**Women's Bodies as Sites of Signification and Contestation:**
**An Analysis of Deepa Mehta's Critique of Narratives of Home,**
**Nation and Belonging in the Elemental Trilogy**

by

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MSS, The University of Dhaka, 2009

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

The College of Graduate Studies

(Interdisciplinary Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Okanagan)

June 2012

**Abstract:**

This thesis examines Deepa Mehta's trilogy—*Water, Earth, Fire*—and the trilogy's exploration and contestation of colonial, anti-colonial nationalist, and religious ideologies as intersecting with patriarchal norms to enact symbolic and actual violence on the bodies of women. I argue that Mehta's trilogy foregrounds the ways in which patriarchal nationalism legitimizes violence against women's bodies and sexualities through different social and cultural practices and discourses which are interconnected. To explain the historical and contemporary contexts of Indian women's domination and the ways they resist this domination, Mehta's films unveil the underlying power relations among social forces such as colonialism, anti-colonial reform movements, post-colonial nationalism, religious and patriarchal heteronormative discourses which make women's domination an acceptable cultural norm. Through an analysis of the experiences of women portrayed in Mehta's films, I posit that the constructions of the Indian nation, in terms of national culture, tradition and identity, are gendered in specific ways that construct the Indian woman, both symbolically and physically, as a site where nationalist ideology provokes their political liberation, self-representation and agency. Mehta's films disrupt these historical and contemporary practices, discourses and norms through the depictions of women's multiple identities, experiences and sexualities. Her works demonstrate the ways in which women constantly resist, contest and negotiate with this domination and violence through their daily activities and narratives.

## Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank to my supervisor, committee members, faculty, staff, and my fellow students and friends at the UBC's Okanagan campus who have inspired me to continue my study. I want to acknowledge my supervisor Dr. Jennifer Gustar's contribution not only to complete this research but also to make me confident and thoughtful. I would like to offer my enduring gratitude to my supervisor for her patience, guidance and inspiration in conducting this research and thanks for the affection and mental support. I want to express my special thanks to my co-supervisor Dr. John LeBlanc and my committee member Dr. Ilya Parkins for their valuable suggestions, patience, and guidance. I also thank to all faculty and staff in Critical Studies and other departments who have helped me by providing valuable suggestions regarding my research.

I would like to thank the University of British Columbia Okanagan's School of Graduate Studies and the Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies for extending me financial support in the form of a University Graduate Fellowship and teaching assistantships.

Special thanks to my friends Vida, Luisa, Meg and Lindsay for their encourangement, companionship, and mental support. All my friends have provided different cultural perspectives to help me to think with greater complexity and understanding.

I am most grateful to my friend and husband Rony Das for his tremendous support, assistance and patience during my research. I could not complete this work without his generous cooperation and support.

Special thanks are owed to my parents who have extended their enduring mental support, financial support, and encouragement throughout my education, both in Bangladesh and in Canada.

**Table of Contents:**

**Dedication:**

To my parents:

*Sandha Rani Roy (mother)*

*Paik Samir Baran (father)*

and

My friend and life partner:

*Rony Das*

## Introduction: Deepa Mehta's Trilogy

Indo-Canadian film director Deepa Mehta was born in 1950 in Amritsar, a border city between India and Pakistan located in India (Banning and Levitin 274, Monk 201). Mehta's father, who was a film distributor, was forced to relocate to Amritsar from Lahore because of the violence of the partition of India in 1947. Growing within a filmic environment, Mehta was already involved with documentary filmmaking when she completed her master's degree in Philosophy at Delhi University.When Mehta was considering pursuing a PhD, she was invited to work with a production company to make documentaries for the Indian government (Banning and Levitin 274). While working in this company, Mehta learned various film techniques such as editing, sound, camera work, and narrative development, and she made her first documentary film on a child bride. During her filming on another documentary, Mehta met with Paul Saltzman who was making a documentary on the High Commissioner of India at that time. Mehta moved to Canada in 1973 after marrying Saltzman and formed a production company, Sunrise Films with her brother photojournalist Dilip Mehta and Saltzman (Banning and Levitin 274 and Monk 201). At Sunrise, Mehta directed, produced, and edited for television, including the series *Danger Bay*. In 1985, Mehta made a documentary on her brother photojournalist Dilip Mehta entitled *Travelling Light: The Photojournalism of Dilip Mehta* which gained international acclaim at the 1987 New York International Film and Television Festival. At this time, Mehta also won Best Feature Film Award at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Women's Film Festival in Italy for a television feature *Martha, Ruth & Edie*. But Mehta earned her first success as a feature film debut when she filmed *Sam & Me* in 1991.

*Sam & Me* is a story of a young Indian boy who arrives in Canada with hopes and expectations but becomes frustrated when he can work only as a caretaker of an elderly father of

his uncle's employer. According to Jacqueline Levitin, "[m]ore than a tale of a young Indian abroad, the film is an indictment of a country that is multicultural in name only. Coming from a comfortable family background, Mehta had been shocked in Canada to find herself viewed as a brown-skinned 'other'" (282). After *Sam & Me's* success, Mehta worked on episodes of George Lucas's television series *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles* (1992) and *Travels with Father (1994)*. In 1994, Mehta directed a big budget feature *Camilla*, a Canadian/UK production. *Camilla* also tells a story of a friendship, this time between an elderly woman and a young woman. When this film failed to fulfill box office expectations, Mehta decided to make only those films which inspired her.

In 1996, Mehta made her first film of an elemental trilogy, *Fire*. *Fire* (1996) is a story of two sisters-in-law who challenge the patriarchal religious traditions and heteronormative roles and duties assigned to women in a joint Hindu family and get involved in a homoerotic relationship. *Fire* engendered criticism and violent reception among Hindu religious fundamentalists, Indian and diasporic scholars and feminists because of this film's depiction of a lesbian relationship and the alleged misrepresentation of women and Hindu culture. In 1998, Mehta produced and directed her second film of the elemental trilogy *1947 Earth*[1] based on diasporic Pakistani writer Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India*, which portrays the horrible ethnic violence enacted on men and women during the partition of India in 1947. When Mehta began her filming of *Water* in 2000, the last film of the elemental trilogy, about the social, cultural, economic, and religious ostracism of Hindu widows in India, she was forced to leave India without completing her shooting because of the violence of Hindu fundamentalists against this film. In 2002 and 2003, Mehta directed *Boollywood/Hollywood* and the *Republic of Love,*

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[1] Henceforth, I will use the abbreviated title, *Earth,* to facilitate reading.

but went on to complete the shooting of *Water* in Sri Lanka in 2005, which was subsequently nominated for the 2007 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. Mehta directed *Heaven on Earth* in 2008, which depicts domestic violence enacted on a newly married immigrant woman in Canada. Currently, Mehta is in the final stage of completing the adaptation of Indian born British writer Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children,* which will be released in 2012.

Deepa Mehta's work, especially her elemental trilogy--*Fire* (1996), *Earth* (1998) and *Water* (2005)--has received international acclaim, instigated controversy, and caused debate in international and Indian newspapers and magazines, and among scholars because these films depict women's domination by the patriarchal religious and nationalist ideologies of India during the historical period represented. These films portray women's identity, empowerment, and sexuality as a challenge to the embedded power relations in Indian society and culture. At the same time, Mehta's trilogy has engendered a lot of controversy because of Mehta's diasporic, hence privileged, subject position. For example, Indian and diasporic scholars and feminist critics Madhu Kishwar and Uma Parameswaran critique Mehta's portrayals of Indian culture, women, and religion and question Mehta's privileged diasporic position and her lack of authenticity. The Hindu religious fundamentalist groups also burned Mehta's effigy, vandalized her film set, and proclaimed death threats to Mehta, and these groups forced Mehta to leave India without completing the shooting of *Water*. The diasporic and transnational identity of Mehta, as well as the transnational mode of Mehta's production--for example, her international crew comprises British, French, Italians, Hungarians, and Indians-- and the transnational reception of Mehta's films across North America, India, and the South Asian diaspora demand a nuanced understanding of Mehta's transnational filmmaking practices and its contribution to diasporic

film and media studies as well as feminist scholarship. More importantly, the depictions of feminist politics and sexual politics, women's subjectivity and empowerment, and women's historiography, as well as the deconstruction of post-colonial patriarchal and nationalist ideologies in Mehta's elemental trilogy play a significant part in contributing transnational feminist perspectives and aesthetics to transnational and diasporic film and media studies. To explore the feminist politics and aesthetics of Mehta's trilogy, I have analyzed the narratives of Mehta's films through various theoretical approaches across disciplines, such as transnational and diasporic film studies, post-colonial feminist studies and film, transnational feminist frameworks, media studies and theorisations of diaspora, and cultural identity. In film studies, transnational or cross-cultural analysis is comparatively new (Butler 119), but in feminist studies, transnational practice is very influential as a critique of global feminism which has failed to deal with alterity, difference, and diversity in feminist works across cultural divides (Grewal and Kaplan 2). Before analysing Mehta's contribution to transnational filmmaking and feminist practices, it is necessary to discuss the significance and uses of transnationalism, diaspora, post-colonialism, and transnational feminist politics in the context of nation, culture, location and dislocation, gender, sexuality, and identity, which are the major theoretical concerns of my analysis.

**Transnationalism, Diaspora and Post-colonialism:**

According to Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal, the primary aspects of transnationalism are "migration flows; the demise or irrelevance of the nation-state and the emergence of alternative identities that are not primarily national; the existence and study of diaspora; a form of neo-colonialism that implicates the transnational in movements of capital; and the 'NGO-ization' of social movements to supplant the international and the global" (Kaplan and Grewal

4

quoted in Marciniak, Katarzyna, Anikó Imre, and Áine O'Healy 4). There has been a rapid

increase of migration across the world since 1980s. Because of the multiple and shifting

identities of immigrants, the increasing transnationalization of cultural production, distribution,

and consumption, and the fundamental transformation in the political economy of capitalism of

late twentieth century, it is no longer enough to analyze the complexity of cultural production,

distribution, and consumption by using a binary model of the world system such as global-local

and center-periphery (Marciniak, Katarzyna, Anikó Imre, and Áine O'Healy 4, Brah 178-179,

Grewal and Kaplan 9-16). As Arjun Appadurai points out, there is a significant disjuncture and

difference in global cultural economy: "[t]he new global cultural economy has to be seen as a

complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of

existing center-periphery models" (Appadurai 6) because these binary models may erase the

existence of multiple expressions of local identities and resistances, and also overlook

multilayered power relations embedded at various levels of socio-political agendas (Grewal and

Kaplan 11).

In this context of cultural production, distribution and consumption, Grewal and Kaplan

use the term transnational to problematize a "purely locational politics of global-local or center-

periphery" (13). In this thesis, I have used the term transnational to question any homogenous

and monolithic construction of local and global culture and identities. Rather, this term

transnational can be used to explore the historically specific effect and influence of cultural

productions and to understand the complex and multiply-constituted identities through the

analysis of cultural production. Further, I have applied this term to explain the cross-connection

between cultures, power relations, and identity formation at various levels of socio-political

agendas, rather than to focus on a purely local or hegemonic global. Most important, the term

transnational can be applied along with the critiques offered by post-colonial and post-colonial

diaspora studies which interrogate the notions of unified and static national and cultural identity.

The term post-colonial can be used in multiple ways. The two most pertinent to my study

are post-colonialism as a social condition --"the condition resulting from a particular form of

geopolitical cultural and economic domination and the subsequent struggles engaged against this

domination that have been consolidated by the bourgeoisie as anticolonial nationalisms"

(Desai10); the second is as a political critique of colonialism and modernity which can be better

understood through the links of power and knowledge (Desai 10). While post-colonialism as a

social condition is significant to our understanding of the migration, displacement and the

formation of post-colonial diaspora, the term post-colonialism as a critique of colonialism and

nationalism is equally important to critique the Eurocentric discourses of hegemonic global

culture and identity. As Jigna Desai argues, "[P]ostcolonial critique theoretically and politically

attempts to identify and to deconstruct the universalizing Eurocentric discourses of colonialism,

nationalism, and modernity through challenging universalist narratives of history, critiquing the

form of the nation, and interrogating the relationship between power and knowledge" (10).

Similarly, the term diaspora can be used as a potential theoretical framework to theorize

nation, "race"[2], and transnationality in relation to power, culture, and identity. In this thesis, I

have used diaspora as a theoretical framework to critique the concept of pure and fixed home,

place, nation, and origin and to question the ways in which the construction of fixed origin and

home play important roles in defining who embraces the hegemonic ideas of home and nation

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[2] This is a highly-contested and a constructed category of social organization and identification
that originates in discourse. Therefore, I place the term "race" in quotations marks though out my work to
underscore the fact that this is a problematic construction, yet it is necessary to name racialization and to
discuss it because it circulates in contemporary discourse and has real effects on people's lives as Mehta's
work shows.

and who does not. Here, diaspora is being used to interrogate the hegemonic nationalist construction of home, space, and cultural and national identity. Diaspora also interrogates the social, cultural, and political processes through which inclusion and exclusion operate and power is formed through the construction of hegemonic identity. As Avtar Brah points out, "[T]he concept of diaspora . . . is embedded within a multi-axial understanding of power; one that problematises the notion of 'minority'/ 'majority'" (Brah 189). Analyzing the concept diaspora in relation to borders and multi-axial locationality of transnational movement, culture and capital, Brah proposes a new concept entitled "diaspora space" which not only indicates those who have migrated but also those natives who are constructed and represented as outsider and marginalized (208-209). According to Brah,

> Diaspora space is the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes. It is where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition (Brah 208).

In this thesis, especially in the chapter on *Fire*, I have used the term diaspora as a cultural identity which critiques the gendered formation of national and cultural identity and sense of belonging by the hegemonic nationalist discourses through the discourses of pure tradition and past in opposition to the contaminated west (Hall quoted in Desai 20). To understand the ethnocentric and gendered construction of home, nation, and identity, my research seeks to respond to several questions: how does Mehta critique patriarchal and nationalist constructions of static and pure home, tradition, and mythic past through the depiction of transculturalism?

7

How can feminist politics be applied to challenge these nationalist constructions of home and space which are inherently gendered? How are women's bodies posited in this imaginary construction of national and cultural identity? How does Mehta portray cultural identity in relation to gender, "race", class, nation, and sexuality through the examination of multiple axes of differentiation? How do gender and feminist politics play important role in the analysis of diaspora and transnationalism? To understand the feminist politics of Mehta's work, it is necessary to focus on post-colonial and transnational feminist critical frameworks.

Situating feminist and gender politics in relation to the politics of location and identity, transnational feminist practices critique the universal nature of feminist movements (Grewal and Kaplan 17). According to Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan,

> there is an imperative need to address the concerns of women around the world in the historicized particularity of their relationship to multiple patriarchies as well as to international economic hegemonies ... .We need to articulate the relationship of gender to scattered hegemonies such as global economic structures, patriarchal nationalisms, 'authentic' forms of tradition, local structures of domination, and legal-juridical oppression on multiple levels (Grewal and Kaplan 17).

To understand the historically specific oppression and domination of women and to explore the resistance and agentic power of women in a specific context of identity formation, Shari Stone-Mediatore provides significant definitions of transnational and post-colonial feminist frameworks. According to Stone-Mediatore,

> By *transnational feminism* I refer to a theoretical and political project that confronts, with a view toward resisting, far-reaching political, economic, and cultural relations of

domination and the specific dangers that these relations present to women. Such a project

is *transnational* because the relations of domination that it confronts cross over national

boundaries and produce historically specific cooperative as well as hierarchical relations

among women of different nations, races, and classes. It is also *postcolonial* in the sense

that it takes seriously the continuing social and psychological effects of colonialism and

neo-colonialism and seeks ways to move beyond such colonialist relations (Stone-

Mediatore128).

Transnational and post-colonial feminist theorists such as Gayatri Spivak, Chandra

Talpade Mohanty, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, Ella Shohat, and Lata Moni deconstruct

the Eurocentric hegemonic and monolithic constructions of "Third World"[3] women which erase

the multiple experiences and differences of women in relation to gender, "race", class, ethnicity,

sexuality, and nationality. For example, Mohanty in her groundbreaking essay entitled "Under

Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse" interrogates western feminists'

hegemonic knowledge production which constructs a singular and monolithic subject of "Third

World" women. She argues that this construction discursively colonizes the material and

historical heterogeneities of the lives of women all over the world (Mohanty 19).These feminists

focus on the politics of location of diverse women across the world—the politics of location

identifies the historically specific experiences and similarities between women "in diverse and

asymmetrical relations, creating alternative histories, identities, and possibilities for alliances"

(Kaplan 139).

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[3] This is a highly-contested and a constructed category of social organization and identification that originates in discourse. Therefore, I place the term "Third World" in quotations marks though out my work to underscore the fact that this is a problematic construction.

