

Fire: A Critique of Hindu Patriarchy

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Abstract: Diversity of religions, languages, customs and traditions in India make it more beautiful and unique. Though the beauty, richness and uniqueness of India is appreciable but it has a darker side too i. e. Indian society is intrinsically patriarchal. The basis of this patriarchy can be traced in the Indian religions because Indians consider themselves as religious (so-called religious) and turn to the religion for guidance. As compared to the Vedic period or ancient times, the status and position of women has worsened over the period of time under the larger umbrella concepts of religion and patriarchy. Since time immemorial, literature and cinema has remained the mirrors of the society. They represent the vices and follies of their respective ages. Though the Indian cinema has always been criticized for its ignoring the issues of gender yet there are several films which represent gender disparity due to patriarchal society. In this article, I'll be discussing Fire and Astitva as critiques of and against Hindu patriarchy.

Key Words: Religion, patriarchy, discrimination, cinema, male chauvinism.

1. INTRODUCTION:

India is a land of diversity of religions, languages, customs and traditions. This diversity makes India more beautiful and unique than any other nation of the world. Though the beauty, richness and uniqueness of India is appreciable but it has a darker side too i. e. Indian society is intrinsically patriarchal. The basis of this patriarchy can be traced in the Indian religions because Indians consider themselves as religious (so-called religious) and turn to the religion for guidance. The scriptures and teachings of India's two main religions; Hinduism and Islam are misinterpreted by their religious gurus and in the present scenario; these two religions are deeply patriarchal.

Thought Hindu scriptures present contradictory views on the position of women but Hinduism have both male and female gods and deities and even consider God as androgynous as for example, Shiv-Shakti. In Book 10, Verse 3-8 (Devi Sukta Hymn) of the *Rigveda*, the feminine energy is declared as the essence of the universe: "I am the Queen, the gatherer-up of treasures, most thoughtful, first of those who merit worship. Thus Gods have established me in many places with many homes to enter and abide in. Through me alone all eat the food that feeds them, each man who sees, breathes, hears the word outspoken. They know it not, but yet they dwell beside me. Hear, one and all, the truth as I declare it. I, verily, myself announce and utter the word that Gods and men alike shall welcome. I make the man I love exceeding mighty; make him a sage, a Rsi, and a Brahman. I bend the bow for Rudra that his arrow may strike and slay the hater of devotion. I rouse an order battle for the people, and I have penetrated Earth and Heaven. On the world's summit, I bring forth the Father: my home is in the waters, in the ocean. Thence I extend o'er all existing creatures, and touch even wonder heaven with my forehead. I breathe a strong breath like the wind and tempest, the while I hold together all existence. Beyond this wide earth and beyond the heavens I have become so mighty in my grandeur. (*Rigveda* 3-8)

The two great epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, present the mixed and conflicting position of women. On one hand, Draupadi had to marry to all the Pandavas and was insulted by Daryodhana whereas, on the other hand, in Adi Parva of the *Mahabharata*, it is stated that, "No man, even in anger, should ever do anything that is disagreeable to his wife; for happiness, joy, virtue and everything depend on the wife. Wife is the sacred soil in which the husband is born again, even the Rishis cannot create men without women". (*Mahabharata* 1.74.50-51)

Manusmriti also presents a mixed and contradictory position of women. It asserts that "as a girl, she should obey and seek protection of her father, as a young woman her husband, and as a widow her son". Whereas in other chapters, it asserts that "Women must be honoured and adorned", and "Where women are revered, there the gods rejoice; but where they are not, no sacred rite bears any fruit".

As compared to the Vedic period or ancient times, the status and position of women has worsened over the period of time under the larger umbrella concepts of religion and patriarchy. Any degree of bias furthers the idea of female infanticide, dowry system, sexual abuse, honour killing, rape cases, domestic violence etc. Joseph Conrad states, "Being a Woman is a terribly difficult task, since it consists principally in dealing with men".

Since time immemorial, literature and cinema has remained the mirrors of the society. They represent the vices and follies of their respective ages. Since its beginning with the film *Raja Harish Chandra* (1913), the Indian cinema has remained the most powerful medium for mass communication and representation of society in India. Cinema produces much which touches the nerves of society. It rears concerns that are inevitably related to growth and development of the masses. Cinema projects role models and endures stereotypical spirits while at the same time, interrogating or projecting them ambivalently. Though the Indian cinema has always been criticized for its ignoring the issues of gender yet there are several films which represent gender disparity due to patriarchal society. John Berger in his work *Ways of Seeing* Quotes: “Men act, women appear. Men look at women; women watch themselves being looks at” (Berger 45). The quote reflects very concisely the position of women in the mainstream Indian cinema. In this article, I’ll be discussing *Fire* and *Astitva* as critiques of and against Hindu patriarchy.

Fire

Fire, a romantic drama film released in 1996, was written and directed by Deepa Mehta, an Indo-Canadian writer and director. It is the first installation of *Elements Trilogy*, succeeded by *Earth* released in 1998 and *Water* released in 2005. The film starring Shabana Azmi as Radha, Nandita Das as Sita, Kulbhushan Kharbanda as Ashok, Javed Jaffrey as Jatin, and Ranjit Chowdhry as Mundu, is based on Ismat Chughtai’s *Lihaaf*, a short-story. It is a fascinating anomaly beginning with a prologue taking place in a field of flowers where Radha’s mother tells her the story of people who’d never seen the sea and they were told by an old woman to see the sea without looking. Radha’s mother confirms whether she understands the story but she replies in negative.

