

Patriarchy and Cultural Politics in Deepa Mehta's Fire

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Abstract: The paper examines the politics of culture and tradition in constructing the social and cultural identities among females in Indian society. It explores the social patriarchal set up and gender affiliation which direct the oppression and subjugation among females. Furthermore, it illustrates the relationship between the dominant (patriarch) and subjugate in the Indian patriarchal society. With the prevailed forms of subordination under the guise of culture and tradition, this paper presents a critique and explores the resistance towards patriarchal attitude and cultural politics to balance the power relations in the society. Despite the multiple forms of patriarchal masculinity that are prevailed in the society to challenge the feministic and gender related voices, the paper is highly evidential to critique the patriarchal social structure to create equality between the genders in society. This paper dispenses all the declarations of current study that have been carried out on the specific issue and it concludes with an aim to create a path for possible future research.

Index Terms: Gender relations, Patriarchy, Cultural politics, Cultural identities, Sexual repression.

I. PAPER

The term patriarchy is originated from the Latin *pater arch* which means the rule of the father. Earlier, it was used to define a specific male dominant family where a patriarch holds all the powers of the family. The father or the head male of the family was supposed to rule over all the younger men, women and servants in the family and they were subject to different types of subjugation and control. Now the term has gained much popularity with the advent of feminist theories. Feminists use the term to define the power relationship between men, women and other socially and traditionally unaccepted genders in the society. It is a social structure where relationship of power between the different genders is maintained by the important heterosexuality and the status quo of patriarchs. Thus, patriarchy is system where male domination is prevalent on all spheres of life including private, public, societal and familial. It is a system which demonstrates the male domination in the society in which men control all the subjects and institution of the society and women are denied to share such powers. It is a set of social rules made by the men through social hierarchy in order to set the men free to dominate and subjugate women in the society. The patriarchal ideology is deeply rooted on the control over

female sexuality and it establishes the certainty in the society that from the existence of mankind on the earth, male have been superior and women have always been inferior to them. Numerous philosophers and psychologists have articulated, over the period of time, supremacy of male over female. According to Aristotle in *Politics*, The male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind. Where then there is such a difference as that between soul and body, or between men and animals (as in the case of those whose business is to use their body, and who can do nothing better), the lower sort are by nature slaves, and it is better for them as for all inferiors that they should be under the rule of a master. (Aristotle, 5)

His view on women is inferior by nature in all spheres of life. Women are inferior to men in capacities, power, biological differences and decision making. Men are created to rule on women in the society. Modern psychology differentiates women from men on biological appearances. Women biological organs make them inferior to men as they are not capable enough like men. In elaboration of penis envy theory, Sigmund Freud asserts all the responsibilities of female suffering to the female who resist their biological space. Their biological order is their fate and they are destined to play the role of feminine in the society. As Gloria Steinem quotes Sigmund Freud in *Moving Beyond Words: Age, Rage, Sex, Power, Money, Muscles: Breaking Boundaries of Gender*: "Nature has paid less careful attention to the demands of female function than to those of masculinity . . . the achievement of the biological aim is entrusted to the aggressiveness of the male, and is to some extent independent of the cooperation of the female." (Steinem, 61)

Over the period of time and with the advent of cultural and feminist theories, all these opinions have been challenged by numerous feminist scholars and theorists. They argued time and time again that patriarchy is a cultural and historical production. It is completely man made and it is a pure traditional process which establishes the supremacy of men over women. As Friedrich Engels articulates in *"Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State"* that in earliest human communities, men and women lived happily. There existed the biological differences between men and women but these differences were natural and completely cooperative. Men had their own duties and responsibilities and so had women. Sexual division was no source of subjugation and control. It is all social and historical progress which created the divisions in the society and established the men dominant and superior to women.

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Cultural politics can best be defined as the social beliefs, attitude of the people in society and their opinion in order to shape the social life and political opinion in the society.

