

### **Igniting Desires: Constructing Female Identity in Deepa Mehta's Fire**

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**Abstract:** The article Igniting Desires: Constructing Female Identity in Deepa Mehta's Fire, probes into the characteristics of female identity in Deepa Mehta's film Fire in her elements trilogy, Fire, Water and Earth. The article examines how religion and patriarchy colluded to enact symbolic and actual violence against women and the cruelties exercised on their bodies in the name of different social and cultural practices. The article concludes that the film creates female identities constructed by the patriarchal society and tries to deconstruct the subordinated gendered identity that exists in the society. The article points out that Mehta clearly tries to break the existing notions about women which are oppressive and subordinating. The film is a powerful challenge to patriarchy which oppresses, subordinates and exploits women. Deepa Mehta, through her film, tries to explain that the Indian society is gendered in many ways to construct an Indian woman as acceptable to patriarchy, both symbolically and physically. The article concludes that the Fire of Deepa Mehta tries to subvert these historical practices, discourses, traditions, norms, beliefs and customs by presenting women with new identities and sexualities.

**Keywords:** Female Identity, Deepa Mehta, Igniting Desires

#### **Introduction**

Identity is constituted as a set of relations based on cultural constructs like race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, rationality and so on. Female identity is a gendered identity. It is a set of attributes, behaviours and roles explicitly associated with female gender. It is often perceived as a cultural construct. Gender is a cultural construct that refers to the way of seeing and representing people based on sex differences. It is a way of distributing duties and roles to the males and females sexes that are culturally constructed and cannot be exchanged. In most societies there is a basic division between the gender attributes assigned to the males and females.

In a society the functions and roles performed by women are subjected to gender division. Men are supposed to perform instrumental functions and women expressive functions in the society. Thus, men perform economically productive labour and women perform economically non-productive labour. This gives an advantageous and privileged position to men. The explanations about gender are institutionalised and made to appear permanent so that men can rule women and restrict their identity. This discrimination on the basis of gender is prevalent in economic, social, sexual and psychological levels. Patriarchy has fixed the norms for creating gendered identity. The norms that exist in society favour and consolidate patriarchal social order. Norms are not rules; they are only actualised behaviour and actions of people. Patriarchy refers to the universal institutionalisation of male dominance. Gender is one of the constructs created by patriarchy. The social construction of gender is carried out in such a way that a woman's sexual identity diverges from her social identity and leads ultimately to her subordination.

Feminism is a political movement that seeks the liberation of women from gendered oppression that developed as a reaction to patriarchy. Feminism is an oppositional practice that resists any ideology, philosophy or institution that discriminates against women. Feminism tries to establish the same rights and opportunities to women that are enjoyed by men in society. Feminists fight for erasing gender differences and for establishing gender equity. Feminism functions on the concept that "the personal is the political" (Milllett 183). In the feminist agenda, isolated individual experiences have no relevance. It is based on the collective oppression and collective experiences of women.

According to Cathy N. Davidson, feminism is a political, social and cultural stance that is pro-woman. Many feminists appreciate bell hook's suggestion that we think of feminism not as movement,

but as a process, which, in the words of Sojourner truth, “keeps the thing going while things are stirring” (Davidson 308). She means that feminism is not a unified or a homogenous discourse. It is a polyvocal or polyvalent. Feminist politics constitutes many different schools of feminism.

A coherent theory of masculinity and femininity is outlined by Gerda Lerner in *The Creation of Patriarchy*. Lerner builds on the idea of women as objects of exchange. Lerner traces the creation of patriarchy through different stages. Men appropriate women’s sexual and reproductive capacity through a complex process involving abduction and slavery. The exchange and abduction of women have created the basis for the control of their offsprings. Lerner’s observations regarding women’s relationship to power through the mediation of sexual ties on one hand and religion and ritual on the other lead to a view of women not as absolute victims. They emerge as complex beings whose lives are determined by their access to money and resources, their use of sexuality and faith.

Women always remain the sexual subordinates to men; this predicament is related to their body. Therefore, the feminist struggles should begin from liberating women’s bodies. In this context, Collin Blakemore and Sheila Jennett remark in *The Oxford Companion to the Body*:

Feminists challenged ‘sexist’ images of women in popular culture and in the pornography industry in relation to a growing understanding of women’s “political subordination under patriarchy.” Women’s bodies then became the ground on which the struggle for liberation was waged (284).

Female body is the site of male oppression. It is inscribed with patriarchal ideology. Women’s struggle must focus on decolonising the female body.

