Political Weekly*, 6 Apr. 2020, www.epw.in/engage/article/how-can-families-be-imagined-beyond-kinship-and-marriage.

⁹ This section was later partially read down by the Supreme Court of India in *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* (2018).

¹⁰ Toole, Autumn M. *Portrayals of Gender in the Media: A Content Analysis Approach to Identifying Gender Oppression and Legitimation of Patriarchy in Magazine Advertisements*. Marshall University, 2016.

¹¹ Seif, Ray. *The Media Representation of Fictional Gay and Lesbian Characters on Television*. Jonkoping University, 2017.

As we reflect on the outcome, the message is clear: There is no escape from discrimination and oppression for Radha and Sita. Even as they seek refuge from their familial constraints, they find themselves entangled in a larger family, where the intersectionality of oppressive forces persists. Their battles may shift in form, but the underlying discrimination remains.