

WOMEN MARGINALIZATION AND PATRIARCHY

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ABSTRACT

*Marginalization is the process of pushing a particular group of people to the edge of society by not allowing them an active voice, identity or place in it. Through both direct and indirect process, marginalised groups may be relegated to a secondary position or made to feel as if they are less important than those who hold more power or privilege in society. Marginalization of women is evident everywhere like family, socio-political environments and work place. Women's marginalization in society is an outcome of several factors. The birthplace of female inequality is the family itself. As a patriarchal society, we always think that females are submissive in nature and they have to sit at home and look after their children. Socio-economic, ideological, and political factors have a pivotal role to deprive women emancipation nowadays. The sufferings of women and the denial of freedom, dignity and respect are the favourite topics for Indian cinema. Through The film **Fire** and **Water** by Deepa Mehta tries to explore how the women characters are thrown under the sword of patriarchal views. In the film **Fire**, Shabana Azmi and Nanditha Das played the lead role. Seema Biswas, Lisa Ray are the central characters in **Water**. The elements trilogy is a trilogy of films by Indian film maker Deepa Mehta, dealing with controversial issues of social reform in India. **Fire**, the first release in 1996, dealt with the issues of arranged marriage and homosexuality in the patriarchal culture of India. **Earth** released in 1998, dealt with the religious strife associated with the partition of India and the formation of Pakistan in the mid*

20th century. *Water*, released in 2005, was the most critically successful of the three and dealt with suicide, misogyny and mistreatment of widows in rural India. Here, in my paper I would like to analyse the movies *Water* and *Fire* in the light of marginalization of women basically that of widows and lesbians.

KEY WORDS: Patriarchy, Marginalization, trilogy of films

INTRODUCTION

Marginalization is the process of pushing a particular group of people to the edge of society by not allowing them an active voice, identity or place in it. Through both direct and indirect process, marginalised groups may be relegated to a secondary position or made to feel as if they are less important than those who hold more power or privilege in society. Marginalization of women is evident everywhere like family, socio-political environments and work place.

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***Fire* and *Water*: Breaking stereotypes**

Different feminist thinkers stress on various aspects of women marginalization. They are ideological, socio-economic and political. Every society holds certain values and beliefs regarding women which have a link with the disadvantageous situation of women. These ideological factors seem to be the outcome of beliefs shared by a particular society or values implanted from other societies. Several misconceptions and patriarchal viewpoints push women into a category of weaker sections.

The reproduction and natural functions of women such as child bearing and child rearing have been linked with the domestic and these reasons separate women from outer world. Only educated women have access to various social areas and majority of Indian women are still live in and for the family by doing their routine bearing and rearing duties. Their aspirations and interests are more or less succumbed for the welfare of the family.

Socio-economic aspect of women marginalisation

Feminists argue that gender division of labour in contemporary society has confined woman to the position of house wife which chains her to unpaid household work, dependency of man, lower social status and discriminations. Radical feminists say that the concept of patriarchy has been the main factor for the sexual division of labour in the society. It defines women in a way, specific to their sex, as beings whose special functions to gratify male sexual needs and to bear and rear children. Many thinkers have analysed the psychic, sexual and ideological structures that differentiate the sexes, setting up an antagonistic relation of dominance and subjugation between them. The dominance of men according to radical feminists has been the root of women's oppression in society and their exploitation in family.

The film *Fire* and patriarchy

The film *Fire* was released in 1996 and directed by Indian-Canadian film director Deepa Mehta, starring Nanditha Das and Shabana Azmi. It was the first instalment of Mehta's element trilogy. It was succeeded by *Earth*(1998) and *Water*(2005). *Fire* was the first bollywood movie to explicitly show homosexual relations.

Fire focuses on the story of Radha, a middle aged married woman and Sita, her more westernised sister-in-law, in a contemporary Indian middle class family in Delhi. They are neglected and mistreated by their husbands. As a consequence of Radha's infertility, her husband Ashok has taken a vow of celibacy which he tests in bed with his wife. He is preoccupied with the pursuit of spiritual salvation under the influence of his guru. He defines women solely in terms of traditionally prescribed functions as wives and mothers. He expects his wife to be dutiful and obedient. Sita's

husband Jathin is obsessed with his Indo-Chinese friend Julie. He is careless and sometimes violent to his wife in their loveless and sexually unfulfilling marriage.

