



Research article

## The Afterlife of a 'Sexual Revolution': Revisiting Responses to Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996)

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### Abstract

Even after so many years, Deepa Mehta's Indo-Canadian directorial *Fire* (1996) keeps resurfacing in literary circles with its multifaceted and inexhaustive appeal. The movie, centring around the same-sex desire between two women, Radha and Sita, was at the peak of its controversy during its release in India in 1998, and since then, the reactionary hate of the masses has come to embody the country's intolerant stance towards homosexuality. Over the years, the public furore against the screening of *Fire* and criticism of the film's content as anti-national and that it is a desecration of the very notion of the 'Indian woman' has drawn critics, again and again, to comment on the ways in which the film brought about a sexual revolution. Treating the litany of critical commentary on the film as afterlives of a 'sexual revolution', the paper will attempt to map some of the central issues addressed by critics over the years so as to re-situate *Fire* within the evolving discourses on gender, sexuality, and culture in the country. In doing so, the paper will underscore the importance of the role that 20th-century Indian cinema had to play in launching a conversation that sustains itself well into succeeding generations.

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## Introduction: Tracing the enduring legacy of *Fire*

Ashwini Sukthankar (2000), seeing the placard 'Indian and Lesbian' in the activists' rally after the release of *Fire* ruminated, "Who would have thought that staking that saucy claim would result in such a furore...a sexual revolution". Indo-Canadian filmmaker Deepa Mehta's directorial *Fire* was first released in 1996 in Canada, and in November 1998 in India after gaining the Censor Board's approval with just a change in a character's name. Before being released in India, *Fire* had already received quite a grand welcome elsewhere in the world, especially in the West, and both the creator and her creation were showered with innumerable accolades and critical appreciation. India, however, had a completely different response to the film, and interestingly, the filmmaker had anticipated such a violent reaction. Before unspooling the jumble of polyphonic narratives that stood as a challenge to the film's success in India, it is necessary to know a bit about what goes on in the film that warranted such fiery feedback from the citizens.

In Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996), the viewers are introduced to two compelling female characters – Sita (played by Nandita Das), and Radha (played by Shabana Azmi), sisters-in-law who are trapped in their own loveless and emotionally sterile marriages. Sita's husband Jatin (played by Jaaved Jaaferi) is a brute who is a nonchalant, uncaring, and unfaithful husband who continues his affair with his 'modern' girlfriend even after his marriage. Sita is aware of her husband's infidelity, but she shows no remonstrance, secretly desiring to escape this filial entrapment. Radha's husband Ashok (played by Kulbhushan Kharbanda), who is Jatin's elder brother, is a celibate who has forsaken his fleshly desires after getting influenced by a Swamiji who taught him that desires are corrupt and must necessarily be suppressed. Added to this is Radha's infertility and her guilt for not being able to give her husband children. Both the women, cast aside by their husbands, find solace and fulfilment in their relationship with one another. While they are cognizant of the fact that their liaison is unconventional and against social codes of existence, they continue to remain lovers, until their truth is revealed, and they must choose between bowing down before society and patriarchy, or charting out a new path together for a new lease of life.

*Fire* is believed to be the first Bollywood movie that initiated talks surrounding the silent and invisible existence of homosexuality in India. Although *Fire* is most definitely not the first creative piece presented to the audience that grapples with the topic of homosexuality in India, it did significantly contribute towards re-visioning post-colonial India's take on homosexuality in the modern age. Ever since its release, there hasn't been a dearth of critical material available on the visual text, with critics commenting extensively on the politics of culture, the position of the postcolonial Indian woman, postcolonial hegemonic masculinity, the conflict between tradition and modernism, nationalism and societal oppression that constitutes the core of the country's stance of intolerance towards homosexuality. While the movie is still popularly known and recognized for its bold depiction of lesbianism, Deepa Mehta has claimed that to limit the film's significance to a brave portrayal of homosexuality would be to limit and obscure its real vision.

As such, *Fire* becomes a movie that takes many shapes at once, and the onus of meaning-making is on the viewer to determine what it is actually about. Sujata Moorti in her article "Inflamed Passions: Fire, the Woman Question, and the Policing of Cultural Borders" (2017) pointedly captures the many resonances that the film has: "The multivalent reception of *Fire* in India is most usefully seen as an area wherein a number of discourses around femininity, sexuality and modern nationalism intersect and feed on each other." It is the objective of this

paper to revisit certain critical responses to the film as a way of reviving the impact that it had on the complex nexus of dialogues concerning the ideological narratives that impose impossible imperatives on the citizens.