Originally coined by Adrienne Rich in the early 1980s, the term politics of location has been used in different ways as a method of interrogating and deconstructing the privileged position and identity of white feminism (Kaplan 139). However, pointing out the limitation of the politics of location and its usages in transnational and post-colonial feminist practices, Caren Kaplan argues, "[a] politics of location is most useful, then, in a feminist context when it is used to deconstruct any dominant hierarchy or hegemonic use of the term gender. A politics of location is not useful when it is construed to be the reflection of authentic, primordial identities that are to be re-established and reaffirmed" (Kaplan 139). In women's cinema, "a feminist politics of location is articulated by those films which situate female identity in dynamic historical situations, to reveal the imbrications of technologies of gender with those of local, national and international power" (Butler 91). My thesis therefore investigates how Mehta constructs the historically specific experiences and agentic power of women in *Fire*, *Earth*, and *Water* and asks how the particular context of women's oppression and domination connect the broader contexts of colonialism, nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and patriarchy. Further, how does Mehta portray the politics of location of the women protagonists by deconstructing the pure and static past? Finally, I seek to clarify the ways in which these three films in tandem posit gender and women in relation to colonialism, anti-colonialism, patriarchy, religion, and nationalism.

**Post-colonialism, Gender, and Nationalism:**

Within Cultural Studies, Benedict Anderson's definition of nation as "an imagined political community" (Anderson 6) has provided am important materialist framework for the critical study of national cultures and identity (Butler 91). According to Anderson, "[i]t is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-

members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion " (Anderson 6). Anderson's definition of nation has provided a significant theoretical framework for understanding the socio-cultural roots and cultural systems through which nation, nationalism, and national identities are formed. This definition is also important to understand the ways in which nation-state has been naturalized by nationalist myths and stories. As Anderson proposes, "nationalism has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which-as well as against which-it came into being" (Anderson 12). Therefore, my thesis aims to understand the socio-cultural and historical contexts of the formation of nationalist ideologies through the examination of the portrayal of nationalism in relation to colonialism, anti-colonial nationalist ideologies, religious and patriarchal discourses. My research further investigates whether nationalism is gendered by placing women's politics and identity in the core of the politics of Indian nationalism and anti-colonial social and reform movements as depicted in Mehta's films.

In a chapter entitled "The Nation and Its Women," Post-colonial Studies and Subaltern Studies scholar Partha Chatterjee elaborates the relationship between women's politics and the politics of Indian nationalism in the nineteenth century. According to Chatterjee, the women's question was a central issue in the social reform agenda in the early and mid-nineteenth century Bengal, but these women's issues were eclipsed in the politics of nationalism in the last decades of the nineteenth century (Chatterjee 116). Chatterjee argues that nationalist and social reform movements in the nineteenth- century did not address women's questions as a feminist politics within a specific context of social relations; rather, nationalism situated women's issues at the demarcation of Indian traditionalism in opposition to colonial rule and to the contaminated west

(Chatterjee 119). Chatterjee explains this resolution of women's status and concerns in nationalist ideology by invoking a framework that separates the cultural domain into two spheres: the material and the spiritual (119). In the material sphere such as science and technology, rational forms of economic organization, modern methods of statecraft, Indian nationalist ideology adopted western techniques to compete with European and western development, civilization, and modernization. But in the case of the spiritual sphere, the nationalist ideology took a different approach—focusing on a distinct spiritual essence of India's national culture (Chatterjee 119-120). At the same time, nationalist ideology posited this framework of material/ spiritual as an analogous dichotomy: the outer/world and the inner/home (Chatterjee120). The nationalist discourses posit their spiritual essence and true self in the domain of inner/ home which must be uncontaminated from the profane activities of outer world and material activities of western civilization, and women are the holder of the spiritual essence of India's cultural and national identity (Chatterjee 120).

In another essay entitled "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized Women: the Contest in India," Partha Chatterjee demonstrates the ways in which nationalist ideology has resolved women's questions in the new contexts of social, cultural, economic, and political changes in post-colonial India. According to Chatterjee,

> The need to adjust to the new conditions outside the home had forced upon men a whole series of changes in their dress, food habits, religious observances and social relations. Each of these capitulations now had to be compensated by an assertion of spiritual purity on the part of women. They must not eat, drink or smoke in the same way as men; they must continue the observance of religious rituals which men were finding difficult to carry out; ... .The new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon women the

honor of a new social responsibility, and by associating the task of female emancipation

with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood, bound them to a new, and yet entirely

legitimate, subordination (Chatterjee, *colonialism, nationalism* 629).

Drawing on Chatterjee's framework of inner/ outer dichotomy, R. Radhakrishnan addresses the

incorporation of women's question in the politics of nationalism in post-colonial India. As

Radhakrishnan points out, "by mobilizing the inner/outer distinction against the 'outerness' of

the west, nationalist rhetoric makes 'woman' the pure and ahistorical signifier of 'interiority'. In

the fight against the enemy from the outside, something within gets even more repressed, and

'woman' becomes the mute but necessary allegorical ground for the transactions of nationalist

history" (192).

However, it is important to note that Chatterjee not only addresses the ways in which nationalist

ideology addressed women's identity by including women's issues as identity markers of the

inner/ spiritual essence of India, but also demonstrates how post-colonial nationalism constructed

the ideas of new womanhood in the new context of post-colonial India by reinforcing women's

sexuality—pure and respectable middle class sexuality in opposition to "brazen, avaricious,

irreligious, sexually promiscuous" (Chatterjee, *Colonialism, Nationalism* 630).The post-colonial

theorists and scholars that I have discussed above make it clear the ways in which women are

symbolically constructed as bearers of meanings—communal, national, cultural, and religious,

by nationalist discourses in colonial and post-colonial India (Chhachhi 75, Chatterjee,

*colonialism, nationalism* 630, Radhakrishnan 192, Butler 91-92, Shohat n.p.). Especially,

Chatterjee's discussions about the construction, by means of post-colonial nationalism, of new

womanhood through the discourses of middle class feminine qualities and his analysis of the

ideological construction of women as mother or goddess to erase her sexuality are an important

departure for analyzing the relationship between nationalism and heteronormativity in Mehta's trilogy.

**Heteronormative Discourses and Nationalism in Post-colonial Feminist Studies:**

According to Jigna Desai and Gayatri Gopinath, few studies have focused on the ways in which gender and sexuality are affected by heteronormative discourses of nationalism and the ways in which heteronormativity is produced and maintained through the discourses of colonialism, anti-colonialism, and nationalism (Desai 29, Gopinath, *Nastalgia, Desire* 469). Some of the post-colonial, transnational and diasporic feminist studies have addressed how the notion of good citizenship is produced through the naturalization of heterosexuality and through the criminalization of other forms of non-procreative sexualities in post-colonial nationalism. For example, M. Jacqui Alexander in the article entitled "Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas" interrogates the racialized and gendered legislative gestures of these post-colonial nations which produce the ideas of normal/deviant sexualities through the legitimization of heterosexual bodies and criminalization of non-heteronormative bodies. As Alexander argues,

> Not just (any) *body* can be a citizen any more, for *some* bodies have been marked by the state as non-procreative, . . . . Having refused the heterosexual imperative of citizenship, *these* bodies, according to the state, pose a profound threat to the very survival of the nation. Thus, I argue that as the state moves to reconfigure the nation it simultaneously resuscitates the nation as hetero*sexual* (Alexander 6).

Alexander poses important questions regarding the relationship between non-heteronormative subjects, sense of belonging, and home in post-colonial countries. The abovementioned quotation

14

also suggests that non-heteronormative subjects have a different relationship to the constructions of home, family, and citizenship in which people of alternative sexualities do not belong to the nationalist definition of good citizenship because citizenship continues to be defined through heterosexuality and heteromasculinity (Alexander 7). Therefore, she suggests that the process of decolonization which was the aim of anti-colonial nationalist movement is seriously disrupted (Alexander 7). Similarly, Paola Bacchetta in the article entitled "When the (Hindu) Nation Exiles Its Queers" interrogates Hindu nationalist attempts to create an inclusive and homogenized cultural nationalist ideology through the enforcement of heterosexuality as only legitimate sexual practice in opposition to queer gender and sexuality in post-colonial India (Bacchetta 14, 143). As Bacchetta argues,

> [T]he construction of queer gender and sexualities, which appear in Hindu nationalism, are largely effects of Hindu nationalist reworkings of misogynist notions of gender and heterosexist notions of sexual normativity imposed through colonialism. These effects are manifested in a binary in which qualities of virile, militaristic masculinity combined with obligatory asexuality(for Hindu nationalist leaders) and forced heterosexuality (for Hindu nationalized masses) are valorized and placed in opposition to queer gender and sexuality(assigned to all others). In this scheme, queer gender and sexuality are constructed as already outside the Hindu nation; when queerdom reenters, it must be immediately exiled (Bacchetta 143).

Bacchetta's analysis of Hindu *xenophobic queerphobia* (in this logic, Hindu nationalism claims that queerdom is not Indian and it is imported from Britain) and *queerphobic Xenophobia* (in this usage, Hindu nationalism signifies queerdom metaphorically to all the designated others regardless of their sexualities) (Bacchetta 143-144) suggests that the usage of queer is contextual

and it signifies multiple meanings, trajectories, and multidirectionality across the sexual identity (Bacchetta 144).

Similarly, Nivedita Menon in the essay entitled "Outing Heteronormativity: Nation, Citizen, Feminist Disruptions" analyzes the politics of location embedded in the particular use of queer in post-colonial Indian context. She suggests that the term queer is used to question the supposed naturalness of heterosexual identity (Menon19-20). Referring to the volume entitled *Queer Politics in India,* Menon points out that

> The term queer . . . speaks . . . of communities that name themselves (as gay or lesbian for example), as well as those that do not, . . . . Queer politics does not speak of the issues of these communities as 'minority issues', but instead speaks of larger understandings of gender and sexuality in our society that affects all of us, regardless of our sexual orientation. It speaks of sexuality as a politics intrinsically and inevitably connected with the politics of class, gender, caste, religion and so on, thereby both acknowledging other movements and also demanding inclusion within them ( Narrain and Bhan quoted in Menon 20).

This quotation points out the particular context of queer politics of post-colonial India, and at the same time, connects this politics with other axes of social differentiation across the nation such as gender, class, "race", caste, religion, and ethnicity. Reviewing the queer movement in India, Menon argues that queer identity emerges in India from the following accounts: a) queer politics questions biology critically and argues that sexuality is fluid, not a generic given, b) queer is a political and unstable term which challenges heteronormativity through gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender/ hijra, feminist or other identities, and c) "queer politics sees

itself as complicated as its point of origin by class, caste and community identity, and is self-critical to the extent it is unable to engage with this complication" (Menon 21-22).

At the same time, Menon demonstrates the importance of diasporic location in the politics of queer to interrogate nationalist ideologies regarding pure and authentic past, sense of belonging, and home (Menon 41). David L. Eng in the article entitled "Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies" posits feminist and queer methods in Asian American studies and demonstrates the ways in which Asian American racial, sexual, and national identities are formulated through compulsory heterosexuality (Eng 32). Posing important questions regarding the roles of nations and nationalism in the construction of racial formation of Asian Americans, Eng argues that the cultural nationalism of Asian Americans not only focuses on Asian American as a racial minority group, but also prescribes who is a recongnizable and legitimate Asian American—male, heterosexual, working class, American born and English speaking (Eng 34). Critiquing this narrow definition of Asian American by cultural nationalist groups, Eng applies queer methods to denaturalize any claims regarding the definition of nation-state and home as considered as heterosexual (35). Rather, Eng defines "queerness not just in the narrow sense of sexual identity and sexual practices, but queerness as a critical methodology for evaluating Asian American racial formation across multiple axes of difference and in its numerous local and global manifestations" (Eng 39). Similarly, Gayatri Gopinath proposes the "queer South Asian diasporic subjectivity" as a challenge to nationalist ideologies regarding home and nostalgia by restoring those practices, desire, and subjectivities that are considered impossible and unimaginable in the conventional diasporic and national imaginings (Gopinath 470, Menon 41).

Following the post-colonial and transnational critical frameworks of queer politics that I have analyzed above, I have used queer methodology not only to suggest homosexual identities and alternative sexual practices but also to critique the construction of any 'normative' discourse. I have applied queer politics to reveal the ways in which heterosexuality and other modalities of power such as patriarchy, religion, and institutions construct the dichotomy of normative and deviance in which multiple sexual practices and identities are punished and exiled. Along with the focus on the politics of location, embedded in the particular usage of queer politics in post-colonial India, I have also emphasized queer politics that is relational to global and diasporic cultural politics. Therefore, I have used a queer diasporic framework as a critical method to critique the ethnocentric and gendered formation of cultural nationalism and identity through the discourses of heterosexual family, marriage, home and citizenship. Also, queer diaspora interrogates heteronormativity that works as a site of cultural authenticity through the discourses of pure and authentic past, home, and identity. Therefore, my thesis will address what kind of roles  nation and nationalism play in the construction of heteronormativity and how Mehta's portrayal of women's multiple sexualities and desires contest and negotiate the nationalist constructions of home, family, and citizenship.

**Transnational Filmmaking Practices and Deepa Mehta's Trilogy:**

In film studies, according to Katarzyna Marciniak, Anikó Imre, and Áine O'Healy , we find the following categories of films: "cinema of the borders," "cinema of migration," and "cinema of displacement" (Marciniak, Imre, and O'Healy 9 ) which refer to the experiences and discourses of exile, migration, and border crossings. These categories and filmic narratives, as Marciniak, Imre, and O'Healy point out, cannot be linked exclusively to any single national and cultural production because of "thematic foci and complicated production contexts" (Marciniak,

Imre, and O'Healy 9) in the increasingly globalizing world and media environment. Since the 1960s, the increasing accesses to multiple channels and different types of local and transnational media, and the displacement of a huge number of people have challenged the notions of national culture and identity, and the dominance of national cinema and genre (Naficy 8). In the critical juncture of the world media system and transnational mode of production and reception of cinema, Hamid Naficy brings attention to "a new and critical imagination in the global media: an accented cinema of exile and diaspora and its embedded theory of criticism" (Naficy 8) in the book entitled *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. In the exilic and diasporic experiences and discourses of filmmakers and, in filmic narratives, the socio-cultural politics of the directors' multiple identities, the effect of globalization in cinema industry, the internationalization of story plot, hybridization of styles, and the transcendence of national and cultural boundary in film production and reception have brought forward a new transnational filmmaking practice (Levitin 271, Tay 111-113).

According to film critic and scholar Asuman Suner, certain films and filmmaking practices can be considered as transnational filmmaking practices when

> they problematize the question of national identity and belonging by directing attention to the multiplicity of the experience of displacement, de-territorialization, and migration within and across the non-Western world. Testifying to the complexity of the question of displacement in their own geopolitical contexts, they effectively prove that the problematization of the relations of belonging and identity is not the monopoly of the exilic/diasporic subjects residing in the West (Suner cited in Tay 112).

In this thesis, following Suner's definition of transnational filmmaking practices, I situate Deepa Mehta's filmmaking practices as transnational, not because Mehta is a diasporic subject nor because of the transnational mode of her films' production, distribution, and reception across North America, South Asia, and South Asian diaspora; rather, Mehta's filmmaking practices in her elemental trilogy can be better understood as transnational in terms of the representation of cross-cultural content and the "complexities of geopolitics, mobilisation, displacement, desires, and identity (Tay 114). In other words, the critique of the binary model of global-local; the depiction of multilayered power relations among different discourses at various levels of social relations such as colonialism, the anti-colonial reform movement, nationalism, religion, and patriarchy; the critique of "authentic" and static past and tradition; the portrayal of multiple experiences of characters and multiple historical narratives of India and nationhood; and the depiction of female multiple subjectivities, desires, and sexualities in Mehta's trilogy make her filmmaking practices transnational and feminist. Mehta's transnational filmmaking practices cannot be analyzed through the traditional binary model of east/west or global/local. Rather, Mehta portrays a very complex relationship between multiple cultures, experiences, histories, stories, and identities of characters in colonial and post-colonial India. Therefore, Mehta's filmmaking practices can be better understood as transnational in the following ways: first, the transnational mode of production, marketing, and consumption of Mehta's trilogy in the age of global media flows; second, the representation and questioning of nation and nationalism and national and cultural identity of India through filmic discourse; third, the cross-examination of the national, cultural, political, ethnic, and gender identity of individuals and communities in colonial and post-colonial India; fourth, the revisiting and reconstructing of the national history of India and complicating of the construction of nationhood through the portrayal of women's

histories; and fifth, the portrayal of multiple experiences, narratives, cultures, desires, and identities in cross-cultural and intra-cultural levels (Lu 3).

According to Jacqueline Levitin, transnational filmmaking is not a homogenous category and it does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, she argues that

> it exists in symbiosis with the dominant and alternative cinemas and in constant negotiation between the global and the local at the moments of encoding of meanings and moments of decoding and re-coding. Viewing Mehta as a transnational filmmaker allows her films to be read and re-read not only as individual texts produced by authorial vision and generic conventions, but also as sites for intertextual, cross-cultural, and transnational struggles over meaning and identities" (Levitin 271).