Radha and Sita are represented as Indian women caught in an oppressive web of commitments to family, arranged marriages, and traditional patriarchal notions of duty. The film documents the attraction, intimate friendship and later lesbian relationship between sister-in-laws. When this secret is discovered, they leave their husbands, breaking free from the oppressive bonds of patriarchal control over their sexuality and identity rather than begging their husband for forgiveness. Their deprivation of basic needs like love and sex lead them into lesbianism and eventually to their own world. They travel from the conservative patriarchal concepts of being obedient, dutiful and virtuous women who honour the family. Mehta has explained that Radha and Sita's story in the film has great personal resonance for her as she also had to struggle against traditional patriarchal views when seeking to end her own marriage.

In a powerful symbolic episode near the end of the film, Radha is caught in a kitchen fire from which her husband, appalled by his discovery of her lesbian relationship, does not try to save her. This scene brings to mind several so called 'accident kitchen fire' incidents and dowry deaths. However, Radha survives and reunites with Sita at the tomb of Nizamudhin, a Sufi shrine which resembles their peace of mind when they reunited. This fire scene in this film reminds the viewers about the Sita's fire ordeal in Ramayana in order to prove her purity and obedience in front of her husband Rama. Here, Sita's fire ordeal is a journey from patriarchal control and traditional notions of sexual purity. Every Indian film has put forward a concept that if a women is sexually impure, either she has been raped or she is in an extra marital affair, she has to end her life. In such films, the women are forced to commit suicide or she chooses to be a sexual worker. But, here, Sita survives and

joins with Radha, whom she loves whole heartedly. Deepa Mehta has 'cut the patriarchal code'- observed some critics.

At that time, the film had made positive and negative remarks. The people who believe in traditional patriarchal concepts criticised the explicit statement of lesbianism firstly in Indian mainstream films. Homosexuality is widely considered as a foreign western import and imposition. It is considered as the product of decadent culture rather than a biological disposition. The patriarchal thinkers could not think heroines without hallow of feminine virtue and purity. Conservative Hindu ideology groups protested against the film by saying that the storyline of the movie will spoil Indian women and would lead to the collapse of marriage as an institution. Some theatres were attacked by the extremists and the controversy had even entered into the parliament also. The director Deep Mehta was vehemently criticized by some groups raising the arguments that her concept about Indian family setup is based on oriental viewpoints and she had manipulated the Indian culture and tradition for the movie. They argued that as Mehta is residing in Canada, she does not know what Indian culture is.

The film also received some negative reviews from the left-wing ideology groups, especially gay and lesbian community. Admittedly, the film was praised for breaking the silence about Indian same-sex sexuality and challenging the Hindu nationalist narrative about Hindu culture. Some feminists criticized the film for giving the simplistic impression that women's oppression linked solely to the control of her sexuality by the Hindu patriarchy. Moreover, some advocates that lesbian rights were disappointed by Mehta's claim that the film is not primarily about lesbianism, but she tries to deny traditional norms, culture and is making aware of women about their options of many choices rather than succumbed to a particular situation. So, this statement makes the portrayal of lesbianism in Fire in a

problematic point. Film tries to identify that the lesbianism is not a primary choice and it happens when normal sex is denied.

Water: patriarchy and the oppression of widows

Water released in India in 2007 and was critically successful among Mehta's other two films. It dealt with suicide, misogyny and the mistreatment of widows in rural India. *Water* is set in the sacred Hindu city of Varanasi in the 1930s and examines the plight of a community socially ostracized widows. Their lives are governed by many social and behavioural restrictions such as taboos against marriage and physical contact with high caste Hindus.

The film tells the story of eight years old Chuyia, who has been married and then widowed while still a child. She is then forced by her family to live in a widow's ashram where the bereaved women live in a life of asceticism as their duty to their deceased husbands. There she befriends a beautiful young widow, Kalyani who has been forced into prostitution, a fate which has not been unusual for economically vulnerable women in widow's ashrams. Madhumati, the elderly matron of the widow's ashram, organises liaisons between Kalyani and clients in order to provide funds for the household. Kalyani is permitted to retain her long hair in order to be more appealing to customers. The inmates of the ashram are required to shave their hair as a symbol of renunciation. The film also contains a tragic love story. Kalyani meets Narayana, who is a reformist, liberal Brahmin and a follower of Gandhi. They fall in love and he seeks to marry her. This union between a high caste Brahmin and a socially impure widow is anathema to conservative Hindu patriarchy notion as well as threatening the ashram's income. Narayana's mother is shocked when he informs her of his intentions to marry a widow. Madhumati angrily

