

Centering Women's Bodies: The Significance of Female Representation In Mehta's Element Trilogy

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ABSTRACT

Gender and sexuality are central to the pleasure principle in Deepa Mehta's films. As an Indo-Canadian filmmaker, Mehta is best known for her Element Trilogy, which includes *Fire* (1996), *Earth* (1998), and *Water* (2005). These films critically explore the condition of women in India, focusing on their oppression and marginalization by patriarchal systems. In *Fire*, Mehta portrays the unfulfilled marriages of Seeta and Radha, who seek emotional and sexual freedom through a relationship with each other. *Earth*, set during the 1947 partition, examines the devastating impact of political violence on women, narrated by a young Parsi girl named Lenny. *Water* depicts the lives of widows in 1938 India, showcasing their suffering and societal rejection. Through these films, Mehta highlights the struggles of women and places their experiences at the center of the narrative, emphasizing the intersection of gender, sexuality, and social oppression in India.

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Gender and sexuality occupy a pivotal role in the conceptualization of pleasure within Indian cinema. As a relatively nascent medium in comparison to literature and culture, film has swiftly emerged as a central object of scholarly inquiry, especially when it engages with literary and socio-cultural discourses. As a form of cultural production, cinema both mirrors and actively shapes societal norms, rendering it an invaluable tool for the examination of gender dynamics. The representation of sexuality, economics, and diversity in film serves to illuminate and refine the portrayal of feminine sensibilities, offering sophisticated insights into the multifaceted nature of female subjectivity. Within cinematic narratives, gender and sexuality are not merely depicted but critically interrogated, enabling filmmakers to subvert and challenge hegemonic gender roles. The intersection of cinema, gender, and culture underscores the significance of film as a transformative medium for interrogating and reshaping prevailing cultural and social paradigms, particularly with regard to gendered experiences in the Indian context.

"Through Deepa Mehta's 'India Film' do foreground "Women" or women's marginalization to a large extent, she does not exclude the idea of the gendered phenomena in Indian patriarchy which both the sexes."(1)

-Sengupta Jayita. (1)

Deepa Mehta's first film *Fire* (1996); make an effort to depict the freedom and possibility in an articulation of female sexual need, which is often condemned. Also in the process, the film draws some distinction between natural lines of affiliation and sexual attachment. While the second film of the

Trilogy 1947-Earth (1998), is against the background of Hindu-Muslim politics and insurgency where woman's bodies were muffled and castigated. Water (2005) – the last film of the Trilogy – construes the gendered subaltern resistance to both patriarchy and matriarchy and the director delicately draws the nexus of incongruity between perceptions of nationalism and female sexuality in the film.

Clearly all three films are focused on these issues; in an interview Mehta expresses her view, “Fire deals with politics of sexuality, Earth with politics of sectarian and Water with the politics of religion.”

(Hilery Magazine) (2)

In Deepa Mehta's Element Trilogy, Women are come to a central of the stage. It means that the entire story bond around them. Through that Deepa Mehta tries to point out the conditions of women in Indian society. How they are suppressed by their male components, society and cultures. In Indian mythology women have a great place, they are worshiped as Goddess but in actual life they are treating like slave.

Fire (1996) first film of Element Trilogy, which is beautifully crafted sensual film perhaps an allegory. On other side country seems to be struggling between tradition and modernity and question women's role in present era.

Film starts with the background of Taj-Mahal, where a newly married couple Seeta (Nandita Das) and Jatin (Javed Jaffery) try to understand each other. When they come to home Jatin leaves his newly wife and joins his mistress. Seeta soon learns to bond with her sister-in-law Radha (Shabana Azmi) Radha's marriage life is not good her husband spend his evening with Swami. Both the marriages are farce, from that they both Seeta and Radha bond each other and try to create a new world, which is far away from the present one, and try to get meaning of own life.

By focusing on how women's identifying is shape by the gendered nature of post-colonial nationalist patriarchy. By the movies Mehta try to reveals the way in which women identities and agency are negotiated and dominated by patriarchy. By portraying the homoerotic relationship between Seeta and Radha, Mehta try to get them centre of the stage and challenge the nationalist narrative discourse regarding women sexuality and desires in India.

Raddha and Seeta transgress the male discourse which entraps them; they do not sweep aside the exiting order. Rather they assert their own discourse on the masculine one. The depictions of women multiple and heterogeneous sexualities, desire and identities in Fire disrupt the post-colonial nationalist attempts to create a unified, singular identity of 'women'.