### **The Genesis of a 'Sexual Revolution': Public Responses to *Fire***

*Fire* (1996) ignited what was indeed nothing short of a "sexual revolution" (Sukthankar) when it was released in India. Despite clearing the Censor Board's approval, *Fire* was met with a massive public outrage involving political parties with an incisive agenda to fuel the controversy surrounding the movie's portrayal of lesbianism and the supposedly negative implications that it bore on the past, present and future of Indian womanhood. Anticipating this primitive response, Mehta had already changed Sita's name to Neeta, in order to avoid nasty controversies surrounding the smearing of Indian culture for the world to watch. This did not stop the protesters from culturally as well as morally policing the content of the film and labelling it as a vilifier of Indian culture and tradition for portraying Indian women in a negative light. It is the public's response that offers insightful revelations about the dominant narratives concerning nationhood, womanhood, and appropriate culture and tradition that constitutes the ideological fabric of the country. Sujata Moorti was right in stating that the responses to *Fire* uphold a mirror to the country's colonial and cultural hangover:

The responses to *Fire* could be seen as symptomatic of larger geopolitical processes: cultural hangovers of the colonial era have emerged as 'new' sites of contestation in representational practices. The colonial hangover can be seen in two distinct areas: the role ascribed to religion in national identity and the centrality of the female figure in discourses of Indian nationalism. (Moorti, 2017)

There were several instances of protesters (allied with political groups) barging into the theatres playing the movie and vandalized the theatre, forcing them to stop spooling the film. In Mumbai and Delhi these violent protests were mostly led by the Shiv Sena Mahila Aghadi and they burnt down the movie posters and shattered glass panes all the while chanting slogans that read how the movie was a desecration of Indian womanhood. The Mahila Aghadi women had also invited the state Culture Minister Pramod Navalkar to intervene and protest against the portrayal of "lesbian relationship" in the film. Chief Minister Manohar Joshi, showing full support to the Mahila Aghadi for their endeavours, had declared that the "film's theme is alien to our culture." Raval and Jain (1998) in their *India Today* article<sup>1</sup> rightly called this a "state-sponsored hooliganism." It was a series of state-sponsored hooliganisms across the country that led *Fire* back to the Censor Board for review and clearance, creating, in Mahesh Bhatt's lexicon, a "cultural Emergency" (qtd. in Raval and Jain 1998).

As the *Fire* crisis progressed from a state-sanctioned public outrage to a curb on the freedom of expression, finally concentrating all its energy on lesbianism and the degradation of Indian femininity, Mehta herself felt the need to speak on the matter: "I can't have my film hijacked by any one organization. It is not about lesbianism. It's about loneliness, and choices" (qtd. in John and Niranjana, 1999, p. 582). It appears that the nuanced message of the film was overshadowed by the exaggerated focus on the homoerotic attachment between Sita and Radha. According to C.M. Naim, language also had an important role to play in the Indian

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/society-the-arts/films/story/19981221-controversial-film-fire-is-sent-back-to-censor-board-matter-taken-to-court-827561-1998-12-20>

public's perception of lesbianism as a foreign element. The switch from English to Hindi merely creates a "semblance of linguistic realism" but the use of English mostly implies "status, 'modernity' and Westernness":

...Sita has already been attracted to Radha. She understands her own homoerotic feelings and is not surprised by them. In other words, she knows about lesbian love. That, in the English version of the film, would imply to its audience in the West that she was married against her wishes, in fact against her sexual orientation, while to the audience of the Hindi version she would only appear more negatively 'modern'—she knows about 'these things' too. (Naim, 1999, p. 956)

The more *Fire* got engulfed in multivalent discourses the more it became clear that the issues raised in the movie were not only of national significance, but their relevance continues to provoke debates even today. This is one of the primary reasons why *Fire* still remains a source of contention and is sure to maintain its fiery status for the foreseeable future.