seeks ways to prevent their marriage by imprisoning Kalyani in her room and cutting off all her hair to make her less attractive. However, Kalyani manages to escape with the help of Sakunthala, another widow from the ashram who has a growing consciousness of the injustice of their situation. Narayana discovers that his father is one of Kalyani's clients and his father justifies his exploitation of women on the ground of caste privilege. He says to Narayana that "Brahmins can sleep with whomever they want and the women with whom they sleep are blessed." Narayana's consequent rejection of his father is a radical act in traditional Indian society in which fathers should be the recipients of utmost respect. Meanwhile Kalyani is overcome by shame and despair and drowns herself in the waters of Ganges before Narayana can save her. Chuyia is sexually abused when forced into child prostitution by Madhumati who is desperate to find a new source of income for the ashram. Despite all of this tragedy, the film ends on a happy note. Chuyia is rescued by Sakunthala and then taken away from Varanasi by Narayana on a train carrying Gandhi and his supporters.

Mehta's principal message is that, although the film set in the 1930s, the mistreatment of widows in India is an issue of pressing contemporary concern. She closes the film with the claim that "there are thirty four million widows in India according to 2001 census. Many continued to live in conditions of social, economic and cultural deprivations as prescribed 2000 years ago by the 'sacred text *Manu*, the sacred Hindu law book. The difficulties of many widows continue despite the Hindu reformers vision of a better future. *Water* is a continuation of his Hindu reformist tradition which 19th century has sought for the social uplift of widows by, for example, allowing them to remarry. The promise of reform is presented by the image of Chuyia's potentially happier future. This is what could occur for widows of Indian society changed in accordance with Gandhi's teaching.

Mehta's film makes it clear from the outset that the male hegemony seeks to rationalise the mistreatment of widows by appealing to the authority of Hindu scriptures. The film opens with the translation from the laws of *Manu* which gives unambiguous instructions about the dharma of a wife whose husband is died:

A widow should be long suffering until death, self restrained and chaste. A virtuous wife who remains chaste when her husband has died goes to heaven. A woman who is unfaithful to her husband is reborn in the womb of a jackal.

Like many other Hindu reformers Mehta questions the privileges enjoyed by the upper caste. The title of the film *Water* symbolically represents the river Ganges which flows through the city of Varanasi. Here the Ganges is the symbol of Hindu conservatism which seeks to justify the low social status and mistreatment of widows. Here, wounded by the traditional beliefs and values, Kalyanai ends her life by drowning herself in the sacred river.

Contrary to the picture that emerges in Mehta's film, there is evidence that widows in ashrams renounce the domestic life voluntarily and are not always forced into their situation. They sometimes contended that their ascetic life is a choice motivated by religious devotion rather than economic pressures or an oppressive patriarchy. *Water* is a perfect example for the plight of socially conditioned women by the rigidities of patriarchal Indian context.

Critics argue that by depicting oppressive widows Mehta tries to conceal the problems of western imperialism at that time. Even though, the sufferings of British rule was a historical fact, that is absent in this film. Mehta's female characters are the representative of passiveness and they are the victims of educated upper caste men. However, Mehta's female characters are not passive. Sakunthala begins to question the way widows are treated and takes steps to save Chuyia from prostitution. Chuyia also exhibits her rebelliousness by questioning the tyranny of Madhumati.

Earlier, Mehta's crew faced wide protest from orthodox groups while they commenced the shooting of this film. They argued that traditional religious values of India are being defamed by Mehta's films and she imposes westernization upon the society. That is why she had been forced to shoot her movie in Sreelanka. Mehta was always under the suspicion of extremists religious groups when she goes for movie making. They scared is she going to break the man made shell of conservatism and implanted values.

CONCLUSION

The article demonstrated how the films *Fire* and *Water* expressed critiques of patriarchal attitudes to women in traditional Hindu belief and practice. These films are important statements against injustices against women in Indian society that are sometimes perpetuated in the name of religion. However, it is doubtful that such films have effected significant change in contemporary Indian society. Structures of oppression are always resilient and deep rooted. Deepa Mehta presents powerful portrayal of suffering caused by gender discrimination, but this inequality still continues in contemporary India.

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