The widely accepted notion about men and women is that beauty becomes a woman whereas virility becomes a man. All artistic and literary representations of women articulate this popular notion. The images of Mary, mother of Gods or queens or other aristocratic women are drawn by men. Men and their patrons set standards and measures of female beauty. Beauty is a product of ideas and opinions, entertained and expressed by men about women. The measures of beauty are outlined and framed by their brushes, chisels and pens. The ideal of female beauty expressed in European pictorial art is framed by male gaze. The male gaze treats women as objects of desire. Women’s beauty is an object for male creativity and imagination; it shapes, manipulates and transforms the female body. Men objectify women on the notions of pleasure, gratification and desire.

Another space appropriated to denigrate women is the media. The messages through the media also objectify and commodify women. They seem to accept that women have a better position in power and responsibility. Even then they exploit her role as a mother. In advertisements, the images of working women are used to reinforce their expected roles. Women should look beautiful, earn income and still be nurturing and home loving. The ideal woman is one who works at home, at profession, and yet gets time to keep a good house and attend to her husband’s and children’s needs without being tired. At the same time, men are portrayed as good fathers without any compromise in their existing roles. Anything that men are portrayed as good fathers without any compromise in their existing roles. Anything that man does adds to his masculinity even if it was not considered masculine earlier.

Masculine and feminine roles exist in a society and the society expects everyone to act in that way. If it is followed, people are rewarded; if not punished. A child acquires the earliest knowledge of its identity from the family. Parents dress their sons and daughters differently. The toys and books given to them are different. Boys are asked never to cry. They can run, jump, climb trees but girls are asked to be careful. Children accept and follow the rules for fear of being punished.

Schools reinforce some of these expectations. Girls and boys are made to sit separately in schools and do not encourage children talking and playing together. These classrooms give a negative message

to children. The textbooks of primary classes state the differences between the male and female roles. The interactions between boys and girls are mediated by notions of shame, modesty and fear for girls and aggression for boys. As children grow up, the messages they come across communicate about growing up male and female. These messages come from the media, parents, teachers or books they read. It can also be from the behaviours of men and women as they conduct themselves at home or outside.

The space is sharply divided into masculine and feminine, the private space is identified with women and public space with men. Women's identity is identified as wives, mothers, home makers, whereas male identity is linked to productive work. Even the women who work outside home are confined to jobs which offer low wages. It is always considered that women's income is supplementary to the family income. Women's duty is at home and any other work they do is additional. The income of men represents the living wage and only their work is primary and necessary. This thought is maintained to keep women away from male preserves – higher education, economically empowering jobs, politics, power, intellectual life and art. This has confined women to the dark spaces of home and low paying jobs. It restricts their mobility and curtails their desire to go about the world, meet people and experience life as they wish.

The female identity is a construct that women make through oppositional practice to patriarchy whether in art and literature or in real life. It is created by deconstructing and subverting the male constructed female identities in life and super structures. The creation of female identities involves both creativity and resistance. It is an attempt to synchronise sexual politics and textual politics.

### **Analysis**

The common themes in all the films in Deepa Mehta's elements trilogy are women's subordination, suppression of female desire and alternative sexuality.

According to Thomas Caldwell, in *Fire*, Mehta explores the politics of sexuality not just between the same-sex couple, but within the dynamics of two passionless arranged marriages. The second film in the trilogy, *Earth* (1998) is set in 1947 during the dissolution of the British Indian Empire. The nature of "forbidden" love explored on *Earth*, in the eyes of Caldwell, is between a man and a woman with different religions. In the film Mehta also explores the politics of nationalism and shows how nationalism can manifest in religious extremism and violence. In *Water*, according to Caldwell, the forbidden love is the widow Kalyani falling in love with another man, which is seen to be an act of betrayal to her deceased husband. Mehta explores the politics of religion to highlight how women are undermined and made subservient for economic purposes by the collusion of patriarchy.

*Fire* is the first of the Elements trilogy directed by Deepa Mehta and was released in 1996. Deepa Mehta's *Fire* is the story of two sisters -in- laws who find solace in each other due to their frustrations in married life. The film offers the women's perspectives on the conflict between desire and duty and between tradition and the realities of modern India. The film explores what traditional marriages have done to alienate women from their own desires – not only the desire for intimacy and sex but also the desire to live their lives for themselves rather than for their husbands. The film is about discovering the individual desire of women.