Therefore, Mehta's questioning of patriarchal and religious traditions and nationalist discourses of women's identity and sexuality and her critiquing of cultural politics through the depiction of sexual politics in the trilogy have engendered a lot of controversy and debates around Mehta's authenticity of speaking about Indian culture and women. I would like to point out that "authenticity" is a pitfall for transnational filmmaking practices since the role of a transnational filmmaker is complex (Banning and Levitin 281) because, on one hand, Mehta is expected to play a role as a native informant in the west, and on the other hand, her Canadian identity makes her an outsider from India where she was born. Concerning this complex position of transnational filmmakers, Levitin poses some important questions: "how can the transnational filmmaker avoid this pitfall? How can she situate herself in a particular culture while simultaneously aiming the film at an international market" (Levitin 273)?

According to R. Radhakrishnan, there is no single way in which we can define authenticity or Indian because "when people move, identities, perspectives, and definitions change. If the category 'Indian' *seemed* secure, positive, and affirmative within India, the same term takes on a reactive, strategic character when it is pried loose from its nativity" (Radhakrishnan 207). Therefore, there is no singular version of authentic India which can rule over multiple experiences and perspectives about India and Indianness (Radhakrishnan 209). Moreover, the notion of authenticity tends to degenerate into essentialism; therefore, Radhakrishnan argues that we should address the problem of authenticity "alongside the phenomenon of relationality and the politics of representation" (Radhakrishnan 211). Placing the controversy and the violent reception of Mehta's films in the context of the growing religious fundamentalism and nationalism in the 1990s in India, I would like to argue that in the context of Mehta's transnational filmmaking practices, the question of authenticity reveals an anxiety over the demand for unified cultural nationalism by the Hindu fundamentalist religious groups. Mehta's transnational filmmaking practices have critically intervened in the dominant discourses of national identity, the construction of nationhood, and the imposition of women in this hegemonic construction, which may not be possible for Mehta by positioning herself in a singular national context.

The multiple experiences, narratives, histories, and identities that Mehta has portrayed in her trilogy deconstruct any singular ethnocentric vision of history, culture, nationhood, and identity. My interest in Mehta's trilogy—*Fire*, *Earth*, and *Water* --grows out of the multiplicity, heterogeneity, and diversity in her filmic narratives. Specifically, the gender and sexual politics of women depicted in these three films powerfully critique the cultural nationalist and religious definitions of tradition, family, marriage, home, sense of belonging, culture, history, sexuality,

22

and identity in the Indian context, which enable the audience to make sense of the evolution of feminist politics in India through the narratives of film. Mehta's contribution is not only its focus on counter-hegemonic discourses of patriarchal religious nationalism, but also it reframes transnational feminist practice within the core of diasporic and transnational media studies. The portrayal of women's domination and resistance and women's articulation of multiple identities and sexualities in the particular context of colonial and post-colonial India, including the relation to a global politics of culture, capital, and identity, depicted in *Fire*, *Earth*, and *Water,* especially demonstrates the significance of transnational feminist practices in diasporic and transnational media studies.

# Chapter 1: Nationalism and Religion: Women's Bodies in Deepa Mehta's *Water*

In this chapter, I will examine Deepa Mehta's approach to Indian patriarchal nationalist discourses which equate women and national identity, then exploit women as political tools to decolonize India. I will also analyze the ways in which women--in particular, Indian upper caste Brahmin widows -- were doubly exploited by the British "civilizing mission" (Chatterjee 118), on the one hand, and the neo-colonialist discourses of upper caste Hindu patriarchy and reformists on the other. The depicted time frame in Deepa Mehta's 2005 film, *Water*--the 1930s in India--provides important historical, social, political, and cultural contexts to explore how women become a central issue in the political and ideological discourses of British, nationalist, and reformist agendas. The beginning of the twentieth century is significant for many reasons in understanding Indian history, and Mehta's film seeks to untangle this history through her exploration of the narratives of women's lives. *Water* focuses on the ways in which the patriarchal nationalist and religious discourses construct 'womanhood,' 'wifehood,' and 'widowhood' in the context of social and political reforms and how these discourses discipline widows' identity, sexuality, and desire. Addressing the social, religious, political, and cultural issues regarding widowhood, Mehta's *Water* allows the audience to engage critically with the historical context of widows' oppression and delineates an important aspect of the long-standing sexual control of women. At the same time, Mehta draws attention to the social and cultural roots of imagining India as predominantly an upper-caste Hindu and male-dominated nation by focusing on the ideological power of the Hindu religious scriptures and priests and on the patriarchal hegemonies of landlords and gentry (Lall 236). My analysis is informed by the feminist critiques of nationalism as elitist and patriarchal and the religious disciplining of

women's bodies and sexualities in both colonial and post-colonial India; both are problematized by Mehta in *Water*.

Widow-burning was abolished in regulation XVII by the British government in India in 1829, and widows' remarriage was legalized in 1856 by the efforts of social reformers such as Rammohun Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (Bandyopadhyay 100). In spite of the laws and regulations, widow-remarriage was not socially accepted by the upper caste Hindu Brahmins because they considered widow-remarriage as "a deviation from the established moral-behavioural codes of Hinduism" (Bandyopadhyay 112). Therefore, the efforts of social reforms by educated social reformers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have not been very successful because of the dominance of upper caste, Brahmanical patriarchal ideologies in popular culture and among the general public in India (Bandyopadhyay 101). *Water* in its depiction of 1930s India portrays this historical background of nationalist movements against British colonialism in India. The Indian nationalist movement called for modernization and social change for the masses, but women's status, especially widows' social and economic status, remained unchanged because of the ideological and political interests of British and upper- class patriarchal nationalists. Mehta's film investigates the ways in which Hindu patriarchal and nationalist ideologies construct widows as 'markers' or 'bearers' of Indian cultural, religious, and national identity in order to revive their past and lost traditions. The Hindu Brahmins in this film promote this ideological construction of widows as symbols of Hindu identity through the imposition of religious ideologies of widows' purity, chastity, and devotion to their dead husbands. For upper-caste Brahmins, issues regarding widows' domination, forced celibacy, and sexual control become symbolic of authority over India's religious, cultural, and national identity (Bandyopadhyay 109).

To investigate the relationship between the colonialist, patriarchal nationalist, and religious ideologies which enact control upon widows' bodies and sexualities in the historical contexts of reform and nationalist movements in India, Mehta's film addresses the following areas: a) the colonial and upper-caste nationalist aspects of the repression of widows, b) nationalist and reform movements regarding widow's remarriage, and the controlling of widow's sexuality and body, c) the construction of widowhood as social and sexual death and as abject by upper-caste Hindu patriarchy, and the role of Dharmashastra (religious scriptures) to reinforce and legitimize widows' social vulnerability, d) the economic aspect of religion in disciplining widows' bodies and dominating their sexualities and identities and e) widows' identity, agency, and resistance against Hindu patriarchy and religious normativities. Along with Mehta's analysis of patriarchal nationalist and religious domination of widows' bodies and sexualities, this chapter elucidates the ways in which Mehta chooses not to romanticize the issue of widows' remarriage, nor does she construct widows as 'victims'; rather, she depicts the social, cultural, religious and political violence inflicted on widows, which affect all women's lives and identities, but do not, necessarily, eliminate all their agency to destabilize the patriarchal nationalist and religious discourses.

However, this chapter also will address the limitations of Mehta's depiction of liberal nationalism through the portrayal of Gandhi and Narayan as women's saviours. It is important to examine the ways in which post-colonial India is constructed not only as a modern nation, but also "fundamentally a 'Hindu' nation" (Rao 318), given the recent rise of fundamentalist Hindu political organizations. Though Gandhi's anti-colonial and nationalist movements are different in nature from the Hindu fundamentalist initiated '*Hindutva*' ideology, nonetheless, it is important to critique and analyze the ways in which the liberal reformers and their nationalist ideologies

ignore women's voices in their reforming agendas and the ways in which they play paternalistic

roles during the reform movements. More importantly, a more radical criticism of Hindu

religious and nationalist ideologies in both colonial and post-colonial India and their construction

of 'widowhood' and its near relative, 'womanhood,' must be addressed. Mehta begins this

questioning in the film, but fails to fully critique the ways in which nationalism and the

Gandhian discourses conspire to limit women's agency.

**Colonial and Upper-caste Nationalist Aspects of the Repression of Widows:**

According to Benedict Anderson, the British government created upper class, western

educated 'idolaters' (Anderson 91) to continue their hegemony on the rest of the colonized

people and to validate their 'civilizing project' in India. As Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid

argue, "reform appears as a pale imitation of the Victorian master narrative of companionate

domesticity that an emergent and compradore Indian bourgeoisie embraced" (Sangari and Vaid

cited in Sarkar 87). Two of the male characters in this film, Rabindra and Narayan, both are

depicted as westerneducated and elite upper class and caste. Through the character of Rabindra

and his fondness for English whiskey and English poets, and through the depiction of Narayan's

western education, Mehta suggests the Eurocentric and elite nature of some nationalist and

reform leaders. The conversation between Rabindra and Narayan regarding the future of British

rule in India also suggests that both of them, especially Rabindra, are influenced by British

education and ideology as Narayan remarks to Rabindra, "you really are a brown Englishman"

(48:54). The strategic position of the British government in the question of widows/women's

issues becomes clear in this film through the absence of British characters. Mehta does not depict

any British character in this film, but the portrayal of the British is very prevalent through the

film's reference to British rule and their treatment of widows. Scholars such as Uma Mahadevan

and Vijaya Singh criticize Mehta's indirect portrayal of the British as benevolent and civilized (Mahadevan 172), and they argue that Mehta fails to expose colonial British ideology (Singh 196). For instance, when Narayan and Kalyani go outside together while Narayan shows her the edge of the city where the British live and tells Kalyani that the British do not care whether she is a widow, Mehta is potentially suggesting a benevolent view of British rule. However, I argue that Mehta does not represent the British in the film to suggest their symbolic silence in face of the ill treatment of widows by the Brahmins.

Tanika Sarkar explores the British colonialist strategies to validate upper-caste patriarchal ideologies in the gender reform movement in colonial India depicted in this film. Sarkar argues that the emerging gender reform movement by social and political reformers under British colonialism does not necessarily mean that the reform movement was a gift from the British master (Sarkar 89). Rather, as Sarkar explains, the British government took a strategic stance not to intervene into upper-caste patriarchal religious laws and rules. As Sarkar argues, "[s]ince the late eighteenth century, colonial law had enclosed an entire realm of social practices and prescriptions--of caste, inheritance, adoption, succession, dower, marriage, divorce, religious belief and practice--which was to be governed by Hindu and Muslim scripture and custom as interpreted by the authorized religious leaders of their communities" (Sarkar 90). By omitting British characters and thus suggesting their symbolic absence in these debates, Mehta potentially suggests the ideological and political stance of the British actually allowed or validated religious laws and control of women's lives, but Mehta fails to reveal fully these ideological and political motives of the British in this film.

However, it is important to investigate the ways in which the upper caste nationalists and reformers tended to internalize the British 'colonialist' and 'civilizing' discourses during the

reform movements. In fact, the nationalist discourses emerged from the British model of nationalism; as post-colonial theorists argue, "anticolonial nationalist discourse is disparaged not only as derivatively Eurocentric, but also as elitist: it is the ideology of the colonially educated, European-oriented middle-class"(Sivanandan 47). Because of the Eurocentric, elite, and patriarchal nature of reform movements, the reformers failed to effect significant social, political and economic changes in widows' lives. Rather, the anti-colonial nationalist and reform movement imposed a double subordination on women, particularly widows' lives, by adopting European colonialist patriarchy on the one hand, and the nationalist neo-colonialist patriarchy on the other. As post-colonial film critic Ella Shohat argues, the patriarchal nature of anti-colonial nationalist ideology replicates colonial repression and imposes neo-colonialism on women's life (Shohat n. pag.). By considering women's position in anti-colonial nationalist patriarchal ideology as a doubly minor position, she also argues that the anti-colonial nationalist ideology not only ignores social issues such as sexism, classism, and racism in the society, but also reinforces the colonial patriarchal power relations between men and women as she goes on to insist that "colonialism and nationalism have impinged differently on men and women" (Shohat n. pag.). Mehta's position in this film is more in line with Shohat's in that Mehta demonstrates British wealth and the power obtained by Indians who are elites and British-identified comprador class. At the same time, Mehta shows, by focusing on widows' domination, multiple exploitations and their lack of participation in gender reform movements so that women do not gain voice and position from the intervention of the Anglophone elites. Rather, "[t]he nationalist discourse . . . is a discourse about women; women do not speak here. It is a discourse which assigns to women a place, a sign, an objectified value; women here are not subjects with a will and a consciousness" (Chatterjee *Colonialism, Nationalism* 632).

The nationalist resolution of women's status is better understood by Partha Chatterjee's analysis of the contradiction of nationalist ideologies against British colonialism and its civilizing project. The model of British nationalism and civilizing project was not entirely implemented by the anti-colonial nationalist ideologies. The nationalist ideology separated the domain of culture into two categories: the material and the spiritual (Chatterjee, *Colonialism, Nationalism* 623 and *The Nation* 119). In the case of the 'material domain' (Chatterjee 119) such as science, technology, economic organization, modern methods of statecraft, it was essential to adopt the economic policies and technological strategies of Europe because these material advances provided colonized countries such as India enough economic strength to compete with the western economy. But, Indian nationalism took initiative to keep the 'spiritual identity' as Indian, as an essence of the national culture and superior to the west (Chatterjee, *Colonialism, Nationalism* 623). This framework of the cultural domain was, as Chatterjee points out, an analogous dichotomy: the separation between outer/ public and inner/ private space where outer/public domain adopted the material aspect of western civilization and the inner/private space was considered as "one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity" (Chatterjee, *Colonialism, Nationalism* 624). Women were posited as a sign of this inner/private space and as a symbol of the essence of Indian culture and identity which must be kept free from western profane activities through women's purity, chastity, and spiritual activities (Chatterjee *Colonialism, Nationalism* 624). Mehta investigates in *Water* how women are posited in the private domain by depicting widows' lives in a restricted space in the Ashram. At the same time, Mehta demonstrates the ways in which widows' identity are constructed as chaste, pure, and asexual and as symbolic markers of the religious, national, and cultural identity of India. According to Chatterjee, post-colonial nationalism emphasized "with all the force of mythological inspiration what had in any case become a dominant characteristic of femininity in the new construct of 'woman' standing as a sign for 'nation,' namely, the spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion,

religiosity, and so on" ( Chatterjee *Colonialism, Nationalism* 630). Therefore, Mehta demonstrates the ways in which widows' lives in the Ashram are constantly under attack, surveillance and domination. The representation of widows' lives in the private domain of Ashram plays an important role in understanding the process of fixing women's lives in a particular private space and of controlling women's bodies. By depicting the relationship between space and body where widows' bodies are controlled and manipulated by the "dark, sullen and confining enclosure" (Shanker-Jain 178) of the Ashram, Mehta potentially suggests a complex relationship between widows' Ashram and body. As Shanker-Jain points out, "[t]he house and the body are interlinked. . . . House, body and mind are in continuous interplay, the physical structure, furnishing, social conventions and mental images influence the activities and ideas which unfold within its boundaries"(Shanker-Jain 185). Therefore, the dark and broken structure of the Ashram, the power hierarchy between Madhumati and other widows, and the segregation between mainstream society and widows' place by defining who can access into the Ashram continuously control widows' freedom of movement and confine their activities in the Ashram. For example, most of the widows spend their time primarily in daily prayers and religious activities. Through the portrayal of widows' religious activities, Mehta illuminates how the physical confinement of widows in the Ashram's private domain affects the ways in which widows accomplish their gender roles as defined by upper-class religious patriarchy.

Along with the portrayal of the process of fixing widows' roles by religious patriarchy in the private domain of the Ashram, Mehta also depicts the ways in which nationalist discourses adopt the material aspect of the colonizer, and tend to keep separate their spiritual identity as Indian by reviving traditions, culture, spirituality and rituals. This process of selection by nationalist discourses is depicted in *Water* through the different characterization of Rabindra and Narayan. Rabindra, as the film shows, is reluctant to join the nationalist and reform movement,

and his character suggests his adaptation of British material success and development through the portrayal of his fondness of British whiskey, his criticism of Narayan's Gandhian discourse and his anti-colonial nationalist ideology. On the other hand, Narayan, though he embraces British education, is different from Rabindra in his approach to the issues of Indian culture, tradition, and women's rights and freedoms. Narayan, as a reformer, tries to liberate Indian widows from the social and religious miseries by applying Gandhi's ideology, especially in making a decision to marry a widow, as widows are constructed as bearers of India's tradition, culture, and identity, but fails to bring any radical change in Kalyani's life, and also fails to challenge radically his father's sexual domination of widows. The ways in which Mehta portrays Narayan's reform ideologies in relation to Gandhi are complex and ambivalent. On the one hand, Mehta criticizes Gandhi's practice of celibacy, and Narayan's adoption of Gandhian discourse on passive resistance through a couple of scenes-- for example, Rabindra and Narayan's conversation regarding upper class Brahmins' sexual exploitation of widows and Gulabi's and Madhumati's conversation criticizing the Gandhian ideology of sexual abstinence.