Cultural politics hold the interest to deal with the gender issues. Much of its interest is to study gender creations and their cultural identities in the societies. It is the field where meanings and identities in the society are constructed and mediated and the power affiliations between the commanding and the dependent are determined. Cultural politics is preoccupied with the claim of widespread definition of culture which envelopes all ways to lead a life in society from an abstract view to the concrete actions and practices in the society rather than a singular definition which describes culture as an artistic and creative production of the selected group of the society. Cultural politics studies the qualities of duality of cultures such as commanding and the dependent, superior and inferior, gays and lesbians and it is this duality of the culture which traps the ruled one under the web of social affiliations and complexities of tradition. It is the field which understands the culture as a whole including all the subcultures such as popular culture, digital culture to establish social, political, and traditional values and meanings in the society.

[5]*Fire*, a Deepa Mehta directorial film which depicts a middle class family, residing in Delhi. It depicts the lives of a joint family including Beji, mother and head of the family who is mute and bed riddled, Ashok, (elder son of Beji), Radha (wife of Ashok), Jatin (younger brother of Ashok), Sita (wife of Jatin) and Mandu, a male servant of the family. The film is quite a family centric as it deals with the issues of joint family under the web of culture and tradition. Ashok runs the restaurant as a means of earning for the family and Jatin runs a video shop. Both daughters in law help Ashok in kitchen to sustain the family business. Jatin and Sita are newly married couple and Ashok and Radha are married for thirteen years. It presents the arrange marriage of a middle class family and the main lead protagonists are female, the daughters in law of the family, Radha and Sita. Radha is infertile as she has no eggs in ovaries. She represents the Indian traditional woman who is dutiful, loyal and ardent to the family. Sita is a new bride of the family who has modern attitude to deal with the issues. Ashok is spending his time with spiritual Guru, Swami Ji, who helps him to attain the truth of life. Jatin is forcefully married to Sita as he still sees his Indian Chinese girlfriend, Julie, a parlor woman. Radha and Sita are dejected by their husbands and within the space of the family, they built a compassionate relationship to each other and with the course of time this relationship acquires the shape of intimacy. At the end of the film, Ashok finds Radha and Sita on bed and they indulge into an argument in kitchen meanwhile, Radha's clothes catch flames of fire and Ashok takes his mother and does not help Radha to overcome. Radha somehow manages to save herself and leaves the house for Sita who is waiting for her at the tomb of Nizamuddin and they continue their survival.

Roger Ebert, a famous film critic and author writes that the film *Fire* evolved as an announcement of the Indian mainstream film which is about bisexuality. It declares the freedom of making films on such issues from the Indian subcontinent. It presents the resistance to the social and patriarchal system where women are deprived from their

basic rights. The filmmaker has transformed her anger on behalf of the suppressed women to visualize the repression on screen through drama and romance. The film attains its fullness in Indian society. It depicts the female protagonists indulged in lesbianism but at the same time it excludes them from that category as they utter that there is no word in our language which defines this relationship as lesbianism is purely a western concept and Indian culture is pure from that notion. "The men are not so much threatened as confused. Sita and Radha see more clearly: Their lives have been made empty, pointless and frustrating by husbands who see them as breeding stock or unpaid employees" (Ebert, 1).[4]

Peter Stack, a chronicle film critic writes in "*Fire Has Spark but Not Enough Heat*" that the film is aptly a dusky narrative of two women of a joint family middle class whose suppressed feelings and cultural bonds compel them to build an intimate relationship which bubbles up than to dry up. It is about the contemporary Indian society which is quite attractive as it visualizes the distinct experience as it depicts the repressed lives break the order of the culture and tradition. It represents the freedom of an individual as a woman and the rules and regulations of culture and tradition. It explores the blemish mark of patriarchy which traps all women in the society especially those who are infertile.

Fire moves at a deliberate pace, almost a tease in light of the romance promised by the title. Though accomplished and wrought with an unwavering intimacy, the story is specific to middle-class India in its focus on the lives of beautiful sisters-in-law Radha (Shabana Azmi) and Sita (Nandita Das), trapped in miserable marriages and living under the same roof. (Stack, 1).

