

A Comparative Study between “Fire” and “The Color Purple” in the Context of Lesbianism

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Abstract: *The representations of lesbianism as offering an alternative space for long-oppressed women, who sensitize the necessity of freedom, shows the changing role of women in the politics of sexuality, acceptability and social divisions. Both the texts, Fire and The Color Purple emancipate lesbian feminism in an explicit way to show that the dependence of women upon their men is no longer prevalent rather the interdependence of women can be resistant to the oppression, suppression, mental and physical depression caused by men. Although, the women who cultivate sexual bonding among themselves are not congenially lesbians, they explore the possibility of making an alternative space without men and in indulging female-female relations they permanently or at least for a short while take escapes from compulsory heterosexual relations. Woman comes to be a saviour of another woman and they help each other to break free from the conservative rules thrust upon them. The two texts, reflecting the miserable situation of women are of two different continents but they are in many ways sharing common actions, ideas, and philosophy.*

Keywords: *Lesbianism; alternative space; oppression; lesbian feminism; resistance.*

Comparison between two narratives, produced from two very different cultures ascertains the junctions and ubiquitous assimilation which a critic desires for an all-embracing truth and not just a persistent reality. Although, the claimants of truth just present their own version of reality as truth, they never reach the hardest goal of ultimate truth. So, I am in a dilemma whether I should present the realities as truths and truths of reality or I should concentrate upon subjective truths. Since, my focus of discussion is lesbianism and it itself is so true and well-acknowledged matter that I probably don't need to panic about my inability to separate the ultimate truth and reality in it. In fact, cognitive truth can easily be derived as the way the women of both the narratives realize in their interdependence for each other at certain point of their lives.

Fire, the story of burning desire, is the first film of the “elements” trilogy, written and directed by Deepa Mehta. In an interview she said “I love the film *Fire*. I am proud of my film. The questions you raise prompted by your middle class upbringing forces me to defend *Fire*. This is a situation I do not like at all. I am not obliged to defend anything in the film *Fire*. 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.”

Over and over again Ashoke has stressed that “desire is the root of all evil”, that's why he has vowed to control his desire. Radha, for her part as a loyal and dutiful Indian wife, should portray the symbol of desire and consequently an object to keep away from, for her husband. Whenever, Ashoke has any question about his control Radha should be there to play her part. She is a woman without eggs and so she cannot give birth to children. Like everyone else, Sita too initially felt that it was greatness of Ashoke that he has not yet left her. Radha sarcastically adds to that, “He is a saint!” Like Spirituality, joint family is one more excitement for Ashoke, his sense of superiority was very well exercised in the context of joint family. He derives spiritual emancipation; he desires truth, an ultimate truth. He desires to attain moksha by constantly keeping the object of desire in front of his eyes. The relationship between Jutin and Julie is in sharp contrast to the relationship between Jutin and Sita. In the first case, it is more for mere sexual instincts. Though, Jutin tries to defend this relationship by calling Julie beautiful, smart and ambitious, he cannot discern the beauty, smartness and ambition of his wife. He might have tried to express Sita should try wearing miniskirt but that more of physical demand. His lack of sensitivity to respond to the mental or spiritual duty for his wife is evident after their marriage. The film starts with portraying the picture of Radha with her father and mother spending lazy time in the mustard field. Her mother tells a traditional story with a profound significance which Radha could not appreciate with the maturity level which she had for her age. But that one scene

set in the beautiful and vast ocean of greenery and serenity sets the truth for her life. It comes back to her every time she is in crisis of realities and needs for strength.

The introduction of the character of Sita shows her to be impatient, lively and brave. Sita and Jutin had come to visit Tajmahal in their honeymoon and when Sita was bored of Jutin's inactiveness and silence in the dark passage; she comes out into open light. The Tajmahal, is traditionally considered and once again is established by the travel guide to be the eternal symbol of a husband's love for his wife. The myth and legend come with its own share of doubt, lack of authenticity and truth. But even then Sita is not afraid to show her free spirit and which indeed excites the audience to expect some path-breaking action coming from her character.