The juxtaposing of two scenes is especially important to our understanding of the complex portrayal of Gandhi in *Water*. In one scene, Narayan places a photo of Gandhi on his home's wall and tells his mother that Gandhi is a nationalist leader. At the same time, in another scene where Gulabi informs Madhumati about Gandhi's activities, especially his sexual abstinence, Madhumati asks, "Mohandas who? Is he a new client" (26:17)? Madhumati's response suggests how alienated the widows are—they are so alienated that they cannot get news about the ongoing nationalist and political movements during 1930s in India. In other words, Madhumati's ignorance about Gandhi clearly suggests the ways in which the nationalist, political and reformist movements failed to bring significant change in widows' miserable lives. The

32

conversation between Madhumati and Gulabi also suggests the severe economic crises and harsh survival strategy the widows have to undergo. So, it does not matter to Madhumati who Gandhi is and what his political and nationalist ideologies are; rather, the only concern for Madhumati is how to earn money through the means of prostitution. Therefore, it is important to Madhumati to get a new client rather than to spend time to hear the anti-colonial nationalist discourse of Gandhi which does not have any meaning in these widows' segregated lives in the Ashram.

In another scene where Rabindra describes to Narayan his father Bhupindernath's sexual usage of widows, Narayan suggests to Rabindra, "you should get your father to join Gandhi. Seth Bhupindernath and Gandhi hand in hand liberate the widows of India"(28:46). The farcical tone of Narayan in this statement suggests something more than simply praising Gandhi. The complex portrayal of Gandhi and his discourse is analyzed by Vijaya Singh in *Exteriority, Space and Female Iconography*. As she points out, "[i]t is worth noting how Mehta brings a number of disparate elements, a young widow, who is also a prostitute, a child widow, a Gandhian idealist, in the city of Benaras together in the cinematic space of the film but fails to resolve them adequately, especially with reference to Gandhi and Indian women, more so because Gandhi occupies a liberatory space in the film" (Singh 196). However, Mehta's film does not draw any final conclusion about Gandhian discourses, but allows the audience to make different interpretations about Gandhian ideologies of nationalism and reform.

Mehta is more interested in issues that pertain to women. For example, on the one hand, by portraying Chuyia's freedom as achieved by Gandhi's and Narayan's hand and focusing on the changing nature of time through her focus on British technology by using a train as a route of escape, Mehta suggests the positive changes in women's lives brought by British rule. As Jasbir Jain argues, "*Water* critiques Brahminical values but it also goes beyond this to bring in a host of

33

other issues related to value-structures, colonial stupor and social change" (Jain 66). As a result, Mehta criticizes the moral and religious grounds of Gandhian discourses on Indian women and sexuality. According to Shakuntala Rao, "Gandhi reinvented specific mythological and religious female characters who embodied the virtues he thought necessary to fight for the nationalist cause" (Rao 321). Therefore, Gandhi's *Satyagraha* and *Swadeshi* movement allowed women's participation in anti-colonial struggles, but they were sent back home at the end of the Indian independence war. Gandhi failed to envision women's oppression within the religious normative systems and symbols (Rao 321). As Rao argues, "Gandhi fixes women's suffering as a symbolic condition through their overdetermined roles as mothers and wives (i.e., social roles instituted through marriage). The question of women's emancipation becomes irrelevant here, except in its symbolic use to achieve *Swaraj* (Rao 321)". Similarly, Kumari Jayawardena states, "Gandhi's ideal woman was the mythical Sita, the self-sacrificing, monogamous wife of the Ramayana, who guarded her chastity and remained loyal to Rama in spite of many provocations. Sita was 'promoted' as the model for Indian women" (Jayawardena 96).

Referring to sociologist Maria Mies, Jayawardena argues that "Gandhi was perhaps hardly conscious of the fact that his ideal of womanhood, which he considered to be a revival of the Hindu ideal, contained in fact many traits of the Puritan-Victorian ideal of woman, as it was preached by the English bourgeoisie. Moreover, this image of woman had a 'strategic function in the political movement" (Mies quoted in Jayawardena 96). The abovementioned quotations clearly indicate that women were constructed as a symbol for anti-colonial nationalism. Clearly, neither Gandhi nor Narayan bring radical social, economic and sexual liberation to widows' lives; rather, the nationalist discourses portrayed through the figure of Gandhi and the character of Narayan still entrench widows' identity as chaste, pure and self-sacrificing, and construct

34

widows as signifiers of Indian cultural and national identity. Narayan plays a paternalistic role in liberating Indian women, who cannot free themselves. While the film concludes with an apparently positive change in widows' lives with the political changes in India's political atmosphere, the portrayal of nationalist discourses in Mehta's subsequent film *Earth*, for example, clearly shows how the liberal discourses of anti-colonial nationalism portrayed in *Water* take the shape of violence and ethnocentrism in *Earth* as a political and ideological tools under the disguise of religious politics and segregation. The patriarchal nationalist and religious discourses that exert control over women's bodies and sexualities are better understood in the context of the reform movement regarding the debate on widows' remarriage and the nationalist reformers' ideological stance regarding widows' sexuality portrayed in *Water*.

**Reform Movement, Debate on Widow's Remarriage, and Disciplining Widow's Sexuality:**

The patriarchal and religious control of widows' bodies and sexualities is portrayed in this film by focusing on the social, cultural, and religious customs of child marriage and the prohibitions of widows' remarriage among the upper caste Brahmins. The issue of widows' remarriage was one of the main agendas during the reform movement during the nineteenth century, and it raised extensive debate and contestation among the conservative upper class Hindu Brahmins (Bandyopadhyay 102). A small group of Bengali reformers such as Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar approached the Legislative Council regarding the widows' remarriage and their inheritance rights born of remarriage. As a result, a law was enacted in 1856 removing legal prescriptive prohibition of widows' remarriage and approving the inheritance rights of widows' offspring born of remarriage (Sarker 83).

This acceptance of widows' remarriage challenged upper caste Hindus' normative systems regarding property rights of widows. The outrage and agitation against this reform, by the upper caste Hindu patriarchy, were motivated by religious scriptures and normative customs of caste system in India. As Sarkar argues, "[f]or Hindus, widow remarriage 'involves guilt and disgrace on earth and exclusion of heaven'; it would flout 'the usages and obligation of Caste and Custom.' Moreover, 'the whole framework of the Hindoo Law of inheritance would be shaken and subverted'" (Sarkar 91). Thus, the upper caste Hindu outrage against the law of widows' remarriage was rooted in an ideological motive which promoted social hierarchy and constructed widows' chastity and celibacy as 'markers' of high class Brahmin and Hindu identity. To rationalize widows' celibacy, chastity, and asexuality, Hindu Brahmins used two mechanisms: reinterpreting Hindu scriptures to reinforce widows' chastity, and forcing the social exclusion of remarried widows and their husbands from the privilege of holding upper caste identity. The social and cultural violence on remarried widows, such as social ostracism, disinheritance and losing caste, were so severe that many remarried widows committed suicide (Sarkar 106-109).

This repressive normative system of Hindu religious patriarchy, in controlling widows' sexual choice and using widows' bodies for their own benefit, is portrayed through the conversations between Shakuntala and the priest Sadhananda and between Narayan and his father Seth Dwarkanath. Shakuntala, after experiencing social and religious domination and ill treatment towards widows, asks Sadhananda, "Panditji, you have studied the Holy scriptures. Is it written that widows should be treated badly" (01:21:45)? In response, Sadhananda says that widows have three options according to scripture: "they can burn with their dead husbands, or lead a life of self-denial, or, if the family permits, marry their husband's younger brother"

(01:22:08). This statement clearly shows that the issue of widows' remarriage was approved only within the same kin group because of the interest in controlling widows' property born out of marriage. Another example of exploiting widows' bodies and sexualities in the name of religion in the film is Narayan's father, Dwarkanath's rationalizing of using Kalyani's body. When Narayan informs his father that Kalyani refuses to marry him because of his father's exploitation of her sexuality, Narayan's father Dwarkanath validates his abuses by providing religious favour when he asserts that "Brahmins can sleep with whoever they want, and the women they sleep with are blessed" (01:31:45). Through the portrayals of Seth Dwarkanath's Brahmin ideology and his abuses of widows' sexuality and body, Mehta focuses on the process of constructing widowhood as abject in opposition to the construction of wives as desirable subjects for their reproductive utility which I have discussed in the section regarding the construction of widows as abject.[4] The religious oppression and attitude towards widows' remarriage are further depicted in this film through Sadhananda's and Shakuntala's conversation. The priest Sadhananda informs Shakuntala about the recently passed widows' remarriage law outside of their kinship group, but, at the same time, points out the Brahmins did not accept this law as he asserts, "we ignore the laws that don't benefit us" (01:22:52). By focusing on the Brahmins' refusal to accept the widows' remarriage act, this film suggests the ways in which patriarchal Brahmin ideologies control widows' bodies, sexualities, and property rights.

The widows' remarriage act was also a mechanism to control widows' sexuality during the social reform movement in India. The reformist efforts in passing a law allowing widows' remarriage were, in fact, grounded in concerns regarding young widows' sexuality and in the

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[4] Reproductive utility and the value of women's bodies is also an issue which Mehta addresses in *Fire.*

37

issue of public morality. Child marriage was allowed among all castes during the nineteenth century (Sarkar 99). According to the1891 census, "widows under the age of 10 formed 6 per cent of the total population of married girls" (Sarkar 99). The study of Martha Alter Chen on widows' social and economic status in rural India reveals an interesting outcome about the concern of widows' sexuality. According to Chen, "the chaste ascetic widow is treated with ambivalence and fear. Perceived to be sexually dangerous because she is desiring and desirable as well as unprotected, the widow is feared for her sexual powers" (Alter Chen 29). For Chen, the goal of the reform movement in pursuing a widows' remarriage act was to retain patriarchal control of widows' unprotected and dangerous sexuality rather than to liberate widows from their forced celibacy and sexual repression. After analysing Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar's treatises, a document supporting widows' remarriage act, Bandyopadhyay argues that "[w]hat we find in his two treatises is first of all a definite and honest statement of paternalistic sympathy for the miserable plight of the widows. But, side by side, what is also writ large is a concern for the falling standards of public morality and the increasing social tendency towards adultery and foeticide, all due to the unsatiated sexual appetite of widowed women" (Bandyopadhyay 111). As Sarkar argues, "[w]idows provided almost the only possible route to consensual love and self-willed romance, because the wife, married in infancy and crushed under domestic and procreative labour, was rarely a figure of romance, and the wives of other men were less responsive and less available sexually" (Sarkar 101).

*Water* portrays these complex attitudes towards widowed sexuality by focusing on the ways in which Kalyani's sexuality is used as a source to satisfy the sexual needs of Narayan's father and other upper class Brahmins. Mehta depicts how widows are considered by Brahmins as inauspicious and a curse in the society, but on the other hand, Brahmins enjoy young widows'

sexual excess. As Narayan's friend Rabindra confesses, "The gentry here have an unnatural concern for widows. My father doesn't even bother with their names, the old one, the fat one, the new one, the young one" (27:47). This film thus indicts the ways in which the upper caste Brahmins construct widows as abject and inauspicious, but, on the other hand, enjoy widows' youth, body and sexuality. Mehta explores this contradiction in a number of scenes. For example, in one scene where Narayan says to his father that he wants to marry Kalyani, his father's statement suggests Brahmins' complex and contradictory attitudes towards widowed sexuality. Narayan's father's advises that it is preferable for him to keep Kalyani as a mistress despite the social ostracism that would bring; he is not allowed to marry a widow because of her low social status in the social hierarchy in colonial India. Therefore, being a widow, Kalyani is not expected to be a wife of Narayan because her sexuality is no longer used for legitimate reproduction. Along with the representation of Brahmins' ideology regarding widows as abject, this film also reveals how Brahmins' sexual exploitation of widows is embedded in the economic politics of religious ideologies.

**Economic Aspects of Widowhood:**

Mehta portrays the economic vulnerability of widowed women and reveals the ways in which the economic interest was one of the motives for keeping widows alienated in an Ashram. This economic motive of Hindu patriarchy became clear in couple of scenes in this film--for example, the priest Sadhananda's statement regarding the Brahmins' outrage against widows' remarriage for their own interest. As Sarkar argues, "An orthodox tract branded remarriage as unnatural because it violated not sexual laws but property laws upon which the world rested-- it amounted to the cultivation of a field without the consent of the rightful owner" (Sarkar 103). Mehta depicts the economic struggle of survival of widows as widowed women were completely

39

deprived from owning any matrimonial property. Though the customary laws allowed widowed

women a share to their husbands' property, they were often cheated. Most often widows were

dependent on relatives' assistance and begging (Sarkar 107). Also, the upper caste patriarchy

used a mechanism that deprived widows of their husbands' property rights. If any widowed

woman was charged with 'unchastity' after her widowhood, she was completely denied any kind

of property rights and maintenance cost. Therefore, widowed women were forced into

prostitution as a way of earning. As Sarkar points out, "Reformers and officials were

embarrassed to find a disproportionately large number of Brahman widows in Calcutta brothels"

(Sarkar 107).

This crude reality is portrayed in *Water* through the depiction of Kalyani's forced

prostitution because her prostitution is the only way of earning money to bear the Ashram's

expenses. Mehta shows that the economic vulnerability of widows is so severe that they are

unable even to bear their funeral expenses. For example, when the oldest widow, Patiraji, dies,

one of the widows raises the question where the cost for cremation comes from. The economic

realities also become clear in the statement of Narayan after Kalyani's death. Narayan, in this

scene, explains to Shakuntala why the widows are sent to the Ashram. He asserts, "One less

mouth to feed. Four saris saved, one bed, a corner is saved in the family house" (01:37:25).

Narayan's interpretation reveals the economic framework of religious practices which are

abusive of women. Mehta's portrayal of this economic interest of religious practices provides a

key insight in the analysis of capitalist religious patriarchy in colonial India.

Along with the focus on the religious, social, cultural and economic aspects of patriarchal

Brahmin ideology, Mehta also portrays the colonization of widows' psychic space due to the

influence of religious scriptures. For example, Madhumati's character is highly influenced by the

ideologies of Hindu scriptures, but Mehta also portrays Madhumati's belief in religious

discourses in complex ways. As a head of the Ashram, Madhumati takes all kinds of privileges;

for example, she enjoys all things prohibited to widows such as butter and marijuana. Her

matriarchal domination "imitates the patriarchal stance" (Sengupta 115) and ideology in the

Ashram. Madhumati's complex complicity with patriarchal laws is evident in a couple of scenes.

For example, when she is informed by Chuyia about Kalyani's remarriage, she asks Kalyani,

"Have you gone mad? Nobody marries a widow. Shameless, you'll sink yourself and us. We'll

be cursed. We must live in purity, to die in purity" (01:14:57). This statement of Madhumati, on

the one hand, focuses on the cruel survival struggles of all widows in the Ashram; but on the

other hand, it shows her orthodox beliefs in the construction of ascetic widows as symbols of

"continued devotion to the dead husband's memory, and therefore a continuing symbol of

martyrdom" (Chadha 93). At the same time, Mehta depicts that Madhumati's belief in the

discourse of purity results from taking benefits from this religious belief, as she profits from the

domination of widows, while recognizing the reality that the patriarchal religious ideologies do

not permit the widows to remarry and cannot bring social change in widows' lives. However, the

idea of purity that Madhumati raises in the abovementioned quotation suggests that though

widows are considered by the religious and patriarchal ideologies as abject because of their lack

of reproduction ability, they are still considered as 'useful' in keeping their dead husbands'

honour by complete devotion, chastity and purity. The ideological motive in elevating the

discourse of purity by religious patriarchy is to control widows' sexuality and identity and to

validate patriarchal domination of women in the name of religious rituals.

The complexity of Madhumati's belief in Brahmanical Hindu patriarchal ideologies is

also depicted in this film by focusing on Madhumati's strict rules and regulations regarding

41

widows' brutal dietary and religious rituals. But on the other hand, as this film shows, Madhumati herself violates this religious beliefs by taking prohibited food. However, Mehta also shows how other widows in the Ashram conform to religious beliefs and ideologies. For example, when Chuyia asks Shakuntala where is the house of men widows, other widows express their deep concern for their husbands as they articulate, "Rama, what a terrible thing to say. God protects our men from such a fate. May your tongue burn. Pull out her tongue and throw it in the river" (32:02). Another example of the internalization of patriarchal religious ideologies is the portrayal of the brutal dietary rules in this film. All widows in the Ashram, including the child widow Chuyia, are forced to conform to the brutal dietary system, and they are restricted from all kinds of food which may reheat their body. The whole notion behind widows' brutal dietary system and the religious prohibition of all kinds of hot food including fish, meat, eggs, onions, garlic and ghee (butter) are to repress and thereby restrict widows' sexuality and desire. The restriction against taking hot food also suggests the ways in which widows' sexual desire and appetite are denied.