### **Womanhood, Nationhood and the Impossibility of the Indian Lesbian**

There were people who loved it [*Fire*], and I think some in India were appalled. Nobody was indifferent to it, and that is what's fascinating. The reaction of the fundamentalists to the film could happen to anything that challenges the patriarchal society, and that was the problem with *Fire*. The lesbian relationship was the most obvious thing for them to hang on to. I found out in talking on panels to people from Shiv Sena [which violently opposed the screening of the film] that what really offended people was that the women have a choice: 'How dare you portray women who choose to go against the traditional ways?' (Mehta as qtd. in McGowan, 2003, p. 288)

Universally, femininity is a socio-cultural construct very much tied to local cosmology guided by archaic codes and binarizations. The Indian woman is tradition-bound and trapped within the insuperable fabrics of essentialism that makes it almost impossible for them to exist within a narrative framework running counter to the socio-cultural diktats of the country. Such ideas pertaining to Indian femininity have been widely circulated via popular discourses that, over time, have come to represent a unidimensional image of the Indian woman. As a result, the concretized monolithic image of Indian femininity stands thus – she is a devoted, dutiful daughter who, in future, will become a servile and domesticated wife, unquestioningly following every command of her parents, in-laws, and husband, and existing only to bear children, preferably male, to continue the patriarchal lineage. Indeed, it goes without saying that a construct of femininity greatly aids in ensuring the survival of patriarchy across ages.

The very notion of womanhood, or femininity, in former colonies got even more complex with the colonial intrusion that altered the alchemy of extant social scripts. It is Partha Chatterjee who averred that the construct of the 'Indian woman' as we know it in the post-colonial society was born at the crossroads of careful deliberation to avoid resembling its white 'other', or the white woman, and as a symbol of the ongoing nationalist sentiments. As such, it became increasingly more difficult to disentangle Indian womanhood from nationalist discourses. Talking about the role of women in the postcolonial nation-state, Suparna Bhaskaran (2002) notes that women are held responsible not only for "maintaining honour and purity, preventing shame" but also for "reproducing national culture" (p. 26). Hence, the framings of the Indian woman, which has over time gained legitimacy with repeated enactments, is a

discourse produced and re-produced by the postcolonial nation-state within the overarching cosmology of a patriarchy-driven society.

Observing the sustained centrality of the woman in contouring the discourses of the nation, Moorti (2017) notes that the "female body [...] becomes a central site where discourses of power and regulation come to bear" and the public's response "expose[s] the centrality of the female figure in the imaginings of the Indian nation." From certain statements made during the protests, it becomes evident that the film's portrayal of women was the source of the mass outrage. The statements also accentuate the positionality of the Indian woman in the post-colonial nation-state and how any deviation from the monolithic image invites belligerent criticism. As such, the film's depiction of lesbianism was found to be extremely problematic in upsetting the 'pure' and morally untarnished image of the nation. Shiv Senik Meena Kulkarni justified the violence carried out by 200 Shiv Seniks on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1998 in Mumbai's Cinemax cinema by blatantly stating the following: "If women's physical needs get fulfilled through lesbian acts, the institution of marriage will collapse, reproduction of human beings will stop." The logic behind the protesters' outcry is also reminiscent of what Bonnie Zimmerman (1981) had to say about lesbian existence, that lesbian is a threat to both masculinity and patriarchy simply because they are a testament to the fact that women can survive without needing a man, thereby making the lesbian a symbol of danger. It is the possibility of a world without men that makes the lesbian a threat to traditional heteropatriarchal discourses.

Central to the imagination of an ideal nationhood is the heterosexual family unit, and the onus of ensuring the reproduction of national culture is on the woman – biologically and ideologically. At this stage, it is crucial to prioritize Moorti's remarks on the historical standpoint at which *Fire* was situated: "The controversy over *Fire* occurred at a historical moment when Indian woman was being reconstituted as a diacritic of Hindu nationalism, a specific religious nationalism." In the film, Radha, Ashok's wife, is at first presented as the perfect image of femininity, the epitome of ideal womanhood – self-sacrificing, self-negating, demure, and domestic. Her inability to bear children has put a strain in her marriage with Ashok who has taken a vow of celibacy under the spiritual guidance of his Swamiji. For Ashok "Desire is the root of all evil" and to test his control over sexual impulses, he challenges his wife to lie beside him without arousing him. As her sexually and emotionally barren marriage fails to provide her a sense of fulfilment, Radha consigns herself to her duties expected of an obedient daughter-in-law by taking care of her paralyzed mother-in-law Biji and by running the family shop. Into this household enters Sita, Jatin's wife, who, contrary to Radha's complacency, seeks alternative avenues of happiness and pleasure when her husband's infidelity is exposed.