Thus Mehta try put light on women's major problem. Their needs and hopes for good life. Radha and Seeta break the tradition and try to be free from patriarchy burden, Mehta greatly paint the two women at the centre of her art.

Earth (1998), second film of Element Trilogy, set in Lahore in 1947. This was in India before partition. Earth is based on Bapsi Sidhwa's novel “Cracking India” (Ice-Candy Man), and presents the real experiences through the eye of Lenny, the child protagonist and the narrator of the story. She is also the central image of thee story, a young lame Parsi girl, who is a victim of India-Pakistan partition.

“Mehta examinee the way in which, Ayam and Lenny negotiate. Context and question parochial nationalist and religious construction of women as a 'bearers' of national and communal honour and identity in this film, Lenny and Ayah becomes a victim through the daily activities and actions.”

(Aycock, Wendell.) (3)

Mehta focus in this film on multifaceted state violence against Ayah's body and Lenny's psyche. In

Earth the female voices heard and yet retained substantially within a narrative controlled by masculine patriarchy sectioned desire, whatever individual or collective. The film raises the question regarding the boundaries imposed on the female body, which acquire significance in the larger social discourse. “I didn’t make this movie (Earth) to make west aware of this – I’m a story teller. I did hope that once that ‘Earth’ was made that people would become more aware of it which is what they did. For me all kind of sectarian was is terrible. All wares are fought on women bodies – that why I made Earth”

Mehta, Deepa. (4)

Thus Deepa Mehta shows the transgression and violence in 1947-Earth. The New York Times describe it as follow-

“A powerful and disturbing reminder of new civilization can suddenly crack under the certain pressures.” (5)

Water (2005) the film is the third and final instalment of Element Trilogy. It is set in 1938 and explores the lives of widows at an Ashram in Varanasi, India. Water is the dark introspect into the tales of rural Indian widows in the 1940’s and covers controversial subjects such as misogyny and ostracism.

Through the film Water Mehta focus on women condition in India, as well as shows patriarchy rule and the widow condition, how they suffer through the masculine powers. City like Varanasi becomes the hell for them. They wish or not they have to suffer from that hell. Indian culture, costumes and tradition are main cause for their suffering, on other hand India fighting against the British rule and the still women of India fighting with our own cultural norms. Widow Remarriages are legal by colonial laws, but in practice they are largely conceded taboo.

The film Water seen through the eye of Chuyyia (Sarala) an eight year old girl, who is woken by her father’s word –

“Do you remember getting married? “No” she replies, “your husband died you are widow now,” “for how long” she asks. (6)

Thus kind of heart touching opening for movies it shows the problem of child marriages in India, and victims of that customs like Chuyyia have to suffer for whole life in a dark hell, from where no can escape.

After death of husbands, woman sent to the ashram. Where they live in a dilapidated two-story house and spent rest of the life in renunciation. That house ruled by Madhumati, a head of house. Madhumati with the help of Gulabi run aside business, he help her to prostitute Kalyani (Lisa Ray) Chuyyia and Kalyani becomes a good friend. Chuyyia is witness of Kalyani’s budding romance with Narayana (John Abraham), a young charming upper-class follower of Mahatha Gandhi. He wants to marry with Kalyani, but that not happened at all.

Through the film Water Deepa Mehta shows the widow condition, they don’t have freedom to live their life, they have to wear white cloths and not permitted to go in any cultural festivals and not to have a good food. Such a thing shows the how widow condition was worth in India. Mehta centralized all that incidents and themes through their moves.

What Mehta had said at interview with CBS-

“We have collective amnesia about our own problem. Water is about women trying to break that cycle and trying to find a dignity and trying to get rid of the yoke of oppression and if it. Inspires people to do something in their own culture that’s what impotent.” (7)

Deepa Mehta’s film Water dwells on the rituals that the inmates of Ashram have to perform, in the home

of tradition and how the punishment of excommunication is forced on woman even a girl like Chuyyia – for no faults of theirs. Water explores gender in the context of issues the widowhood and prostitution.

Mehta quotes about Indian Women as follow –

“I think Indian women are extremely strong and they are finding for themselves a platform to take care of themselves.”

In conclusion, this research paper highlights how Deepa Mehta’s Fire, Earth, and Water critique patriarchy and the treatment of women within traditional Hindu beliefs and practices. By centering women as the central figures in her Element Trilogy, Mehta emphasizes the systemic injustices they face. Through these films, Mehta makes a powerful statement against the oppression of women in Indian society, challenging entrenched social norms and advocating for greater recognition of female agency and autonomy. Her work underscores the need for a reevaluation of patriarchal structures and their impact on women’s lives.

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