There is a huge contradiction between this repression of female appetites and the use of female bodies for sexual pleasure which the film seeks to explore through sharp contrast and juxtaposition; for example, Madhumati's practice of exerting power through the consumption of hot food and the policing of the brutal dietary system imposed on the rest of the widows works as symbolic of their powerlessness in the Ashram. At the same time, Mehta depicts the ways widows also take prohibited food as a way to resist religious norms and to articulate their repressed sexual desire. Mehta further depicts this normative system of repressing widows' sexual desire and equating it with the denial of the pleasures of food through Pitiraji's character. In the first meeting with Chuyia, Pitiraji asks whether Chuyia has juicy rasgullas, hot gulab

42

jamuns, yellow laddos. Auntie's desire for sweets, especially ladoos, and her request to die

outside of the Ashram clearly show how the upper caste Brahmins normative system imprisons

widows' bodies and desires through religious normative systems and rituals. As Madhuri

Chatterjee argues, " The socio-moral code of religion excludes women not only from power

structures and social constructs but also from her own body, the idea of a self and her sexuality"

(Chatterjee 81). She goes on to argue that "The concept of purity critiqued in *Water* imposes a lot

of control over desires and senses, and imposes a social control through forms of behaviour and

relationships" (Chatterjee 81).

Addressing women's domination in relation to patriarchal religious normative discourses

and the contesting reform and nationalist movements in colonial India, *Water* focuses on the

different kind of relationships engendered by patriarchal practices with class, religion, nationalist

reform, social movements, and colonization (Sangari and Vaid 5). The emphasis of Nayaran's

dream for liberation, the focus on the widows' remarriage act and Kalyani's suicide because of

the  volatile attitude towards her decision to remarry clearly show that neither anti-colonial

nationalist movements nor reform agendas were concerned about women's liberation and

positive changes in their lives; rather, I argue that  the patriarchal and religious nationalist

ideologies construct women's issues as a playground in which they fulfill their ideological and

political motives. I do not argue that the anti-colonial nationalist and reform movement did not

play any role in women's lives; rather, I argue that rather than enjoying the benefits of social

reform movements, women have always been pushed to the margins of social change and

development because of the patriarchal and religious nature of reform movements. Mehta shows

in this film that the increasing politicization of religious identities in nationalist reform

movements provides a new "lease of life to patriarchal practices under 'religious' sanction"

(Sangari and Vaid 2). The inter-relation between colonialist ideologies and the elite and Eurocentric nature of patriarchal nationalist reform movements is depicted through the characters of Rabindra and Narayan in this film.

Although *Water* depicts women's freedom as issuing from nationalist reformist groups, the unchanged social, economic and political realities depicted in widows' lives in this film reveal that the women question is completely ignored and excluded from the nationalist discourses in post-colonial India. Moreover, the film's depiction of the disciplining of widows' bodies and sexualities by the upper class Hindu patriarchy focuses the viewer on the ways in which the religious and nationalist ideologies construct women as emblematic of Indian nation and culture. Mehta explores the ways in which widows are constructed as repositories of religious meanings, rituals, norms and purity and reveals that widows' chastity and celibacy are constructed by Hindu Brahmins as "symbols of the culture of respectable" (Bandyopadhyay 113) or elite Brahmins. I argue that it is the patriarchal, religious and sexed/gender biased concepts of religion, tradition and custom which are under examination in Mehta's exploration of women's agency and sexuality in colonial and post-colonial India.

By portraying widows' lives side by side with the portrayal of married women, especially in two scenes--for example, Kalyani's and a married woman's bathing scene and Shakuntala and a married couple's wedding ceremony scene--Mehta shows how widows are constructed as the opposite of acceptable womanhood: they are abject and desexualized beings according to patriarchal and Brahmin ideology. Simran Chadha analyzes the impact of this particular construction of widowhood as abject--social and sexual death--on the lives of real women; as Chadha argues, "[t]he laws that govern widowhood extend through the social body of laws governing Hindu society and have therefore a very direct impact on the lives of real women, who

44

are conditioned from childhood to fear widowhood and avoid it through piety and devotion"

(Chadha 88). Through the examination of widows' social and sexual death and the patriarchal

Brahmins' construction of widows as abject, Mehta depicts the processes that are at play in the

abjection of widows in the name of religion; through comparison, she also allows us to see the

ways in which this construction of widowhood has huge influence on the construction of chaste

and ideal womanhood and wifehood.

**Symbolic Constructions of Widowhood as 'Social Death':**

*Water* focuses on the ways in which widows are symbolically constructed as socially

dead by the uppercaste Brahmin patriarchy (Chakravarti 64, Mukherjee 36). The social and

sexual domination of widows are portrayed through their social ostracism and alienation. *Water*

begins with a scene wherein an 8 year old, Chuyia, is sent to a widows' Ashram after her

husband's death. This establishing scene clearly depicts the common practices, in colonial India,

of widows being forcibly sent to a place which is restricted from much social contact, privileges,

and community involvement, and especially, from male access. In short, women are imprisoned

with other women because they are widowed. This alienated state of widows and their social

marginality make them socially dead. In order to explore the social alienation, *Water* depicts

widows of different ages in an Ashram, and the portrayal of the Ashram's colourless and broken

structure in opposition to the depiction of Narayan's father's bright, colourful and rich palace

across the river suggests the social segregation between mainstream society and the outcast

widows' Ashram. Considered as responsible for her husband's death, Chuyia is sent to the

widow's Ashram as a disrupter of the normative social order and a curse on society. By depicting

the widows' social ostracism, in the name of religion, rituals and customs, Mehta suggests that

the construction of widows as 'socially dead' is embedded in the hegemony of Hindu religious

scriptures, patriarchal traditions, customs and social hierarchy in Indian caste system. She does

this primarily through her use of Hindu scripture. According to ancient Hindu scripture, as the

film articulates, widows are condemned and cursed for their husbands' death as their husbands'

death is considered a result of their sins from previous life. Widows are generally considered to

be symbols of bad fortune and a bad omen; as punishment for their sin, widows are forced to live

in a social and sexual abstinence. These strict religious rules and regulations of widows' lives are

depicted through the text of Manu which is criticized throughout in *Water*.

*The Laws of Manu*, one of the influential Hindu texts, is quoted at the very beginning of

this film: "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" (quotation displayed at the very beginning of

*Water*). To validate patriarchal domination of women, Manu constructs wifehood as *ardhangini-*

the half body of her husband (Sarkar 96). The ideological motive behind this construction is to

promote the unquestioned devotion of women towards 'pati' (husband), even after his death, and

to elevate the patriarchal domination of women. *Water* focuses on this construction of women

and widows as 'half body of their husband' and depicts the ways in which Hindu Brahmins

validate this ideology in the name of religion. The ideological motive behind this construction is

to promote the wife's unquestioned devotion to her husband, as explained by Tanika Sarkar. As a

wife is constructed as only a half body of her husband, she is obliged to lead her life through

"self-deprivation, a renunciation of all pleasures of life--sexual, dietary, sartorial, and ritual"

(Sarkar 96). Mehta critically examines and questions these Hindu religious patriarchal ideologies

in the construction of widows as socially dead by focusing on Madhumati-Chuyia's conversation

in *Water*. When Chuyia cannot adjust to the brutal dietary restrictions and religious regulations

of widows' Ashram, Madhumati, the female head of the Ashram, tends to rationalize the tale of

religious scriptures in the name of religion and wifely duties. As she states to Chuyia, "Our Holy

Books say, a wife is part of her husband, while he's alive. And when husband dies, God helps us,

wives also half die, so how can a half dead woman feel pain" (08:39). Chuyia replies, "Because

she's half alive" (09:03). Mehta's focus on the patriarchal Brahmins' construction of widowhood

as social death brings important narratives of the social construction of widows as lack, loss, and

abject into stark opposition to those of abundance, life, love, and innocence.

Borrowing the term 'abject' from Julia Kristeva's *The Powers of Horror*, Simran Chadha

points out that "The object of abjection, as opposed to the object of desire must be expunged

from the societal order for it refers to the threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of

the distinction between subject and object or between self and other" (Chadha 89). Widows,

therefore, are considered by the patriarchal Brahmin ideology as something in between life and

death and as symbols of curse and disrupters, but still they are desirable for their sexual excess.

Two scenes make this abjection evident. In one, Mehta juxtaposes Kalyani and Chuyia and a

married woman in a bathing scene. When Kalyani accidentally collides with the married woman,

she scolds her and says, "What are you doing?  Widows shouldn't run around like unmarried

girls. You've polluted me! I have to bath again" (20:46). Similarly, Shakuntala is considered as

an abject when she fills her water bucket from the Ganges where a priest does religious rituals

for a wedding ceremony. Considering Shakuntala's shadow as a sign of bad omen for the newly

married couple, the priest says, "Watch it. Don't let your shadow touch the bride!" (39:38). Also,

what is clearly important in these scenes, as it resonates so specifically with the title, is the use of

water as a symbol of purity. Both widows are seen as in danger of "polluting" the very source of life: water[5].

*Water* further emphasizes that the social and religious contexts in the construction of widows as 'socially dead' are enacted and reinforced through the reiteration of religious ritualized patterns, such as the shaving of a widow's head and fasting, and the custom of wearing a white sari. Analyzing the symbolic interpretations of the white sari and the rituals of shaving widow's head, Uma Chakravarti argues that "the colour codes of red and white are systematically sustained in the wife/ widow opposition. Whereas red symbolizes fertility and sexuality, white symbolizes asexuality and death" (Chakravarti 76). Similarly, the shaving of the widows' heads signifies their symbolic castration, the loss of sexuality as women's hair is considered as the symbol of sexuality, power and freedom (Chakravarti 77). As Chakravorti argues, "The Widow's social death stems from her alienation from reproduction and sexuality, following the loss of her husband and her exclusion from the functioning social unit of the family" (Chakravorti 64). This film focuses our gaze in that all of the widows in the Ashram, including Chuyia, are forcibly shaved after their husbands' death. Specifically, the head shaving scene of Chuyia and hair cutting scene of Kalyani depict the ways in which their sexual usefulness and beauty are symbolically castrated. At the very beginning of this film, we see Chuyia with long hair, sitting with her sick husband, father and mother-in-law at a bullock cart. The second scene depicts the ways Chuyia is transformed as asexual being and socially dead person through her shaving after her husband's death. Similarly, Kalyani who is only permitted to keep her hair long because of her sexual value is desexualized towards the end of the film through the cutting of her hair. By portraying the religious rituals of head shaving and hair

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[5] Mary Douglas originally addressed concepts of pollution and taboo in 1966 in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Douglas 1-29).

cutting, Mehta depicts the ways in which widows are socially constructed as of use, yet abject because widows' sexuality has no reproduction value in the society. The depictions of Kalyani's and Chuyia's transformation into desexual beings and the process of their abjection clearly suggest the ways patriarchal religious ideologies limit and control women's sexuality and define women's role as mothers and wives. *Water* depicts the religious rituals, ceremonies, and restrictions through which every widow has to go, and posits these as the dominant mechanisms of Hindu patriarchy in controlling widows' sexualities and bodies. *Water* also examines the ways in which the reform and nationalist movements fail because of the patriarchal and Brahmin ideologies, and therefore, the reform agenda regarding widows' remarriage also fails to bring freedom in widows' sexual lives during the late nineteenth century.

At this point, I would like to emphasize Mehta's choice to turn the audience's gaze from lack (death) to abundance (life). Through Chuyia's response to Madhumati, Mehta establishes widows' autonomous identity. Chuyia throughout the film is a symbol of the resilience of life. As a child, she has not been entirely indoctrinated in her lack of self-worth, of value; rather, Chuyia freely loves and appreciates the others, especially, the eldest widow 'auntie' and Kalyani's dog Kaalu. Her ignorance of her ideological position permits her a voice. She is alive because she does not know she is dead. Mehta explores this innocence of life and exposes the violence perpetrated by patriarchal ideology. However, along with the portrayal of the violence enacted on widows' lives by the patriarchal nationalist and religious discourses that I have discussed in earlier paragraphs, Mehta explores the ways in which the lives of the widows in the Ashram continue to challenge the Brahmins' patriarchal and religious discourses through their articulation of sexuality, resistance and agency.

**Widow's Identities, Agency and Resistance:**

Ultimately, Mehta does not portray widows as essentially victims; rather, she depicts the ways in which widows' identity and agency are situated in a particular social, cultural, religious and political context during the anti-colonial and reform movement in India. Some scholars, for example Vijaya Singh and Sudha Rai, criticize Mehta's representation of widows' identity as 'victims' and the depiction of widows' sexuality within the legitimized domain (Singh 199). According to Rai, "The denial of subjecthood and agency by the diasporic gaze is the limitation of these narratives of victimhood" (Rai 211). I argue that Mehta focuses on the systematic violence of colonialism, religion and neo-colonialist nationalist ideologies. Rather than portraying widows' victimization, Mehta depicts the ways in which the widows, especially Chuyia, Kalyani and Shakuntala, continuously intervene into the religious, cultural and social normative discourses, and the ways in which they negotiate their economic oppression and resist their sexual domination within and outside of the Ashram. This section will discuss how *Water* counter-narrates the religious and nationalist ideologies of widows as 'objects' of sexual domination through their articulation of multiple and heterogeneous identity, agency and sexuality. This section also focuses on the ways in which all of widows in the Ashram make a home away from home through their co- operation, solidarity, empathy and shared experiences and memories. Mehta reveals in this film that each widow resists her domination in different ways because of her different social position, level of literacy, and age.

Mehta also portrays the ways in which the widows build a sense of community through "a combination of imagination, sweet reminiscences, sorrowful memories, dreams and reflected human values" (Shanker-Jain 179). A couple of scenes are evident in focusing on widows' sharing of experiences, memories and joys. For example, Pitiraji the oldest widow in the Ashram

50

remembers the joys and, at the same time, sorrows in the wedding ceremony in her childhood and shares with Chuyia, "while the priest was reciting the vows, I started to laugh. Ma slapped me hard, and then until the end not a squeak from me" (18:45). This memorialisation of her childhood not only provides a different picture of a married woman's life than that of a widowed woman, but also suggests how the widows survive through their imagination though they have to undergo severe hardship. Another scene where Chuyia feeds Pitiraji a loodo before her death suggests Chuyia's love for Pitiraji, which brings a different taste in Pitiraji's life. Mehta portrays how the resilience and courage through sharing and empathy bring a change in widows' lives and stimulate them to intervene in their sexual and social domination. As Shanker-Jain argues, the widows' home is a place where the widows are "the agents of continuous intervention, change and exchange" (Shanker-Jain 178).

The agentic role of Chuyia in *Water* is important to analyze because she challenges religious norms and regulations from the very beginning in this film. When Chuyia is sent to the Ashram, she challenges Madhumati's domination of other widows by saying "I don't want to be a stupid widow, Fatty" (09:12). Chuyia's childish behaviour suddenly changes the atmosphere of the Ashram into a joyous and friendly environment. Chuyia is the only one who put religious norms into question and challenges religious regulations towards widowhood. First, Chuyia brings forward the issues of widows' right of ownership and asks the important question of who belongs to Indian identity who does not. Through the character of Chuyia, Mehta raises the important issrue of the sense of belonging of widows, as this film raises the question of 'home'. Throughout the film, Chuyia asserts that she will not stay in the Ashram because this is not her home. Mehta portrays through Chuyia's character how widows are constructed as outsiders as they do not have property rights. Chuyia's quest to go back to her 'home' symbolically questions

51

Hindu customary laws about widows' matrimonial property rights which force widows to be dependent on either their fathers or husbands. That the Hindu customary laws push the widows into the margin of poverty is strongly depicted in *Water*.

Another example of Chuyia's resistance is to challenge Madhumati's religious norms. When Madhumati asserts to Chuyia that a wife is a part of her husband, so when a husband dies, a wife is also half dead, Chuyia challenges Madhumati and argues in favour of widows' autonomous self and identity. Third and perhaps, the most important example of Chuyia's resistance is to ask Shakuntala "where is the house for men widows" (31:57). Chuyia's question suggests the hierarchy of gender relations between widows and widowers in the Indian context, and reveals how the power hierarchy in social and gender relation makes widowed women's conditions more vulnerable. Because of the power relations between men and women, widows are treated differently from the treatment of widowers. Widowers are generally allowed to marry according to their wish and in their own interest. Mehta shows how important it is to question the hierarchal gender and social relations through the depiction of Chuyia's agency and resistance against the normative systems of the Ashram. Another important example of Chuyia's resistance is when she murders Madhumati's parrot out of rage against Madhumati. Chuyia's action suggests her symbolic resistance against the oppressive religious discourses against widows. Ultimately, the film concludes with Chuyia's brutal rape by Narayan's father, which suggests the ways in which widow's agency is shaped and, to some extent, is limited by the structural, cultural and religious violence enacted on the widows during the nineteenth century in India.