Biji is the symbol of traditional culture and beliefs of old India, dying, decaying, impotent, and mute. She can only express her irritation or need by ringing a bell, exhibiting her frustration by spitting on someone's face, horrified but incapable of action in front of open display of sexual desire but even then she has to be powered and carried along with everyday's reality. The day Sita comes to this household; she closes the door and slips into a pair of trousers of her husband. Radha and even Biji was quiet shocked to find her in the way. This merely childish act shows her in a desire to slip into a transsexual identity of male who can confidently smoke, turn on music or dance. It is not the coy girl whose head is ever bowed to show respect to others. Later also she dresses in men's formal and dresses up Radha as the dutiful, shy, lovely lady, the prized possession of any man. The relationship between Radha and Sita sharing frustration, depression, and sexual and cultural repression is very much reminiscent of the mother-in-law, daughter-in-law couple of *Paromitar Ekdin* by Aparna Sen. Though, Aparna Sen has not explored the possibility of any sexual relationship between them, Deepa Mehta has gone beyond the friendly or sisterly bond to an aesthetically beautiful and culturally shocking for the conservatives by showing lesbianism between Radha and Sita. Modern Sita tries to express her disgust against the rituals. "We are so bound by rituals. Someone just needs to press the button and I would respond like a trained monkey." But then she was almost expecting the shocked reaction of Radha which she believes is "lovely" as it shows her innocence and compliancy.

When Mandu guides Ashoke to spy the lovemaking of the Sita and Radha, he was quite hesitant to open the door beyond which lies the "respect" of his family name but even more shocking than the information of the relationship was the sight of it. Despite the reality of lesbian practices, Ashoke once again urges his wife for his acid test but in this crucial moment, the emancipated "angel" in the house refuses. Radha has started believing like Sita that "duty is outdated". The desire of self-fulfilment only in the glorified name of sacrifice and duty no longer holds any significance. The furious husband, the face of male-dominated society, the symbol of institutionalized power, demands the lady to touch his feet and beg pardon. In the backdrop we see the milk, boiling on the gas stove. Finally, Radha's sari catches fire. Ashoke carefully takes up Biji from the place and takes her away where Radha is left burning. "Fire God" is traditionally believed to be the examiner of a woman's chastity and purity. Sita had to prove her chastity many times by the means of "agnipariksha". Even Radha emerges pure and pristine after her "agnipariksha". Her burnt sari and blackened face only proves her ordeal. In the last scene, Radha and Sita meet each other in pouring rain. They hug each other and the audience is promised and reassured that they had embarked on their journey to prove themselves and to reach the truth of self-fulfilment even at the cost of renouncing the social stigma and taboo.

The film unfolds the cultural intricacy of India where there is no such word to denote lesbianism as expressed by Nandita Das's character, Sita saying "there is no word in our language for what we are, how we feel to each other." This utterance seems to be strange to the western viewers because in developed societies vocabulary exist for referring to phenomena even if the phenomena are not socially/ ethically approved. Therefore, it is difficult for Sita to characterize her relationship with Radha because they both belong to a middle class set-up of India where most of the people are unaware of this kind of relation. The film is based on Ismat Chughtai's (1941) story *Lihaf* (The Quit). *Fire* presents the story of two women who after being frustrated by marriage find solace in each other while living in repressive society. It targets the traditional role of Indian woman who are ever dependent upon fate and their husbands. The two women wanted to break free from patriarchal reality and their solidarity helps them to create a world of their own where they have engaged spiritually and physically in search of consolation, comfort and love.

The film screened for three weeks in India before Hindu fundamentalists accused it as dirty and offensive to Indian culture and Hindu religion. The abhorrence and complete intolerance of the film was out- and-out designed by right wing force that engenders fiery protests against Deepa Mehta's film *Fire*. The Shiv Sena movement starts and Shiv Senas speculate that if the women fulfil their physical needs through lesbian acts, the foundation of marriage will collapse; the order of reproduction will stop. But in reality *Fire* is not a story of lesbians or promoting lesbianism, it is about seeking truth of identity. It is about being brave enough to follow one's desire.