In an interview with Pegah Aarabi, Deepa Mehta observes that *Fire* deals with the politics of sexuality. In a 2006 press conference of *Water* in Taormina Film Fest, Deepa Mehta speaks about the theme of *Fire* which is the clash between traditions and the desire of an independent voice.

In *Fire*, the first couple, Radha and Ashok have been enduring a dry and barren marriage for the last 15 years. When doctors reveal that Radha is unable to bear children, Ashok becomes a Brahmachari – one who refrains completely from sex to gain religious and spiritual development. Ashok is completely

devoted to a religious holy man, a swami, in order to clear his life of worldly desires and temptations. Ashok can only think of his own needs, especially his need to justify and prove to himself that he has reached some salvation even though he believes he has failed at the essential task of producing a child, especially the all-important male heir. His only kindness to Radha, who is commanded to participate in his experiments on celibacy in Mahatma Gandhi style, is not to have thrown her out for being barren.

Sita is the character who embodies changes in society. She comes from a traditional family, but is more critical of the traditional rituals and more in touch with her body and desires. Ashok's brother Jatin marries Sita, but he continues his relationship with his Chinese girlfriend. Though Jatin wanted to marry his Chinese Girlfriend, Julie disagrees to be a part of his joint family and become a reproductive machine. When Ashok compels him to marry to provide the family with a son on the family name, he weds Sita and brings her home while continuing his relationship with Julie. Sita, a cheerful, young woman, is out of place in the gloomy atmosphere of the house till she builds a friendship with her sister-in-law. Jatin's behaviour is typical of men in patriarchal societies where women are always treated as reproductive adjuncts of men, objects of sexual desire easily available to men.

Sita's arrival brings a modern sensibility to the house and pushes it toward a long-overdue collapse when looked through the eyes of patriarchy. She refuses to go along with the family's unspoken plan that she produces children to occupy her time in a loveless marriage. According to her, the duty of giving birth to children is overrated. Sita refuses to live by standards other than her own, and her relationship to Radha slowly goes ahead with her finding a fellow victim. It challenges the traditional role of Indian women which demands that they quietly bow to fate and husband. The main theme of the film is the development of a mutually supportive and affectionate relationship between the two women, a relationship which gradually transforms into a sexual love.

The brutal and revolting nature of the sexual relationship bound up with the institutionalised traditional marriage in class society is powerfully revealed through Jatin's sexual attitude towards his wife. The film also portrays the mental agony undergone by Radha in having to lie beside Ashok in bed. She is forced to do so to help him prove to himself his ability to resist sensual pleasures. Moreover, the two brothers consider the nursing of their aged, bedridden mother to be the duty of their wives. We never see Jatin speak a gentle word to his mother.

The film depicts two unhappily married sisters-in-law who fall deeply in love with each other. They make the brave decision to seek personal happiness and freedom by living their own life and leaving their husbands. The film paves way for many controversies not just because the film deals with homosexual relations but because it presents the idea that women have a choice in the direction they decide to take in their life. The film shows that women can take decisions out of who they really are and whom they love and want to be with. The relationship in the film between Radha and Sita and the choices they make break and challenge the cultural and gender expectations of the society. Their final decision is to run away from a life society has chosen for them. They decide to live and love the way that was always in their hearts. This proves that they are rejecting their false identity of who they were forced to be.

In Garry Morris's review of the film, he states that "eventually she [Sita] draws Radha out her shell, and two of them find in each other what their husbands refuse to give". The most important scene in the film is when Radha speaks to Ashok telling that she is leaving home for Sita. She tells Ashok that she is leaving which shocks Ashok who thought that she would ask for his forgiveness. She tells him: "You know without desire I was dead. Without desire, there is no point in living, and you know what else... I desire to leave. I desire Sita. I desire her warmth, her compassion, her body. I desire to live again". Radha finally shows the courage to speak out to Ashok about what heaped on her in her married life. Radha's decision to leave Ashok is also her departure from the traditions and expectations that surrounded her, disabling her from leading a life that she always wanted to.

The fire that envelops Radha at the end of the film when she bids goodbye to Ashok gets transformed into a character of the film with symbolic significance. When Agni is verdict in favour of Radha, he has been aligning himself with a traditionally frowned upon relationship rejecting the relationship between husband and wife. Agni endorses a relationship that is honest, aesthetically and spiritually appealing but not traditionally accepted by the society.