The beautiful young widow Kalyani is presented with limited agency in comparison to Chuyia as Kalyani is forced to prostitute herself to bear the expenses of the Ashram. In spite of the long term sexual exploitation, and the limited choice of her life, Kalyani challenges her usage

52

as a sexual object in a couple of scenes. For example, when Madhumati offers her extra care because of her physical value, she protests and alerts her that "this is an Ashram, Didi, not a brothel" (01:07:44). But, ultimately, Kalyani is forced to commit suicide because of her sexual exploitation, and by focusing on her death, Mehta portrays the extreme result of widows' sexual, social and economic exploitation. When Kalyani comes to know that Narayan's father was her client, she refuses to marry Narayan. Finding no other option, Kalyani returns to the Ashram, and Madhumati tells her that she is allowed to return to the Ashram only if she agrees to do prostitution again. Kalyani, at last, does not surrender herself to sexual domination; rather, she challenges the Hindu patriarchal sexual oppression by throwing herself in the holy Ganges. Kalyani's suicide is her resistance against the religious normative discourses. By focusing on her inevitable death, Mehta also reveals the crack in the reform and nationalist movements which fail to bring any change in Kalyani's life.

Shakuntala, the only widow who can read and write, also resists the Hindu patriarchal religious discourses. The apparent image of Shakuntala is very pious and dutiful as she follows the Hindu priest Sadhananda as her religious guru. But, Shakuntala also challenges the religious discourses regarding widowhood. For example, in one scene, Sadhananda asks her whether she is close to 'self-liberation' through her religious activities and sincerity. Shakuntala suddenly articulates her worldly desire, and challenges the religious definition of "self- liberation", as she states, "Self-liberation means detachment from worldly desires? Then no, I am not closer" (41:23). This confession of Shakuntala's desire reveals how important it is to connect "desire" of the oppressed with the deeply embedded body-level issues of pain, illness, and despair. It is important to note that the different and multiple ways in which Chuyia, Kalyani and Shakuntala articulate their agency and identity suggest that the widows are not merely victims; rather, their

identity and agency are highly shaped by and also shape the upper caste Hindu patriarchal

religious discourses. Also, the different ways in which Chuyia, Shakuntala and Kalyani articulate

their identity suggests how they negotiate with extreme hostile circumstances and struggles for

survival. *Water* thus challenges the stereotypical construction of widowhood as 'social and

sexual death' by the Brahmin religious discourses, and depicts the ways in which the widows are

the actors of their struggles and resistance.

Mehta also portrays widows' resistance against the Brahmin religious normative

discourses through her choice of film style in *Water*.Through specific film techniques such as

framing, lighting, colour, and use of long lenses, Mehta suggests the ways in which widows are

not degraded or abject; rather, as beautiful presences they have agency to negotiate and resist

their domination and oppression by patriarchal religious discourses. In this scene where Chuyia

messages Madhumati, Mehta positions carefully Chuyia and other characters to emphasize

Chuyia's agency and resistance. In this close-up shot, Chuyia is positioned on the right side of

the frame, which suggests the importance of Chuyia's character. Not only the framing of Chuyia

but also the lighting suggests the power and beauty in Chuyia's character. Mehta's deliberate

composition of light and framing, for example the use of dark shade on right side of the frame in

a long shot and Mehta's position of Chuyia at the centre facing toward the window, suggests the

terrific darkness of Chuyia's imprisonment in the Ashram, but, through the light coming from the

window, also symbolizes hope and beauty in Chuyia's life and her strength to resist the

oppression. In a subsequent shot where Madhumati cuts Kalyani's hair and de-sexualizes her,

Mehta's perfect balance of Kalyani and Madhumati in a shot-reverse shot structure suggests

Kalyani's potential to resist the violence enacted by Madhumati. Here again, Mehta's deliberate

use of a bright background with green leaves and her use of light coming from window in

contrast to the dark in Kalyani's room suggest beauty and hope in Kalyani's character in spite of the dark effect of religious repression on her sexuality. In both scenes, Mehta carefully composes the background with sunlight reflecting on green leaves, which suggests beauty in the widows' characters and challenges the religious construction of widows as abject. At the same time, Mehta focuses on the dark effect of repressive religious discourses on widows' lives through the portrayal of dark shadows on widows' faces.

Mehta's careful composition of two scenes regarding Shakuntala's agency and resistance positions Shakuntala as the strongest character in this film. In the shot where Shakuntala confesses her bodily desire to the priest (chapter 8), Mehta portrays Shakuntala and, ultimately, India in positive way. In the steady and graceful shot, Mehta composes a beautiful background of green trees and sunlight and uses water in a positive manner to cleanse the ignorance and misfortune that the patriarchal religious discourses bring into widows' lives. The position of Shakuntala on the right side and at the centre of the frame and Mehta's composition of background with green leaves, sky, and water suggest the beauty of India and the strength in Shakuntala's character. Especially, in a close-up shot in this scene, Mehta depicts that Shakuntala cleanses the surface ground with water while the priest tells her not to lose her faith, an important example of Mehta's portrayal of Shakuntala's strength and faith. At the same time, Mehta's use of vacuum on the right side of the frame also suggests Shakuntala's anxiety and her troubling situation in the society. However, one of the powerful shots regarding Shakuntala's resistance and agency is the ending shot of *Water* where Shakuntala looks back (chapter 19). This shot is carefully composed by Mehta to interrogate the religious discourses about widows' domination through the portrayal of Shakuntala's gaze. In this shot, Mehta uses a long lens, which is commonly used in Hollywood cinema for a glamorous portrayal of characters by

blurring the background behind them. Here, Mehta exploits this traditional filmic technique of Hollywood and uses the long lens for symbolic and political purposes. In this shot, Mehta positions Shakuntala in sharp focus on the left side of the frame, and blurs the background. In this shot, the deliberate blurring of the background produces an atmospheric effect that suggests Shakuntala's anxiety. Yet, through the highlight of Shakuntala's gaze, Mehta articulates Shakuntala's strength and poses questions regarding the social and religious treatment of widows in India.

By revealing the relationship between colonialism, nationalism, religion, patriarchy and elite class ideologies, Mehta exposes the ideologies of cultural and religious nationalism which revive traditions 'as it really was' in the name of religious politics. Mehta's *Water* brings forward the important issue that "there is nothing natural or primordial about cultural identities--religious or otherwise--and their projection as political agencies" (Bannerji 6). Therefore, rather than portraying the miseries of widows as it really was, Mehta rewrites the religious nationalist discourses of tradition by focusing on social and political changes over time. Depicting the widows' agencies and resistance in multiple and different ways in *Water*, Mehta also focuses on the ways in which the widows can be defined as agents "depending on the ideological/political ground of interpellation" (Bannerjee 6). So, on the one hand, as this film shows, Madhumati and other widows in the Ashram internalize patriarchal religious ideologies, but at the same time, Chuyia, Kalyani and Shakuntala resist these discourses in multiple ways. *Water* not only provides social, cultural, historical, economic, and political contexts of women's, specifically widows', multiple displacements in the colonial and post-colonial India, but also allows a space of resistance and continuous intervention of widows in the nationalist and religious discourses of essentialized and mythologized feminine identities.

**Chapter 2: Women's History: Partition, Borders and Bodies in Deepa Mehta's *Earth***

As in *Water*, in *Earth,* Deepa Mehta addresses the position of women in relation to discourses of nationalism in the context of religious constructions of female bodies. However, *Earth* focuses primarily on women's personal histories as providing an alternative to these more hegemonic discourses. With traumatic histories then "[t]he issue is not simply with remembering or forgetting, but rather with how the nation remembers to forget, with how, that is, the representations of a remembered past serve an imaginary coherence that remains closed to the other" (Mario Di Paolantonio quoted in Didur, *At a Loss* 53). Deepa Mehta's *1947 Earth* (1998) is a film adaptation of Pakistani diasporic writer, Bapsi Sidhwa's semi- autobiographical novel, *Cracking India,* which portrays the traumatic experiences and collective memories of an intimate group of friends from different religions, ethnicities, castes, class, and gender categories during the violent history of British India's partition into modern India and Pakistan in 1947. This film focuses on the violence of the Indo-Pakistan division through the eyes of an eight years old Parsee child, Lenny. By describing the effect of this bloody partition and the nation building projects of India and Pakistan through Lenny's perspective, Mehta focuses on an alternative history about partition and communal violence described by a woman who lived through it as a child and is now recollecting these difficult events. In interview with Richard Phillips, Mehta states, "I wanted to tell this really large story from the standpoint of an intimate group of friends from different ethnic groups and trace out the process of partition through them" (Phillips n. pag.). In order to do so, Mehta depicts not only a woman's perspective on the Partition, but also those of the working class and subaltern.  In so doing, Mehta gives voice to the memories and the daily lives of those whose stories are marginalized in the dominant narratives of the history of

India's partition. Focusing on a woman's narrative and her sense of the traumatic experiences of subaltern lives, *Earth* creates "a double feminist lens" (Hai 383): as Ambreen Hai argues, "[i]t offers both a self-narrated account of the growing consciousness of a little girl, a member (like the author) of a minority ethno-religious community, and a focus on the--until recently untold-- experiences of the scores of women (of various ethnicities) who were raped, abducted, or mutilated in the ensuing violence" (383). The central female characters in the film, Lenny and Ayah, are positioned as 'border inhabitants' in the film, which allows us to examine the complexity of this violent partition beyond the grand narratives of political, religious, and nationalist discourses of partition. In focussing on the experience of the subaltern, *Earth* challenges male-dominated nationalist historiography through Lenny's growing consciousness regarding India's partition and through her transformation from an innocent perspective to a political interventionist and revisionist perspective.

*Earth* depicts how gendered bodies, especially women's bodies, are constructed as a 'contested space' over which different ethnic, political and religious groups fight to acquire this symbolic territory.  In fact, the physical and symbolic borders produced in partition profoundly affect all the central characters, such as Ayah, Lenny and Ayah's admirers; on the other hand, Lenny's and Ayah's agencies resist and challenge these restrictions on their identities and sexualities. Lenny and Ayah negotiate, contest and resist the border-making processes of nationalist ideologies fuelled by religious difference. The conscious and unconscious agencies of Ayah and Lenny are very important to understand the ways in which subaltern people resist received political and national narratives through their daily activities and lives. The daily lives and experiences of  working class people in this film not only challenge the normative discourses and institutions, such as nationalist ideology and state decisions regarding partition, but also

demonstrate the ways in which daily lives can be transformed into critical sites of knowledge, alternative histories, and political consciousnesses.

As in *Water* and *Fire*, *Earth* focuses on the daily resistances and agencies of women in their private spheres and the ways they negotiate and question the colonial, religious and nationalist discourses in colonial and post-colonial India. My analysis of Ayah's and Lenny's identities and agencies is informed by post-colonial and transnational feminist frameworks. These frameworks resist any kind of totalizing definition of women's victimization, lack of agency and identity. My chapter is divided into three sections: a) the depiction of political and nationalist perspectives of India's partition and Lenny's intervention between these dominant narratives, b) the representation of violence against gendered bodies, and c) the ways in which Lenny's and Ayah's multiple identities resist symbolic and physical borders imposed on their desires and sexualities. In the last section, I will also discuss how Lenny's 'in-between,' or interstitial identity and Ayah's identity as liminal, a 'border inhabitant' reveal the complexity, ambivalence and contradiction of the partition of Indian sub-continent. My work will contribute to a nuanced understanding of the post-colonial identities of women such as Ayah and Lenny, identities which enable us to better comprehend the contradictions and ambivalence of colonial and post-colonial subjectivity in transnational production and the ways in which women's lives enact resistance.

**Received Political and Nationalist Perspectives and Lenny's Interventionist Narratives:**

According to Linda Hutcheon, "Postcolonial narrative is a form of trauma narrative[;]. . . its function is to reclaim agency both by remembering belatedly, and by trying to heal, to undo that trauma by recalling in a public venue--but in the mode of the personal--the violence of

nation formation" ( Hutcheon quoted in Hai 388). In *Earth,* Mehta focuses on public and private

traumatic experiences occasioned through the violence of partition in which Lenny's acts of

memory constitute a "social history" (Menon and Bhasin 6). The mode of remembering partition

through Lenny's personal experience is very powerful in articulating an alternative

historiography. Urvashi Butalia writes, "I have come to believe that there is no way we can begin

to understand what partition was about, unless we look at how people remember it (quoted in

Didur, *At a Loss* 53). Considering memory as an activity which mediates between past and

present, and individual and collective forms of imaginations, Ann Cvetkovich points out that the

act of memorialisation is a central part of the construction of public cultures which offer different

perspectives about how people experience history in different and multiple ways (Ann

Cvetkovich quoted in Herman 117). The ways in which Lenny memorializes the violent effects

of partition are compelling and, as I will show, interventionist because Lenny's narratives not

only problematize the dominant nationalist and political narratives of the partition, but also pose

a 'feminist historiography'. According to Menon and Bhasin, "[f]eminist historiography has

focused attention on the necessity of restoring women to history not only to challenge

conventional history-writing, but to emphasize that a representative history can only be written if

the experience and status of one half of humankind is an integral part of the story" (10). So,

rejecting the "women-as-separate-chapter syndrome" (Menon and Bhasin 10), Mehta places

women's narratives and experiences at the center of this film as well as the other films in the

trilogy, thereby displacing  the dominant political narratives regarding partition.

     In the political and nationalist narratives of India, violence is often rationalized in the

name of freedom and liberation. Nationalist ideology tends to glorify the nationalist leaders'

(such as Gandhi's, Nehru's, and Jinnah's) contribution in the history of partition. The nationalist

narratives completely ignore the social and personal narratives of those people who are deeply affected by the violence of partition, especially the traumatic experiences of rape and abduction of women. Rather than romanticizing the political narratives of India's independence, Mehta describes her interpretation of India's partition in an interview:

> I grew up hearing about all the horror stories of partition, as did a lot of people who were from the Punjab, the area most affected. In fact, if you ask anybody from the Punjab today, and we are talking about third generation, what does 1947 mean to you, they will never say the independence of India. They all say the partition of India. Every family member has some horror story to tell. It was a Holocaust" (Phillips n. pag.).

The gap between political and social/personal narratives of India's partition has been identified by women historiographers such as Menon and Bhasin. They point out that

> [t]he abundance of political histories on partition is almost equalled by the paucity of social histories of it. This is a curious and somewhat inexplicable circumstance: how is it that an event of such tremendous societal impact and importance has been passed over virtually in silence by the other social sciences? Why has there been such an absence of enquiry into its cultural, psychological and social ramifications?" (Menon and Bhasin 6)

As Giacomo Lichtner and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay point out, "[e]ncouraged by writings on the Holocaust and other 'trauma literature', new historical studies on the Partition tried to retrieve the memories of people who suffered in the bloody riots associated with it" (435). Similarly, partition scholar Gyanendra Pandey points out the ways in which partition historiography tends to exclude "the dimensions of force, uncertainty, domination and disdain, loss and confusion" (Pandey 4), and focuses on historical memory in which history of partition is

memorialized from different perspectives. Mehta disrupts the silence and ignorance perpetrated by political and public narratives by focusing on personal, social and psychological effects of partition on ordinary people through Lenny's point of view. As a female child who is disabled, the narrator is positioned as an 'outsider' and also, at the same time, an 'insider,' enabling us to examine the multiple and contesting narratives of partition. Lenny is further marginalized because she does not belong to the dominant religious denominations, such as Hindu, Muslim or Sikh. Lenny's position as insider and outsider mirrors the position of all nationals during partition, but her position as female gives her another interstitial perspective. Focusing on the personal and social traumatic experiences of Ayah and Lenny, Mehta brings to the surface the complexity of the missing stories and problematizes the nationalist ignorance of subaltern experiences and perspectives.

The personal and social narratives of partition begin when older Lenny's voice-over narration gives an account of her experience of British 'divide and rule' policy during partition. Lenny narrates:

In March 1947, I was about eight. I was in Lahore. The foundations of the British Raj were shaken. But I also heard like a pounding march drawing closer, the impending partition of our soil...the partition of Hindustan and Pakistan. Hindu, Mussalman and Sikh who had lived together in a well-knit society were clamouring suddenly for their respective shares. And then, August 1947. The pen of the British Empire dripping with the lifeblood of this nation etched on our soil in perpetuity a line (Chapter: 2, 00:13).

 In this statement, older Lenny emphasizes the ways in which the British political ideology promotes the 'two nations theory' to weaken anti-colonialist nationalist movements in the Indian

sub-continent. As Bernard Cohn, Lloyd Rudolph, Susanne Rudolph, and Dipesh Chakrabarty argue,

> [T]he British policy of designating the Indian population into separate "Hindu" and "Muslim" communities was motivated by both the need for administrative organization and management of colonial populations, as well as the more invidious political policy of divide and rule. The latter especially attributed a mythic homogeneity to these communities and set up a structural antagonism between them through both (a) colonial political policies, and (b) the discursive construction of "Hindus" and "Muslims" as separate communities for enumeration (Cohn, Rudolph, Rudolph and Chakrabarty quoted in Daiya 33).