In India, marriage is regarded as one of the most significant life cycle ritual and is a familial and societal expectation. The primary aim of Hindu marriage is "dharma praja" (progeny particularly sons) which is considered by some to be a man's highest duty and source of emotional and familial gratification. Marriage is neither viewed as a means to achieve personal happiness nor as a means of sharing your life with a person whom you love. Instead, the basic quality of family unity, family togetherness, sharing common family goals and a way of life are of significant importance and personal consideration is secondary. In the film, Ashoke requests Jutin to marry so as to gift the family with a son to continue the family name. Jutin weds Sita and brings her home while continuing his relationship with Julie. Julie is a hair dresser who has immigrated with her parents to India from Hong Kong. She disagrees to marry into a traditional joint family for she has consumed bourgeois tastes and habits. On the other hand, the Indian women have no choice and marriage is the most important reality to their lives. They have to enter into a ritualised life which is confined with false ideology and discipline. Deepa Mehta says "*Fire* is a film about loneliness. It's a film about hypocrisy of our society today. It is film about how women do not have choices in a patriarchal set-up." Although, the director has ever claimed that lesbianism was not the main focus of her film she rather finds the necessity of thinking freely among long oppressed women but critics of these days appropriate it as a pioneer text of lesbianism in India. Since, the politics of sexuality was getting reorganised especially after 1980s when the alternative sexual people were coming in common knowledge, the scholars from India started collecting evidences to grease the wheel of sexual reformation. Although, Sita and Radha are not congenially lesbians but they prove that lesbianism can be matured from a sense of solidarity and mutual interests. The film is no doubt an excellent text to provide feminist approaches but its non-heterosexual impulse cannot be denied because it breaks the rules of convention, tradition and myth. In spite of lot of controversy around the film for whether it should be treated as feminist text or a text emancipating alternative sexuality, the critics themselves decide the text in the reality of what they want to fit in.

In the book *The Color Purple*, Celie expresses she does not even look at men because she is petrified by their oppressive manners towards women. She is instead in preference of women, sexually, because they have always been kind to her. In the novel the consummation of lesbianism is not from loving one gender or the other, it is eventuated from loving another individual and which is similar to the case of Radha and Sita. Although, Celie's desire for Shug begins abruptly from watching a photograph of Shug and once again Celie feels love and temptation for another person other than Netty. Celie imagines Shug as how extraordinarily kind-hearted person she would be. But her fancy comes to an end briefly at their first encounter when Shug comments to her "you sure is ugly". Despite that they later grow intimacy between them. Celie discloses her about dirty mentality of Mr._ and how she has been treated by Mr._. Celie and Shug come close emotionally and that their relationship has been forwarded soon into a lesbian relationship. To Celie, her relation with Shug is significant for it helps her to understand her identity, the worth of living and to make herself satisfied both physically and emotionally. Moreover, Celie who has been spending life into docile workforce learns to be an independent, free thinking woman with more confidence and determination. However, the most successful film director Steven Spielberg in his 1985 film *The Color Purple* adapted from the book has almost skipped the erotic part of lesbian love, expressed in detail in the book and later in an interview with Entertainment weekly he expresses that he "was the wrong director to acquit some of the more sexually honest encounters between Shug and celie." Although, Spielberg also clarifies to EW's Anthony Breznican for why he has minimized the erotic encounters between two women because "There were certain things in the [lesbian] relationship between Shug Avery and Celie that were very finely detailed in Alice's book, that I didn't feel we could get a [PG-13] rating," "And I was shy about it. In that sense, perhaps I was the wrong director to acquit some of the more sexually honest encounters between Shug and Celie, because I did soften those. I basically took something that was extremely erotic and very intentional, and I reduced it to a simple kiss. I got a lot of criticism for that." The question is if there were heterosexual erotic encounters would the director restrict them to a single kiss? Although, I am not saying that some more erotic scenes could have strengthened the lesbian bonding because a single kiss can be assertive to reach the target of expressing lesbianism or female-female love. I would say that Deepa Mehta has revealed lesbianism more explicitly by covering some bold scenes of lovemaking which is somewhat missed in the film *The color purple*. However, the similarity between the two narratives *The Color Purple* and *Fire* is in terms of dependence of women upon lesbianism which they cultivated after being exploited by the male members of their families. Although, Shug was not confronted with the circumstances which Celie came through and in spite of her fancy for another man Germaine, she still in love with Celie. On the other side Celie loves Shug as much as she did earlier for Germaine. Shug later falls into love with Germaine, an active member of her musical band and this news crushes Celie. While travelling with Germaine, Shug continues writing postcards to Celie. Celie requests to love Shug even if Shug does not care anymore. When Celie comes just about to realize her

life content without Shug, Shug returns ending everything with Germaine. It shows a woman always in search of compensatory mental, emotional and physical support from another woman every time she is departed from men's world or in a crisis of reality.

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