



COUPLING NATURE AND WOMEN: A QUEER ECOFEMINIST READING OF DEEPA MEHTA'S *FIRE*

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Abstract: This paper analyses globally acclaimed film director, Deepa Mehta's movie *Fire* (1996) through the perspective of Queer Ecofeminism. Queer ecofeminism integrates queer theory and ecofeminism to deconstruct the normative dualisms to assure identity to every human being as well as nature. The paper examines the female protagonists of the movie, the oppression they faced and the mode of resistance put forth by them keeping in contact with the accompaniment of nature in their lives. The interconnectedness of women with nature and sexuality is given focus in the paper.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, queer theory, dualism, elements of nature, feminism, oppression and resistance.

Ecocriticism has evolved over the years to comply with the needs of the developing standards of literary discourses. Ecofeminism is rooted in the identification of nature with women, which emphasizes the liberation of nature with the liberation of women. The oppression meted out against women is brought to the same platform as that of the oppression against nature. Contemporary literary discourses necessitate the inclusion of other sexual identities for the study of ecocritical perspectives. One of the recent areas of study and research is Queer Ecofeminism. The amalgamation of ecofeminism with queer theory has opened new arena of discussion about the sexual minorities and marginalized communities of the society. The inclusion of the queer

communities to the discipline of ecology and feminism echoes a similar demand put forward by nature and women in the earlier ages against the patriarchal 'culture'. The term 'queer' is addressed in both sexual and social domains pertaining to the LGBTQIA and other marginal classes of the society. Queer ecofeminism aims at reconstructing the "master model" of identity as Val Plumwood puts it, which constitutes dualisms like culture/nature, male/female, self/other, subject/object by including the newly coined heterosexual/queer binary. The ultimate aim of queer ecofeminism is to dismantle the dualized structure and to treat man, woman and the 'third' communities equally which henceforth will lead to the negation of the idea of otherness.

This paper analyses the union of the elements of nature and women in resisting the otherness thrust upon them by the normative binaries to carve a niche for themselves in the social constructs of the male, culture and heterosexual. The paper focuses on the examination of the tendency of the dominant to "sexualize nature and naturalize sexuality" (Gaard,115), thereby reading the acclaimed Indo- Canadian filmmaker, Deepa Mehta's movie *Fire* (1996) of the *Elements Trilogy* through the lens of Queer ecofeminism.

Fire: A Spark of Passionate Love

Fire, the first installment in the *Elements Trilogy* is a landmark in Indian Cinema. The movie is inspired by Ismat Chughtai's story "Lihaaf" or "The Quilt". It is one of the first movies in Indian mainstream cinema to explicitly present the concept of homosexuality. *Fire* traces the lesbian relationship between Radha (Shabana Azmi) and Sita (Nandita Das), daughters-in-law in a contemporary middle class Indian Hindu family. Radha, the elder is confined to the spaces of domesticity and is obedient to her husband, Ashok (Kulbhushan Karbandha) who is in pursuit of a spiritual life abstaining from desires of every kind. Ashok tests his ability to control his desires by lying near Radha but abstaining from sex. Sita is well educated and newly wed to Jatin (Javed Jaffrey), who was forced into an arranged marriage with Sita and still maintains an extra marital

affair with his former girlfriend. Jatin finds Sita as an instrument to quench his sexual pleasures depriving her of love in marriage. The hypocrisy of a middle class Indian family is evidently revealed in the film where we find the mother in the family watching a Hindu mythological television programme, whereas Jatin simultaneously rents out porn videos secretly. As Karen J. Warren observes:

Similarly, language which feminizes nature in (patriarchal) culture where women are viewed as subordinate and inferior reinforces and authorizes the domination of nature: “Mother Nature” is raped, mastered, conquered, mined; her secrets are “penetrated” and her “womb” is to be put into the service of the “man of science”.(12)

The loneliness and unexpressed dissatisfaction in their respective marriages become a common thread in developing an emotional and sexual bond between them. Radha and Sita bond over the cooking fire in the kitchen of the eatery that the household runs. The kitchen that is usually considered as a feminine space turns out to be the space for the discovery and ignition of desires in the women of the film. The barrenness of Radha’s womb and her suppressed agony in the marital life is comforted by the more passionate Sita who rekindles the fire of love and sexuality in Radha. Fire, one of the elements of Nature according to the Vedas, is used as a metaphor in the film. Radha, the once submissive wife, undertakes a trial by fire of her family and society to find paths for the fulfillment of her desires. This is vividly painted in one of the final scenes in the movie where Ashok and Radha gets involved in an argument after him discovering about the relationship that Radha shares with Sita. Radha’s sari accidently catches fire in the kitchen, but Ashok saves his mother and leaves Radha to herself. Despite Ashok’s rejection and inhuman attitude, Radha returns safe and unharmed to Sita who awaits her in a temple to embark on the newly found joy in their life together. Fire is also symbolic of the fiery passions and desires that seldom find voice in the women of the hierarchical society as portrayed in the film.

The depiction of nature in the film is resonant of several ecological implications. The image of a happy young girl with her parents in the vibrant yellow mustard field is recollected by Sita to combat her inner conflicts that delve deep in her heart regarding the new marriage and household. The restricted life in the concrete walls of her new home in the busy street in Delhi suffocates Sita. Radha had been by then conditioned to the surroundings of invisible but definite boundaries. The field is symbolic of the longing for freedom, self-expression and existence of both nature and women. The anthropocentric or rather androcentric tendency to exercise control over nature and women and shape it as per the fancies of men is revealed. Greta Gaard in her work, *Ecofeminism (Ethics and Action)* puts it:

Green Philosophy is predicated on the belief that fundamental social transformation is necessary. What appears to be mainstream in green philosophy holds that anthropocentrism is the root of our social and environmental problems. Ecofeminism, in contrast, view anthropocentrism as a symptom of a much deeper problem: androcentrism". (6)

Locating lesbian relationship in the patriarchal culture and Indian society as presented in the film could be seen as a breakthrough in defining new realms of expressions of sexual orientations. The identification of a new set of binary, heterosexual/queer makes space for interconnectedness, inclusiveness and queer existence. The culture specific social setting expects humans to be homosocial and heterosexual. The accepted norm of heteronormativity is dismantled in *Fire* when Radha realizes the barrenness in her heterosexual life but fruition of sexual and emotional desires in her homosexual intimacy with Sita. Earlier ecofeminists recognized the relationship of nature and women in the label of sisterhood. Queer ecofeminism defies the demarcations of sisterly attachment and traverses into an intimate bond of coupling of women and nature negating the 'unnatural'. The rainbow of sexuality over green pastures opens newer arena of understanding the queer and nature.

Conclusion

The movie *Fire*, set in the contemporary period, explores ideas regarding the treatment of women and their emancipation text. *Fire* presents the nuances of the men of a middle class Indian family and the psychological needs of human beings by exploring new contours of lesbian relationship between two sisters-in-law.

The latest developments in the ecological, legal and political spheres of our society aim at providing equal representations and identity to every single being on earth irrespective of its race, class or gender. A balanced ecology with human beings playing the significant role of the rational animals is crucial to the conservation of the environment as well as the interests of the future generations.

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