In the film, political and nationalist narratives are disrupted when young Lenny deliberately breaks a plate. The apparent child-like action of Lenny suggests her internal rage regarding the British and nationalist politicians' decision to divide the country on basis of religion and demonstrates, through her actions, that such an action will effectively destroy, "smash," the unity of the country. Lenny's subsequent question to her mother, whether one can break a country, is an example of her innocent intervention into the political actions of dividing human relationships on the basis of religion. Through her portrayal of Lenny's symbolic action and questioning of the breaking of the country through her question, Mehta criticizes both the British and nationalist leaders' sectarian decision. As Mehta argues,

> [T]here are many dark political questions about partition that the British establishment doesn't want brought to light. When you know the real history of partition and the responsibility that lands in the laps of the British, obviously you understand why it is a

very uncomfortable subject for them. Generally the response there has been to romanticise Gandhi and Lord Mountbatten. This is done to such a degree that I find it quite nauseous (Phillips n. pag.).

Mehta's critiques of British and Indian elite nationalist ideologies regarding partition are very evident in the dinner scene in this film. It is the only scene where we see the direct presence of British Raj. In this scene, the British bureaucrat Mr. Roger, Mr. Sethna, and his elite nationalist Sikh guest engage in violent debate over who will rule India and what will happen if the British government leaves. This scene focuses our attention on the dominant perspectives about India's partition--liberal, nationalist and British perspectives. For example, Mr. Roger points out arguments in favour of British rule in India to protect Indians from division; on the other hand, Mr. Sethna's elite nationalist friend blames British government for the total mess and problems, while Mr. Sethna argues that a neutral position is the best position. What is clear in this scene is the absence of women and subaltern groups in the discussion, symbolized by Lenny's position 'beneath' the table. By completely excluding subaltern and women's opinions from these dominant perspectives in the dinner scene, Mehta highlights a 'gap' in the dominant approach of history writing: "*whose* or *what* history is represented" (Didur, *At a Loss* 55).

Criticizing the modernist and European epistemological hegemonies of 'writing history' as embedded in the colonizing project, historiographer Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, "[w]hat gets written out of this kind of history are the 'ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force and the tragedies and the ironies that attend' the founding of the nation-state" (Chakrabarty quoted in Didur, *At a Loss* 55). In *Earth,* Mehta addresses these concerns by demonstrating precisely how alternative voices are silenced in official histories. The contradictions of narratives of India's history and partition are clearly depicted in a scene where Mehta juxtaposes a train massacre and

the broadcasting of Nehru's speech: 'tryst with destiny'. Placing this remarkable historic speech alongside the killing of people in the train scene, Mehta emphasizes the contradictions in public histories of Partition.

Mehta also disrupts the nationalist and political narratives of so-called objective and scientific history of partition through art film techniques and through the romantic narrative structure of the memories of young Lenny. Mehta's depiction of Lenny's memorialisation and the usages of lighting, colour, and music suggest the personal aspect of remembering partition. The romantic narrative style of memory, suggested by the beginning scene of Lenny's colouring of India's map and in the ballroom dancing scene, arouses human emotions, psychology, ambivalence, and internal contradictions, which offer a subjective vision of partition, history and violence. The beginning scene of Lenny's colouring of India's map is very stylized. In this scene (Chapter: 2), we see Lenny colouring a map and a voice-over narration of older Lenny is describing her experience about the British 'divide and rule' policy on the basis of religious segregation before partition. This shot captures the warmth of memory through the composition of bright light, warm colour, background music, and the voice-over narration. The position of Lenny at the centre of the frames, with hand-painted family photographs placed in the background, suggests a fairy tale domesticity, and Lenny's act of colouring the history suggests her positive memory of the beauty and vitality of family life. Through the lighting, warm colour and background music, Mehta portrays the ways in which Lenny articulates her internal emotion and her subjective vision regarding the ideal and happy family life and her childhood memory, which in fact resist the nationally and communally inflected historical narratives of partition and violence.

65

In another scene, of ballroom dancing, Mehta also portrays Lenny's subjective vision of the vitality and beauty of family life and memory. In this scene (Chapter: 4), the strong contrast of light and shade and the music on the gramophone create a dreamlike scene of happy family life. Through the depiction of the domestic setting and familial images of these scenes, Mehta suggests the melodramatic and romantic constructions of Lenny's memory of partition and her subjective vision of ideal family life. Analyzing the importance of the romantic and melodramatic structures of memorialisation, Dorothy Barenscott points out that "[m]elodrama, in light of issues related to trauma, history, and memory has been considered most recently within a far broader critical range of possibility, facilitating a more complex reading of films that represent intense human suffering within the framework of a love story or personal drama, such as Mehta's *Earth*" (Barenscott 8). Though the romantic narrative style of Lenny's memorialisation provides Lenny's subjective perspective regarding the positive memory, her imagination of a fairy tale reality depicted in both scenes is ultimately disrupted by the violence enacted on gendered bodies in this film.

**Violence Against Gendered Bodies, Sexuality and Desire:**

Urvashi Butalia, in "Community, State and Gender: On Women's Agency During Partition"*,* examines the ways in which women's bodies are more victimized than men's bodies in the name of honour killing. She points out that

> [t]here are any number of such stories, of both men and women--although the numbers of women are much larger than those of men--offering themselves up for death, or simply being killed, in an attempt to protect the 'purity' and 'sanctity' of the religion. While most able-bodied men felt they could go out and fight, and kill if necessary, for the

women, children and the old and weak, a martyr's death seemed to be the only option

preferable to conversion to the 'other' religion (Butalia 14).

Butalia's assertion suggests that masculinity that cannot rise to the occasion of the fight is

constructed much as that of women, wherein men of an 'other' religion are considered as

effeminate and therefore, symbolically, castrated. Fighting, here, marks masculinity; martyrdom

marks its other. Butalia's statement is also significant because she shows the different ways in

which violence is enacted on men's and women's bodies and the social, religions and political

values attached to the male and female bodies are completely different. Mehta depicts the ways

in which the disciplinary borders are drawn on both men's and women's bodies, sexualities and

desires in this film. Along with the examination of the nationalist construction of women's

bodies, which I will examine shortly, it is also clear, in *Earth,* that masculinity and masculine

roles are constructed and promoted in specific ways during the violence of partition. In this

process, particular male bodies are defined as emasculated or feminized and, therefore,

symbolically and physically castrated and circumcised. Other male bodies are constructed as

warriors because of their class, gender and religious privilege during partition.  Importantly,

Mehta examines how masculinity and masculine roles are constructed in specific way by the

religious and nationalist discourses during the partition. In this construction, specific male

bodies, for example, the bodies of the Hindu gardener Hari and Ayah's lover Maalish-Wallah

(Hasan), are symbolically castrated or circumcised as their bodies are constructed as symbolic

markers of national and religious identities. Hari's circumcision and his forced conversion to

Islam are good examples of the ways in which partition disciplines men's sexuality and identity.

Hari does not leave Lahore for Hindu India, and he is thus forced to convert to Islam, having no

alternative way to live as his Muslim friends begin to kill Hindu friends. As one of the friends of

the group complains when he hears that Hari is going to convert to Muslim, "Our friends want to kill us, what options do we have (Chapter: 13, 06:11)?" This statement raises an important issue regarding the ways in which religious identities were deployed through a politicized narrative of difference to create enmity and to erase lifelong bonds of friendship and human relationship. As Ice-Candy man confesses, "Yes, I lobbed grenades into several Hindu homes, folks I knew all my life. For each of my sisters' breasts, I want to kill all the bastards (Chapter: 13, 05:09)."

Mehta shows the ways in which Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs are pitted against each other by a political process and they become both victims and perpetrators of the violence of partition. Mehta also examines how religious identities become means of enacting gendered violence against men by inscribing power on his body and feminizing it, thus reducing its threat or value in this gendered-system. Thus we see, how the corporeal body signifies the effect of power, as Judith Butler explains it: "what constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements, will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power" (Butler quoted in Budde 46). Hari's forced conversion and circumcision not only suggest his physical mutilation and subjection to political power, but also reveal how his masculinity is emasculated, constructed as 'effeminate' rather than as 'warrior', as he does not belong to the dominant Muslim group in Lahore. Mehta further depicts these physical and symbolic circumscriptions of Hari in a scene where a group of Muslim men, including Hari's friend Ice-Candy-Wallah, enters the grounds of Lenny's house and asks for all Hindu members who reside in the Sethna family. The Muslim priest Imam Din informs them that there are no Hindus in this family as Hari has become a Mussalman and his name has been changed to Himmat Ali. To verify Hari's conversion, the group asks Hari to read Kalma and demand to see his new circumcised penis. Hari is, in this scene, disrobed for public view, hence violated and symbolically raped. His former identity as a

Hindu man has already been violated by the circumcision; when forced to disrobe for inspection, he is further emasculated and feminized as a victim of male-gendered gaze of violence. Pointing out this physical and symbolic violence against men during the partition, Diaya argues that "Hari's conversion probably constitutes the humiliating, symbolic emasculation of Hindu men for the mob, as well as legitimizes his presence in the new nation-state Pakistan" (Diaya quoted in Neutill 79). I argue that by portraying the symbolic castration and physical violations of Hari's body, Mehta demonstrates how post-colonial nation-states disavow marginalized people's sexualities and desires, and how their sexualities are considered as threats to hegemonic national and religious identities of post-colonial nation-states such as India and Pakistan.

Mehta also examines the way in which special value is attached to women's bodies and sexualities in the hegemonic discourses of nationalism during the partition specifically. From post-colonial feminist framework, Ann McClintock argues that "a gender critique of nationalism reveals the ways in which the nation is construed in terms of familial and domestic metaphors, where 'the woman' is enshrined as both the symbolic center and boundary marker of the nation as 'home' and 'family' (McClintock quoted in Gopinath 468). Mehta traces the ways in which nationalist and religious discourses construct Ayah as a symbolic marker of national boundaries and the repository of authentic communal, religious and national identities. As such symbolic markers, women's bodies became very crucial to nationalist project of border making, as Gopinath highlights: "Women's bodies . . . become crucial to nationalist discourse in that they serve not only as the site of biological reproduction of national collectivities, but as the very embodiment of this nostalgically evoked communal past and tradition" (Gopinath 468). Focusing on the female body and psyche which are sites of cultural production, Madhuri Chatterjee investigates how every society ascribes meaning to women's bodies; in effect, woman's body is

not merely physical, it becomes a space of control, for example in *Earth* (Chatterjee 78, 80). She also asserts that *Earth* "raises questions regarding the boundaries imposed on the female body, which acquire significance in the larger social discourse" (Chatterjee 80). Similarly, Neelam Raisinghani points out that Mehta shows in *Earth* how women's bodies are constructed as a contested ground and as weapons of nationalist politics upon which communal violence is enacted during the partition (Raisinghani 162).

Lenny's Ayah, Shanta, is portrayed very sympathetically in the film. She is a beautiful young woman, the centre of sexually-charged attraction of a group of working class men who all admire her. She is also deeply loved by Lenny, who focalizes the film. We, as the audience, tend to see her as a loving, humourous, intelligent and endearing young woman. However, she gradually occupies a symbolic position in the film, the embodied site over which India's and Pakistan's communal, religious and nationalist identities are fought. As Shanta belongs to the Hindu community and she also lives in Lahore, her body is a site of conflict between India's and Pakistan's national, religious and cultural identities. Therefore, Shanta's body and sexuality play an important role to focus us on the ways in which women's bodies in India and Pakistan are constantly disciplined and punished. As Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin argue,

> the dramatic episodes of violence against women during communal riots bring to the surface, savagely and explicitly, familiar forms of sexual violence--now charged with a symbolic meaning that serves as an indicator of the place that women's sexuality occupies in an all-male, patriarchal arrangement of gender relations, between and within religious or ethnic communities (41).

The violence against women in *Earth* ranges from physical and sexual to psychological and symbolic. Generally, the sexual and physical violence against women's bodies is depicted in three scenes in this film: the train massacre, the mass rape against women described by a child in the refugee camp, and Ayah's abduction and rape in the concluding scene. The religious and nationalist violence against gendered bodies is portrayed in the scene of the train massacre through Ice-Candy-Man's point of view, not through Lenny's perspective. The violence depicted in this scene transforms Ice-Candy-Man from a fun-loving friend to a nationalist and political leader. In this scene, Ice-Candy-Man, whose name is also Dil Nawaz, waits for a train which is supposed to come from Gurudaspur to Lahore carrying Muslim people including his two sisters. When the train arrives at the station, Dil Nawaz finds that the train is full of mutilated bodies and four sacks filled with women's breasts. Juxtaposing the violent train massacre with Nehru's speech: 'tryst with destiny', Mehta emphasizes that "[t]he moment of India's partition and Pakistan's formation is marked by and marked on the mutilated, dismembered, and wounded bodies of the refugees on the train, rendering the bodies meaningful not only as the material effects of the political partition but also as metaphor for the increasingly divided community" (Herman 131). I would like to add that Mehta not only focuses on the metaphorical division of the community and country, but also examines the ways in which corporeal bodies signify power and politics. Especially, women's mutilated breasts in the train scene suggest the communal and national dishonour attached to women's mutilated and raped bodies. Moreover, the mutilated breasts and bodies of women in this scene demonstrate the ways in which women are victimized by multiple forms of violence during the partition.

Menon and Bhasin focus on these different kinds of violence against women as they point out, "[t]he most predictable form of violence experienced by women, as women, is when the

71

women of one community are sexually assaulted by the men of the other, in an overt assertion of their identity and a simultaneous humiliation of the other by 'dishonouring' their women" (Menon and Bhasin 41). Analysing the political and religious values attached to women's mutilated bodies, they continue to argue that "[e]ach one of the violent acts mentioned above has specific symbolic meaning and physical consequences, and all of them treat women's bodies as territory to be conquered, claimed or marked by the assailant" (Menon and Bhasin 43). Different forms of violence against women such as stripping, raping, branding or tattooing in private and public spheres including religious and sacred places are portrayed through the narration of a young boy in the refugee camp. When Lenny and her cousin go to see the 'fallen' women and they ask one of the boys how his mother was raped, the boy describes the scene as follows: "the Hindus attacked our village, they killed everyone. I hide under corpses. That's how I'm alive" (Chapter: 13, 02:27). The boy goes on to describe that "after the Hindus left, I went looking for my mother. She was in a mosque. She was tied to the fan on the ceiling by her hair. She was completely naked" (Chapter 13, 02:58). The naked bodies of 'fallen' women in the mosque or temple not only suggest the terrific violence against women but also signify the humiliation of the honour of the other religion, community and nation attached to women's bodies' violation and mutilation.

The sexual violence against women and the political and religious values attached to women's mutilated bodies are especially portrayed through Ayah's abduction and rape. By depicting Ayah's abduction by her admirers, Mehta shows that partition not only breaks the intimate group, but also transforms all friends into enemies. In the scene of Ayah's abduction, a group of Muslim men asks Mrs. Sethna where Hindu Ayah is. Mrs. Sethna and Imam Din insist that Ayah has left Lahore for Amritsar. The mob does not believe it and, by this time, Dil Nawaz

intervenes in the scene and pretends that he will make the whole situation alright. Taking

advantage of Lenny's faith and innocence, Dil Nawaz convinces her that he will look after Ayah

and he has actually come here to take care of her. Lenny trusts Dil Nawaz and tells him, in utter

innocence, that Ayah is in her mother's bedroom. Suddenly, Dil Nawaz turns around and tells the

mob that Ayah is inside, and the whole group drags Ayah and pulls her on a truck shouting

religious slogans, for example, 'Pakistan, Zindabad'. These religious slogans in the context of

Ayah's abduction suggest the ways in which the symbolic and material violence reduce women's

identities to 'markers' of national and religious identities. Also, by associating any religion or

nation with women's bodies, one nationalist group tends to fix shame on the humiliated bodies of

raped women of other group, so that the whole country or nation cannot even memorialize the

shameful and traumatic violence against women. As Menon and Bhasin point out, "[t]attooing

and branding the body with 'Pakistan, Zindabad!' or 'Hindustan, Zindabad!' not only mark the

women for life, they never allow her (or her family and community) the possibility of forgetting

her humiliation" (43). They also describe how the whole nation is too stigmatized to even recall

the brutal violence against women as they argue that "[m]arking the breasts and genitalia with

symbols like the crescent moon or trident makes permanent the sexual appropriation of the

women, and symbolically extends this violation to future generations who are thus

metaphorically stigmatised" (Menon and Bhasin 43-44).

Along with the portrayal of physical and sexual violence against women during the

partition, Mehta also examines the ways in which psychological and symbolic violence impact

Lenny's identity formation and sexual orientation and demonstrates how gendered violence

affects Lenny's sexual maturation and identity formation. The ways Mehta depicts the profound

effects of patriarchal and nationalist discourses on Lenny's identity are no less important than the

73

physical violence enacted on Ayah. Pointing out the symbolic violence against Lenny, Kamran Rastegar argues that "a girl upon the verge of sexual maturation sees the eruption of violence in the society around her to be fundamentally analogous to the inherent violence accompanying the new social role she is being thrust into as a woman" (Rastegar 23- 24). Rastegar's argument exposes the inherent violence of post-colonial nationalist discourses which imposes heteronormative gender roles and identities in women's lives. So, as Mehta depicts in *Water* and *Fire*, women's identities and sexualities as sites of biological reproduction and as repositories of national honour are multiply displaced and doubly oppressed. The hierarchal gender roles promoted by the patriarchal nationalist and religious discourses reinforce Lenny's expected role as 'mother' or 'wife' in post-colonial India and Pakistan. The physical and symbolic violence enacted on Ayah's and Lenny's bodies also demonstrates the violence against women in their daily lives; as Miriam Cooke argues, "[w]hat women experience in war repeats in stereo the daily experience of violence that has become ordinary" (Cooke quoted in Rastegar 24).