Sita is Radha's antithesis – Mehta described her as "Modern India, desiring independence over tradition" (Sidhwa, 1997, p. 77), and she shows Radha the path to liberation through sexual emancipation. Legal feminist scholar Ratna Kapur (2000) in her article "Too Hot to Handle: The Cultural Politics of *Fire*" (2000) labels the lesbians in Mehta's directorial as "sexual subaltern[s]" (p. 53) given the marginal and invisibilized stature of lesbians in the country. The film shows the neglected sisters-in-law finding solace in each other's company as they consummate their relationship, thereby confirming the fear expressed by Kulkarni. Lesbianism threatens not only the monopoly enjoyed by men over women but also puts reproductive futurism at risk. At the time of the protests, Kulkarni had also enunciated that "[the] majority of women in our society

do not even know about lesbianism. Why expose them to it?" – which once again underscores the postcolonial anxieties and fears surrounding the control over female sexuality.

Even though it is through lesbian desire that sexual emancipation and liberation have been represented, Deepa Mehta has mentioned on multiple occasions that lesbianism is only peripheral to the larger issues shown in the film. In an interview with Indian Express, Mehta said: "Lesbianism is just another aspect of the film. It is probably the last thing they resort to when they desire a certain confidence out of the relationship" (*Indian Express* interview, December 13, 1998). Hence, it is more apt to view lesbianism as the lens through which Mehta evaluates the ideological loopholes that constitute the very narrow construct of the Indian woman.

### **Representation of South Asian Patriarchy in *Fire***

It goes without saying that the two sisters-in-law, Radha and Sita, have been the locus of all critical attention, having invited public outrage about the choices they make in the film. However, it is also worthwhile taking a look at the men of the house, namely Ashok and Jatin, and how their representation shapes the understanding of South Asian patriarchy globally. To understand the motivations behind Radha and Sita's decision to seek out each other emotionally and sexually lies their husbands' unavailability and gross neglect. Both women relate to one another due to the void left in their domestic lives by their absentee husbands. The *karvachauth* episode is particularly significant in driving this point home. As both the sisters-in-law await their husbands' arrival so that they can break the fast, Radha quenches Sita's thirst and breaks her fast by giving her a sip of water. The weight that the scene carries cannot be emphasized enough – it is at this moment that the exclusive privileges that men enjoy on account of hegemonic masculinity is subverted. Ironically, it is the same ritual that is celebrated to pander to the indispensability of men within the domestic space and in women's lives that unveils the fallacies of such ideological narratives that help sustain patriarchy.

It has been noted how the 'Indian woman' as a construct was a carefully deliberated figure created in the image of the nation when it was trying to carve out an unique identity for itself to set itself apart from its colonizer, but failed to overcome the colonial hangover completely. The colony and the patriarchy appear as co-conspirators in scripting narratives on ideal femininity while simultaneously upholding patriarchy as the watchdog and keeper of women's position in the post-colony:

...the Hindu woman locates her internal and social agency in relation to the gaze of the Hindu man, whose eyes reflect those religious ideals that paradoxically produce her as subject and commodity, and whose gaze is somewhat regulated by the paternal gaze of British colonialism. (Gariola, 2002, p. 308)

Identifying the connection between patriarchy and female sexuality, Mary E. John and Tejaswini Niranjana (1999) note how *Fire* "represents patriarchy as being founded on the denial of female sexuality...control of female sexuality is surely one of the ideological planks on which patriarchy rests" (p. 581). Ashok's way of controlling Radha's sexuality is by depriving her of it brutally, while Jatin decides to forgo sex with Sita after ceremonially consummating the marriage and turns to his girlfriend Julie. It was unimaginable to either of them that their wives would seek out alternate sources of companionship. Removing the lack of sexual availability

of the men from the equation compels one to focus on the glaring lack of emotional availability in their marriages that does more damage to Mehta's portrayal of South Asian patriarchy.

Radha and Sita had no other choice but to wait on their husbands until a frustrated Sita chooses to act on her homoerotic desire for Radha. Sita refuses to believe in the traditional duties that wives are supposed to perform and she even articulates the possibility of having alternate choices: "I'm so sick of all this devotion. We can find choices" (*Fire* 1998). The exercise of individual choice and agency are the ultimate markers of women being liberated from traditional and patriarchal imperatives. It also simultaneously strips away the power of the patriarchs. Carol Upadhyaya (1998) averred that *Fire* attacked the "root of patriarchy and caste/class hierarchy" through the demand that "control over one's sexual and reproductive life, including free choice of a sexual partner of either sex" must be considered as a fundamental right having legal protection (p. 582). It is ultimately female sexual desire, the very thing that patriarchy simultaneously fears and wants to curb, that sets Radha and Sita free from the shackles of a loveless and lifeless existence. To the celibate Ashok "[d]esire is the root of all evil" for it "brings ruin," but from Radha's confession, it is her desire for Sita that proved to be liberatory:

Brings ruin. Does it, Ashok? You know that without desire there's no point in living. You know what else? I desire to live. I desire Sita. I desire her warmth, her compassion, her body. I desire to live again. If you want to control desire, ask for Swamiji's help, not mine. (*Fire* 1998)

*Fire* shows how patriarchy controls women's bodies and sexualities by bending them according to their will. Sita is forced to consummate her marriage as it is tantamount to rape, while Ashok, after years of abstinence, attempts to force himself on Radha after learning of the sexual nature of his wife's relationship with her sister-in-law. In both cases, thus, sex has been portrayed to be a tool used by men to assert their dominance over their women. These scenes of non-consensual sexual advances paint a pathetic picture of heterosexuality as compared to the bliss experienced by Sita and Radha in their homoerotic alliance. It can, therefore, be further asserted that Mehta's critique of South Asian patriarchy lays bare the loopholes inherent in institutionalized heterosexuality while simultaneously subverting the negative stereotypes associated with homosexuality.

### **The Question of Culture**

Culture also has a role to play: in India, culture becomes a site of a complex amalgamation of issues ranging from the literary to the political, and the nationalist framings of femininity become the apotheosis of such cultural ideologies. Consequently, it is culture, constitutive of beliefs and practices, that is the prime agency through which hegemonic forces are enacted (Panjabi & Chakravarti, 2012). Indian queer feminist scholars have analyzed the repercussions of locating the figure of the lesbian within the country's socio-cultural context and concluded that being Indian and Lesbian comes with politics of invisibility and warrants a creation of independent feminine cosmogonies (Thadani, 1996). The question of culture and cultural policing that the film incited is to be accredited to the movie's depiction of homosexuality, which several protesters concurred was alien to Indian cultural values. A BJP leader (unnamed) had claimed that same-sex desire is a product of globalisation: "Any rational human being will concede that homosexuality is unnatural...all this is part of the current trend for 'modernisation,' 'globalisation,' and 'emancipation'" (qtd. in Moorti, 2017).

It is important at this point to stop and consider how homosexuality, and in this case, lesbianism was viewed as a foreign influence that goes against the grain of our culture. In the movie, Sita remarks to Radha, "There's no word in our language to describe what we are," however, several critics were quick to comment on the factual inaccuracy of this claim. Ruth Vanita (2013), directly challenging this claim (1), stated that the Sanskrit *swayamvara sakhi* and Hindi *saheli* are equivalent, and even better, than the term 'lesbian' which is a western import. Ross elaborates on this terminological conundrum as well:

If the Hindi *sakhi* historically referred to friendships between women that might have extended to eroticism, the Bengali *shamakami* means "desiring one's equal," with neither overtly signifying female-female desire originally. The explicit Urdu noun *chapatbaz*, meaning a woman who "rubs," that is, has sex with, other women, was common in Lucknowi culture prior to 1857...although it is not widely used in present-day India. Other historical terms such as *swayamvara sakhi* (self-chosen special female friend) have been documented, but these are rarely straightforwardly sexual, just as the widespread *saheli*, while holding romantic connotations, primarily refers to friendship. (Ross, 2016, p. 14)

In articulating that there is no linguistic equivalent of 'lesbian' in any Indian language, the statement erases the position that nonnormative sexual orientations had enjoyed in pre-colonial India. Ross (2016) warns against the pitfalls of conflating the "rights of men who love men and women who love women" with "Western Modernity" simply because "open accounts of same-sex desire existed prior to India's incorporation into the British Empire, which imported both the psychosexual definition of homosexuality and virulent homophobia" (1). The question of culture is also inextricably intertwined with the woman question, matters bordering on religion and the nation's religious sentiments, as well as tradition, and Mehta has taken care to reveal the relationship between these three in the movie dexterously. The mythological namesakes of the two sisters-in-law became, quite predictably, a source of contention once the movie was released in India. Reflecting on the larger ramifications of this issue, Kapur wrote:

Prior to the release of the film, Deepa Mehta anticipated an aggressive response to the cultural content in the film and agreed to change the name of one of the protagonists, from Sita to Neeta. The move was an attempt to slip into a less confrontational and compliant position on culture. This alteration reflects the fears of those concerned about the offence that the film could cause to Indian audiences in the representation of an intimate and sexual bond between Sita and her sister-in-law, Radha. Both names are derived from central female characters in Indian epics, whose attributes of virtue, self-sacrifice and devotion to their respective husbands, have come to represent the hallmarks of Indian womanhood as it is imagined. (Kapur, 2000, p. 55)