Marjorie Baumgarten[1] a film critic, reviews *Fire* as a controversial joint family drama constructed on the social and cultural arena. Despite the film is made in Indian society, the characters speak English language throughout the film. It is made over the bonds of social, cultural and traditional rules

which depicts two daughter in laws seeking freedom from the culture and tradition through the bond of same sex desires which disappoints the traditional order and culture of the

society. It narrates the tale of two female protagonists who are deprived and repressed by their husbands and they develop an emotional and passionate relationship with one another. Their lives are filled with avoidance and suppression of their desires as they husbands focus on some other ways. Jatin, (husband of Sita) avoids Sita and visits his vivacious girlfriend and Ashok goes to Swami Ji who trains him to attain the celibacy. Both Radha and Sita are repressed characters who establish a bond of intimacy in order to survive. The result of their relationship presents a resilience to the patriarchal system and cultural order which poses a threat to the Indian tradition and culture. "*Fire* is an odd amalgam of Western subject matter about sexual role-playing and social stratification and the floridly elaborate

traditions of the Indian cinema (the most productive national cinema in the world) that largely relegates women to sexual objects in a host of lurid yet oddly chaste films in a variety of styles.” (Baumgarten, 1).

Fire extols the tale of two female protagonists of a joint family who are suffering from the patriarchal oppression. Their rights and sexualities are controlled by their husbands. It represents the lives of the married women in a joint family and how they are trapped between their sexual desires and culture. The filmmaker creates a parallel narrative within the film which depicts the tale of fire ordeal from the epic Ramayana in order to highlight the ways tradition constructs the ways of life in the society. The fire ordeal is depicted thrice in the film to put more emphasis on the chastity test Indian women are expected to go through. Indian women are presented under the scaffolding of culture and tradition. Their actions and behavior are continuously controlled by the oppressive tradition. It puts the issues of female desire and sexuality into the limelight of patriarchy and cultural politics. The female protagonists, Radha and Sita are constantly stuck under the web of culture and tradition and with the course of time, they defy the ritualized rule and traditions of culture in order to establish their own identity in the society. Their physical relationship is likely to raise the plausibility of change for the social agency which codifies and controls the women in the society.

It showcases how fabricated hallucinations of India as a nation is supported by the control of female sexuality. The bodies of Radha and Sita have turned into an archive where cultural identities are produced and formed. Their bodies act as a national archive of culture and tradition to sustain the authorized society and family as an important part of the nation. And for the validation, the film presents several allusions to the epic Ramayana in which Sita is forced to walk on the fire to prove her sexual purity as the subjects of the king Rama demand him to test his wife as she was abducted. The presentation of the fire ordeal in the film marks the female subjectivity in the society as the character of Sita in the Ramayana becomes a symbol for the society to produce the national and cultural identity of women which is deeply rooted in tradition and mythology.

However, exploring the difficulties of women under patriarchy, *Fire* focuses on the narrative of women emancipation as it provokes women to build same sex relationship in order to defy and resist the patriarchal structure of women sexuality. Radha and Ashok are married for thirteen years and the moment doctors declared Radha barren, their intimacy shuts down and Ashok changes misfortune into an opportunity to attain the celibacy. For Ashok, Radha is an object to testify his sexual desires as he lays her next to him on bed and denies to touch her. Radha is constantly being objectified by Ashok, for him Radha's body is repository to transcend his control over his desires. Radha is constantly regretting over the loss of her subjectivity. In like manner, Jatin maintains his relationship with a Chinese Indian woman Julie. Marrying Sita was social and familial responsibility for Jatin as he has no desire for her. Their physical relationship is labored as we see during their wedding night, Jatin intimates with her violently and leaves Sita in anxiety as she becomes aware over the loss of her purity. Marriage for Radha and Sita, signifies no love and care but dejection, loneliness and

repression and to overcome from this web, they form an intimate relation to one another to resist the patriarchal structure and construction of female sexualities. Their intimate relationship evolves due to the failure of patriarchal ideologies which they defy and resist to form their own subjectivity. As Judith Butler writes in “*Gender Trouble*”[2]

The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire. The act of differentiating the two oppositional moments of the binary results in a consolidation of each term, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender, and desire. (Butler, 31).

II. CONCLUSION

In *Fire* the sex is denaturalized by Radha and Sita to challenge the patriarchal and cultural formation of gender and sexuality. It is quite evident that Sita wears the clothes of Jatin and does masculine dance steps, she smokes cigarette and in a like manner, Radha selects Sita instead of Ashok. They establish the fresh heterosexuality within the space of culture and tradition. Their bodies, the signification of masculinity is denaturalized to regain the heterosexuality in order to defy the rules and traditions of culture and patriarchy which controls and regulates their identity and sexuality.

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