Fire represents a happy middle –class family, as stated by Ashok “I’m lucky to have such a family”, which is later on uncovered as a simmering cauldron of domination, disloyalty, discrimination, humiliation and frustration. It focuses on the story of Radha and Sita. Radha is a middle-aged traditional wife who silently works as a maid. She is a caregiver to the paralysed mother-in-law, Biji, who cannot walk, talk or look after herself; her only tool of communication is a bell. Radha’s husband, Ashok runs a take-out food restaurant with a video rental store at the side, where his younger brother, Jatin sells porn videos under the table. Ashok is a staunch follower of a Swamiji who teaches him that desire is the root cause of all the evils and sufferings. So Ashok has taken a vow of celibacy after knowing that Radha is impotent and cannot give an heir to the family. For the last thirteen years, Ashok lies next to Radha without touching her in order to test his resolve. He is a staunch patriarch who defines woman as a solely meek, submissive, dutiful, obedient, and mum creature, whose only duty is to obey her husband and to look after her family and work as maid.

Sita is the beautiful, westernized young sister-in-law of Radha. She is newly married to Jatin, who is in relationship with a chinese-Indian girl named Julie. Julie refuses to marry him because she doesn’t like joint family system. At the insistence of Biji and Ashok, Jatin married Sita only to get a child from her to continue the progeny. When the couple return from their so-called honeymoon, Jatin leaves immediately to meet his girlfriend. In his absence, Sita is shown quickly taking off her traditional Indian sari and putting on Jatin’s pants. She is seen having fun, dancing and pretending to smoke, which shows that Sita is a modern westernised girl, not following the traditional patriarchal norms, which is not expected from a traditional Indian bride or wife. Jatin still continues his relationship with Julie even after the marriage and spends his days and nights with her, and is sometimes very rude and violent towards Sita. Sita knows about her husband’s love-affair but she is mum and silent just because she doesn’t want to bring disgrace to her parents, which is symbolic of typical Indian family girls. But despite of thinking about her family, she is intrinsically a revolutionist who defies the patriarchal norms.

Both Radha and Sita are depicted as typical Indian wives caught in the web of patriarchy, feeling lonely and frustrated, spending their days slaving in the hot kitchen. In such an excruciatingly painful and depressed atmosphere, both Radha and Sita find solace in each other and become lovers, sharing emotional and physical bonds. In one incident, Radha tells Sita that men eat black pepper on their wedding night to perform better. Sita asks, “What about brides?”. Radha says that brides eat green cardamom for seductive fragrance and pops one in Sita’s mouth. She comes close to her and asks if it’s working. Both sisters-in-law playfully flirt with each other in the kitchen. Gary Morris states in the review that “the kitchen, normally a major zone of oppression, becomes a cosy space for their love, and one in which tradition is turned on its head” (Morris, 2000, pg. 2.). But their relationship is not without its share of painful obstacles.

One day while having “Karwachauth” Radha retells the mythical story of a philanderer King whose Queen goes to extremities to win the affection of her husband back. On hearing the story, Sita proclaims, “What a wimp...I mean the Queen, and as for the King I think he is a real jerk!”, at which Radha mildly admits that the Queen had really no choice. Sita then states, “I am so sick of all this devotion...we can find choices” (*Fire*). In this scene, Sita is really defying the gendered expectations and questioning the traditional patriarchal norms. . In the review of the film, Gary

Morris states that “Eventually she (Sita) draws Radha out of her shell, and the two of them find in each other what their husbands refuse to give” (Morris, 2000, pg. 1.). When Ashok wants to know the reason to why Radha had not come when he called her off; to this she replies that “Sita says the concept of duty is overrated” (Fire). Ashok boos, “Sita is young...but you know its importance” (Fire). After this, Radha rejects the cruel practice of Ashok lying beside her without touching, and Sita rejects the mean and loveless advance of her husband.

One day, Mundu, the servant is caught by Radha watching a porn movie called *The Joy Suck Club* and nervously masturbating in front of pitiful Biji, who is a symbol of impotent Indian society and India. She informs Ashok about the incident and tells him to throw Mundu out of the house but he is forgiven by Ashok just because he is a man and so his crime is pardonable. Mundu feels jealous when he notices Radha and Sita’s growing love alliance because he likes Radha and wants to develop a relationship with her. In order to take revenge and in a fit of jealousy too, he tells Ashok about the quite brazen relationship of both sisters-in-law and brings him to the house when they are making love. Ashok slams open the door and got horrified and disgusted when he catches them in the act. He is shattered because his long-dormant desire too has been stoked by the incident.

Sita tells Radha that “There’s no word in our language for what we are, how we feel for each other” (Fire). Both Radha and Sita decide to leave the house but Radha tells Sita to leave first and she’ll meet her tonight. Biji rings her bell as she sees Sita leaving and spits at Radha’s face when she sits up close to her. Before leaving, Radha wants to tell Ashok what has been inside her for so long. Ashok tells her that what they were doing in the bedroom is a sin in the eyes of God and man, further adds that “desire brings ruin”. Radha finally stands up and repudiates his stance and states that “You know without desire I was dead. Without desire there is no point in living, and you know what else...I desire to live. I desire Sita. I desire her warmth, her compassion, her body. I desire to live again” (Fire).” Ashok asks her to touch his feet and apologize. Radha’s sari catches fire when he pushes her aside. Ashok carries Biji and saves her and angrily watches and let Radha burn in the fire. Somehow Radha is able to save herself and recalls her mother’s advice and finally sees her ocean. She moves out leaving Ashok and joining Sita. Radha’s final goodbye to her husband is her departure from abiding to the patriarchal norms that incapacitated her from being whom she was always meant to be.

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