In Mehta's film culture has been utilized as an analytic with which to ascertain the position of women in the Indian cosmology. This connection between culture and Indian femininity is extremely multilayered. Chincholkar-Mandelia avers in "Fire: A Subaltern Existence?" (2005) that the "subaltern Hindu woman's identity is shaped and molded within (and by) the patriarchal discourse. Therefore, patriarchal codes in power work to justify her subject-position as a 'subaltern' Hindu woman and thereby validate her subordination, identity and subjectivity within Hindu society" (p. 197). Perhaps the most easily identifiable cultural trope that Mehta has deployed is the symbol of fire which could perhaps be grasped from the film's title and



content, especially in Mehta's reworking of the mythical *agni-pariksha* from *Ramayana*. Ross has provided a very comprehensive insight into the layered metaphorical meaning of "Fire":

Complicating the *agni-pariksha* in the *Ramayana*, which restores order and purity by assaying and controlling women's sexuality, *Fire* emphasizes the duality of the fire metaphor as a signifier of lustration and lust. The film's inferno represents both patriarchy's inability to contain the destructiveness of its purifying rituals and the impossibility of obliterating women's "burning" sexual desires. (Ross, 2016, p. 51)

In a similar vein of critical inquiry and interpretation, for Gairola (2002), fire, as a "visual motif" becomes representative of "patriarchal codes of righteous duty" while simultaneously standing as the "fiery shame of a lesbian desire that empowers the female protagonists, enabling them narrowly to escape complacently accepting the patriarchal culture of postcolonial, post-partition India" (p. 316). In the movie, it is Radha and not Sita who must pass the trial by fire. Radha's *agni-pariksha* takes place when her sari catches fire from Ashok's violent push, she manages to save herself from the engulfing flames while her husband leaves her to burn after fleeing from the house with his mother. Moorti (2017) rightly contends that by "allowing the women to emerge unscathed from the fire and consider options outside of marriage the film overturns the celebration of female chastity."

The argument on culture and its subversion also extends to a debate between traditionalism and modernism – where modernism/ modernity (the audience/protesters/critics have construed Radha and Sita's act of fighting patriarchy and society to be with one another as symptomatic of modernity) is seen as a subversion of traditional ideologies that consistently limit women's existence. As per Gopinath (2005), the dilemma in which Radha and Sita find themselves in is polarising – they are caught between upholding their culture and tradition by continuing to live and suffer in silence as opposed to choosing to live together. Thus, "modernity," with its promise of individual freedom and self-expression, pulls inevitably against "tradition," which demands that the women adhere to the roles prescribed for them as good Hindu wives and remain chaste, demure, and self-sacrificing" (Gopinath, 2005, p. 141). The end of the movie shows the triumph of "modernity" over "tradition" and in doing so highlights certain problematic and questionable ideologies tied to culture and "tradition". It is also significant that the tomb of Nizamuddin, a Sufi shrine, where the lovers meet at the end, apart from acting as a "symbol of the outsider and tolerance" (Burton, 2013, p. 7), also reinforces the motif of free love as the Sufi saint Hazrat Nizamuddin was known for his homosexual love for the poet Amir Khusrao (Ghosh, 1998, p. 148), thereby deftly throwing the most frequently quoted "un-Indianness" of homosexuality into question.

### **Conclusion: Desire for Freedom, Freedom to Desire**

By treating the litany of critical commentary on the film as afterlives of a 'sexual revolution', the paper maps some of the central issues addressed by critics over the years so as to re-situate *Fire* within the evolving discourses on gender, sexuality, and culture in the country. Going back to Mehta's claim that the movie is about "choices" and "Hindu concepts of tolerance, non-judgmentalism, compassion" (qtd. in John and Niranjana, 1999, p. 582), *Fire* can be read as a story that upholds and celebrates the liberation that women can enjoy once they exercise their agency in acting on their choices. In Mehta's film the choice is to act on transgressive desire despite knowing full well the social and cultural ramifications of it. Coming hand in hand with freedom is tolerance and acceptance, ideas to which the country has time

again proved itself to be hostile. It would seem that as a true visionary Mehta's loyalty as a film maker lies in bringing to light a multiplicity of issues that plague the everyday existence of Indian women. In doing so Mehta's film transcends being just a "site of feminist resistance" (Bose, 2000, p. 250), but is a polemical piece that compels viewers to re-evaluate and question the dominant logics of society.

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