The climax scene shows that the road ahead of Sita and Radha is not easy. Radha's sad and discoloured face shows the pain in her heart. The two women meet each other at the end in an old building in an unexpected downpour which proves the above statement.

The film is only obliquely about "feminist sisterhood" or the "lesbian continuum" which Rich speaks about. The film is explicitly about the necessity for women to make choices in their lives, especially in the matter of desire. Mehta stresses that a woman's life is weighed down with the cultural baggage she inherits. In an interview published in the Sunday Leader on March 8, 1998 Deepa Mehta argues that Fire is not about homosexual relationships: "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-fulfilment". The choices make the difference. The quality of life depends on the choice a woman makes. Mehta reminds women that every woman's life is a metaphorical test of fire, an ordeal that compels her to get submerged in the depths of earth. In order to overcome this ordeal, they have to be conscious of alternative choices, especially in the matters of love, marriage and family.

### **Conclusion**

The female identity is a gendered identity which is associated with social rules constructed by culture. Though it is culturally constructed and historically evolved, it is entrenched in the roots of society that it appears to be natural and legitimised. Female body is inscribed with the ideologies of patriarchy and religion. Different kinds violence are inscribed on women to subordinate them among which rape is the most violent form. Woman is considered a private property of man. Female body is considered as a site sexually colonised by men. Woman is reduced to the level of a commodity or object. Even the works to be performed by women are limited to the private or domestic sphere. In a patriarchy, the social identity and gender identity of a man are the same, but a woman differs. This is one of the reasons for discrimination against women.

Gender is a construct of oppression. The oppression of women is aggravated by related constructs like race, ethnicity and class. Society expects men to be aggressive, active and dynamic whereas denigrates women to be passive, docile and patient. Our society follows a conformist tradition where a man can express his desires and a woman cannot.

Visual cultures like film, television, internet and advertisements play an important role in strengthening the gendered identity of women and consolidating the gender difference. The connotations of the female body are appropriated in visual cultures. The meanings of the female body are constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed in visual cultures. Women are often used as baits in advertisements to attract the audience. The potential consumers of an advertisement are middle class men on whom women depend for money. Thus, vicariously satisfying their sexual pleasures using women as bait, helps to increase the consumption of a product. Commodification of the female body is also extended to other fields like pornography, porno- photography, cabaret and so on which further denigrates the position of women by making them sexual objects that satisfy the voyeuristic pleasures of men.

Media is widely appropriated to subordinate women. The messages and ideas conveyed through the media commodify women. They exploit the roles a woman plays in her daily life. Media portrays ideal women to be one who works at home, office and still finds time to spend with family and fulfils her duties

as a daughter, wife and mother. Patriarchy this order world into male and female where typical male and female behaviours are drawn. This gendered ideology exists in society which has to be followed by everyone. The space we live in is also divided into masculine and feminine. The gendered identity of women seems to be deeply influential because patriarchy could present it as universal.

Women create their own female identity to deconstruct those identities forced upon them by patriarchal societies. They oppose the identity spread about them in different ways. Art, film and literature are some ways which help them in constructing their own identity that helps them fulfil their desires.

Deepa Mehta is a film maker who visualises the evils and problems in twentieth century India through a feminist perspective. Her films raise the voice of the silenced groups in Indian society, especially women. Deepa Mehta's Elements Trilogy – Fire, Earth and Water- deals with the oppression and subordination faced by women in different walks of life. They portray how patriarchy inscribes and enforces female subordination in the minds of people.

The first film in the trilogy, Fire, is the story of two sisters-in-law who find peace as happiness in each other. It shows frustration and alienation of women in traditional marriages. The theme of Fire is the clash between traditions, and the desire of an independent voice. Radha, a female character in the film, leads a life subdued to her husband who uses her impotence as a step to attain salvation. She has forgotten what life is by living according to the wishes of her husband. Sita, on the other hand, believes in changes. She criticises traditions and rituals. She refuses to follow the traditional belief that a wife should live her life at the feet of husband and be a child-producing machine. She revolts against the loveless marriage and gives value to her desires. They share their sorrows together and begin a new relationship. Radha and Sita question the expectations of them as women which ask them to be devoted to even loveless and cruel husbands who reject their desires. Their relationship challenges the patriarchal norms. Fire depicts this revolting nature of sexual relationship in traditional marriages. Fire became controversial not because the film deals with the relation between two women but because it puts forward the thought that women have a choice in life. Fire reminds us that the quality of life of a woman depends on the choice she makes in life and the value she gives to dignity and self-fulfilment.

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