Mehta portrays this daily violence which turns into extreme forms as rape and abduction during the partition in this film. Mehta depicts daily violence against women in a scene where Lenny and Lenny's cousin Adi converse about 'fallen' women in the refugee camp, located near to Lenny's house. Referring to Yusuf, Lenny says to Adi that there are 'fallen' women in this camp. Adi replies, "no, raped" (Chapter: 13, 02:05). The word "raped" is unknown to Lenny until she witnesses Ayah's abduction and rape. So, she asks Adi," what's that" (Chapter:13, 02:07). In reply, Adi says that "I will show you one day" (Chapter: 13, 02:09). By portraying this scene, Mehta not only investigates the ways in which violent partition disciplines women's bodies through rape and abduction, but also demonstrates how violence may happen in women's daily lives through heteronormative nationalist discourses which are communicated to children.

74

Rastegar focuses on this inherent patriarchal violence which affects Lenny's identity and gender performance as a mature woman in post-colonial India. As Rastegar describes, "[a]s a girl, . . . she comes to understand that the foundations of violence in her surroundings are largely gendered and that the experience of this violence is differentiated along gender lines" (Rastegar 27). Lenny comes to perceive the ways in which the partition reinforces gender differentiation, and she gradually realizes that the difference between religious identities such as Hindu, Muslim and Sikh is merely performative, an artifice (Rastegar 27). Therefore, Lenny constantly negotiates and contests the normative gender and religious identities promoted by nationalist discourses through her idealization of Ayah in multiple ways, which I will discuss in the following section.

**The Agency of Lenny and Ayah:**

Mehta examines the ways in which Ayah and Lenny negotiate, contest and question the patriarchal nationalist and religious constructions of women as 'bearers' of national and communal honour and identity in this film. At the same time, they challenge the normative constructions and representations of raped women as abject and degrading images. Ayah and Lenny resist their hegemonic constructions as merely 'victims' through daily activities and actions. I argue that the ways in which Lenny and Ayah resist patriarchal nationalist oppressions during the partition do vary because of their different subject and class positions in this film. I also argue that Ayah and Lenny are not completely victims of the nationalist attempts of border construction, nor are they self-contained/self-autonomous identities; rather, their subjectivities are situated in the particular context of political antagonism during India's partition. Their subjectivities are shaped by the political and historical contexts of partition, but they are not represented in this film as degraded images. The ways, Lenny and Ayah negotiate with the

75

nationalist and religious constructions of 'citizen', 'home' and 'nation' and the ways in which

they transform their abjection into site of resistance are complex, indirect and, sometimes,

unconscious. More importantly, Ayah's and Lenny's resistance through daily activities

significantly challenges the received narratives of actors, actions and agency.

The nationalist narratives of India and Pakistan tend to construct the idea of citizenship as

normatively Hindu or Muslim, elite, and patriarchal and push minorities, women and subalterns

to the margins of the national imaginary (Didur, *Cracking* 43-44). The women in nationalist

discourses are neither subjects nor objects; rather, women are considered as "the 'ground' in

patriarchal debates over community and state identity . . ." (Didur, *Cracking* 43). So, the

imaginary construction of women's identities erases their multiple and heterogeneous identities

and agencies. These nationalist imaginary constructions of unified identities of women

undermine the multiple ways in which women can deconstruct, reconstruct, mediate and

negotiate their sense of belonging to 'home' and 'nation' and express their agency and

sexualities in multiple ways which can be challenging to long established modernist binary

structured definitions of identity and agency, which I have discussed in chapter 3. However,

Mehta focuses in this film on multifaceted state violence against Ayah's body and Lenny's

psyche. At the same time, Mehta examines the ways in which Ayah and Lenny resist their

hegemonic construction as 'victims', and how they reveal the contradictions and ambivalence of

post-colonial identities.

Lenny's identity can be better understood as "the site of mediation between discourses

and experiences" (Canning quoted in Didur, *Cracking* 46) as Lenny's subjectivity is mediated by

multiple discourses around her. For example, Lenny's parents' bourgeois culture and their

neutral position during partition, and the normative gender hierarchies in her family and in

colonial India mediate Lenny's experiences regarding gender roles and identities in Indian

patriarchal society. In addition, Lenny's multiple identities (Parsee, woman and disabled child)

posit her subjectivity in a 'border space'/ 'liminal space'/ 'hybrid space', and construct her

identity as an 'in- between' or 'interstitial' identity (Hai 380). According to Homi Bhabha, the

border space produces the

> 'tenebrousness' of the 'interstitial,' or the in-between: 'These in-between spaces provide
>
> the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood--singular or communal--that initiate new
>
> signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of
>
> defining the idea of society itself. It is the space of intervention emerging in the cultural
>
> interstices,' . . . that introduces creative invention into existence (Bhabha quoted in Hai
>
> 380- 381).

Because of Lenny's 'in- between' identity, she is able to question the hierarchical power

structure existing in patriarchal Indian society; for example, she questions her family's privileged

and questionable neutral positions. In the ballroom dancing scene, Lenny questions her mother

whether Parsees are bum-lickers (Chapter: 4, 00:59)?" When her mother tells her a story of how

Parsees came to India from the Middle East and, as the story reveals, the Parsees promised to

remain invisible like sugar in the milk, Lenny intervenes in this story and says, "we are not bum-

lickers, we are invisible (Chapter:4, 02:10)". This statement of Lenny exposes the hypocrisies of

all dominant political and nationalist positions, including her parents' positions during the

partition.

Lenny's awareness regarding normative gender hierarchies, existing power structures

and nationalist violence becomes clearer in some scenes such as Pappu's marriage with a very

old Christian man, when Lenny tears a cloth doll into pieces, suggesting the violence done to female children. The performative nature of gender identity becomes clearer to Lenny when she witnesses her playmate Pappu forced into marriage at the age of ten with an old man. The heteronormative discourses of nationalist ideology construct Lenny's gender identity as a future wife and mother, so she can see her own fate in Pappu's. When Pappu asks her when she will find a husband, Lenny responds that she will find a husband like Ice-Candy-Wallah, Maalish-Wallah, and Adi. Though the patriarchal heteronormative discourses of nationalism construct Lenny's sexuality as heterosexual, she is very critical of the existing power structures and gender hierarchies in colonial and post-colonial societies. So, Lenny questions Ayah after learning of Pappu's child marriage, "why is Pappu being married to him (Chapter: 7, 02:05)?" Apparently it seems that Pappu is being married with an old Christian man because of her low caste status and marginalized social position. But, Ayah's explanation regarding Pappu's child marriage makes it clear that the growing communal and religious tension and conflict among Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh impact on Pappu's child marriage. For example, when Lenny asks Ayah about the reason of Pappu's child marriage, Ayah states that fear makes people lose their minds. Ayah's statement suggests the ways in which the religious and sectarian conflicts enact violence on Pappu's sexuality. Lenny's consciousness regarding this nationalist and religious violence against Pappu's sexuality is an important example of her awareness of violence against women during the partition.

The violence against men's and women's bodies which Lenny witnesses in her childhood profoundly shapes her identity. One of the examples of the effect of this violence on Lenny's psyche is her action of tearing the doll into two pieces after watching a violent experience of breaking bodies. Through Lenny's repetitive actions, Mehta examines the ways in which the

78

violence against gendered bodies influences Lenny's identity formation and sense of self. As the violence culminates, Lenny comes to realize that the people around her are no longer friends; rather, they are Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. Her consciousness about the performative religious and gender identities keeps her from participating in religious and communal talks. She states to Ice-Candy-Man, "Again Hindu-Muslim Talk? We won't come to the park again (chapter: 3, 04:38)."

Lenny's resistance and agency against patriarchal normative discourses are not always direct and conscious. I argue that the ways in which Lenny expresses her anxiety, her refusal of Pappu's child marriage and her protest against religious and gender identities, are often complex, indirect, and are mediated by the discursive political context of the partition. It is important to note that Lenny's agency and questions regarding normative religious identity resist the growing religious conflicts around her group although she is not able, finally, to protect her Ayah. Nonetheless, her agency is important and interventionist in articulating the complexity of indirect agency which problematizes the existing power relations in patriarchal Indian society. As KumKum Sangari argues, "[i]ndirect agency could thus include . . . any 'range of actions which take forms that are difficult to fit into commonly understood typologies of organized political activity' but nonetheless, impact on the flow of power" (Sangari quoted in Didur, *Cracking* 51). I argue that the unconscious and indirect agencies of young Lenny and the direct and conscious statements of older Lenny are equally important to challenge the nationalist and religious discourses in colonial and post-colonial India. The direct agency of older Lenny is evident in her political consciousness regarding the failure of post-colonial nationalist discourses to bring social and political changes; as she explains, "250 years of British Rule, and what have we to show? A

country, split, murder, loot, kidnappings, crime and more crime in retribution (Chapter: 16, 07:41)".

The agency and identity of Lenny's Ayah also play important roles in challenging the nationalist and religious constructions of her identity and sexuality. The ways in which Ayah articulates her subjectivity and sexuality subvert the physical and metaphorical border imposed on her gendered identity and body. The nationalist construction of border and their nation building project do not always subvert Ayah's sexuality and desire; rather, Ayah's position as a 'border inhabitant' in the border city Lahore makes her aware of manmade violence against gendered bodies. Describing the possibility of borders, Heidegger argues, "a boundary is not that at which something stops, but [. . .] that from which something begins its presencing" (Heidegger quoted in Hai 382). Referring to this statement of Heidegger's, Hai argues that "being a border Zone or a boundary can be difficult but also enabling, the inscription of a limit that yet poses the possibility of transgression, and novelty" (Hai 382). The enabling and transgressing power of Ayah is depicted through her construction as a 'self' for Lenny's sexual orientation and identity formation.

According to Ambreen Hai, Ayah acts as both self and other in this film (Hai 390). Lenny identifies her sexual orientation and maturation through Ayah's desire and identity. Lenny continues to learn about religion, politics, and gender hierarchy in patriarchal society through Ayah's growing consciousness regarding the hierarchical gender lines in patriarchal Indian society. From this perspective, Ayah can be defined as the 'subject' of Lenny's story. Especially, Lenny's sexual orientation and education are mediated through Ayah's romantic and sexual relationship with her admirers. For example, on the day of her birthday, Adi kisses her and she says, "Maalish-Wallah kisses Ayah better (Chapter: 13, 01:23)". However, the undisciplined

affectionate relationship between Ayah and Lenny (Didur, *Cracking* 56) also subverts the classism and sexism in religious and nationalist discourses. Because of Lenny's interaction with the subaltern group, including Ayah, Lenny comes to realize and identify the growing political tensions in her society. I argue that as an educator of Lenny's sexuality and political consciousness, Ayah can be defined as a potential agent in spite of her subaltern status in patriarchal society. Pointing out the potential relationship between Ayah and Lenny, Didur argues that "[t]his relationship gives Lenny insight into the contradictions and the potential for resistance to her society's dominant codes" (Didur, *Cracking* 57).

Not only as an educator of Lenny, but also a site of resistance, Ayah challenges the patriarchal nationalist discourses in her community. Ayah holds a desirable position in her group and everyone desires her. Ayah is so desired in her group that the group remains united until the violence is enacted against Dil-Nawaz's sisters' bodies. Pointing out the importance of Ayah in uniting the group, Maalish-Wallah says to Ayah that "Hindus, Mussalman and Sikh are living apart. Only your community is the same (Chapter: 6, 00:37)". In response to Maalish-Wallah, Butcher says, "Yes Shanta Bibi, Hindu, Mussalman, Sikh, all of us hover about you, like fireflies around fire (Chapter: 6, 00:41)." As a center of attraction, Ayah constantly negotiates with the growing tension in the group. For example, in one scene, Ayah resists the conservative religious talk, and she warns the group that she will stop visiting her friends if the communal talk continues to exist in the group. More importantly, Ayah shows her political consciousness regarding the effect of the partition in India and Pakistan at the very beginning of the film: explaining the British motives regarding the partition, she explains to Mrs. Sethna that "Madam, I hear, before giving us independence, the British will dig a huge canal. On one side Hindustan, the other side, Pakistan ( Chapter: 2, 02:16)." Ayah's statement suggests the political motives of

81

the British government not only to separate India into two countries, but also to reinforce the growing conflicts between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs on basis of religious discourses.

Ayah not only articulates her political insights, but also expresses her choice, sexuality and desire in this film. One of the examples of Ayah's agency is her refusal of Dil-Nawaz and selection of Maalish-Wallah as her future husband. Her refusal to Dil-Nawaz is an example of her direct resistance to the divisive religious nationalism in post-colonial India. Ayah's desire for Maalish-Wallah and her final decision to marry him clearly prove Ayah's choice and desire in this film. As Didur argues, "her desires continue to subvert and remake that imaginary at the local level; she holds the group of her admirers together and diffuses conflict among them, at least temporarily, despite the intensification of racist and patriarchal discourse at the time of partition" (Didur, *Cracking* 58).

But, ultimately, Ayah fails to resist the effects of patriarchal religious and nationalist violence against her body and sexuality as the film concludes with her abduction by a group of nationalist leaders including her admirers. By portraying Ayah's abduction and rape, Mehta focuses on the ways in which the violence of the border making project of nationalist discourses polices bodies, especially women's bodies. At the end of this film, older Lenny narrates her psychological attachment with Ayah and the complexity and ambiguity of the aftermath of Ayah's abduction. She narrates, "[i]t's been 50 years since I betrayed my nanny, unknowingly. Later I heard somewhere that she was married to the Ice-Candy-Wallah. Somewhere I heard that she was seen in the brothels of Lahore. Someone once said, she's in Amritsar. But I never saw her again. On that 1947-day, I had lost a part of myself with my nanny" (Chapter: 16, 07:56). Ayah's abduction and rape seem to be examples of her lack of agency and these also show her subjection to nationalist violence during the partition. But, I argue that Mehta does not draw any

82

simple resolution regarding Ayah, such as her rehabilitation. Rather, Mehta illuminates the complexity of the potential aftermath of raped and abducted women during the partition. As Menon and Bhasin argue, "the so-called recoveries of women in the aftermath of the riots had much to do with an attempt to legitimate the new nation-states and little to do with the actual complexities of the women's experiences" (Menon and Bhasin quoted in Herman 139). Pointing out the political motive of governments' investment in the recovery of raped women, Butalia also argues that "[f]or the post-colonial, deeply contested, fragile and vulnerable State, the rescue operation was an exercise in establishing its legitimacy. Thus, both for the legitimation of the State and for the restoration of the community, the recovery of women . . . became crucial" (Butalia quoted in Herman 140). By keeping Ayah's abduction free from any fixed explanation and final resolution, I argue that Mehta engages "in textual strategies to counter narrative determinism" (Sunder Rajan quoted in Hai 403). According to Rajan,

> Feminist texts . . . 'counter narrative determinism' in several ways, including 'representing the raped woman as one who becomes subject through rape rather than merely one subjected to its violation, [. . .] structuring a post-rape narrative that traces her strategies of survival, [. . .and] counting the cost of rape[. . .] in terms of more complex than the extinction of female selfhood in death or silence (Rajan quoted in Hai 403).

I argue that by identifying herself with Ayah after her disappearance, Lenny represents Ayah's subjectivity through her rape rather than presenting Ayah as degraded image or fallen woman. It is clear that in spite of Ayah's physical disappearance, she still exists in Lenny's memories and narratives. I argue that Ayah's abduction and disappearance do not represent Ayah as victim; rather, her abduction examines the actual complexity and silence of abducted women during the partition.

Focusing on Ayah's abduction, rape and her ambiguous position in post-colonial India and Pakistan, Mehta not only reveals the untold stories of subaltern and women during the partition, but also investigates the gaps, contradictions and ambivalence of political narratives regarding partition. The political narratives commemorate violence against women such as rape, abduction and murder as 'sacrificing acts' of women for India's and Pakistan's independence. Therefore, the nationalist narratives of India's partition romanticize women's sacrifice by associating India and Pakistan with the sacrificing images of women as mothers. Ayah's invisibility after her abduction demonstrates the ways in which post-colonial nation-states such as India and Pakistan erase abducted and raped women from their masculinised 'heroic' histories of partition; the raped women are only memorialized through the nationalist politics of mourning. As Sumita S.Chakravarty argues, "for postcolonial nations, the transition from pre-independence nationalist movement to postindependence nation-state involves a simultaneous mourning of the past and a forgetting of the exclusions through which the new nation consolidated its power" (Chakravantry cited in Herman 140- 141). Mehta's adaptation of Bapsi Sidwa's novel, *Earth 1947,* allows us to memorialize and mourn these bodies of history.

The nationalist politics, omitted subaltern women's narratives are retrieved through Lenny's multiple perspectives regarding the partition and through Ayah's unresolved stories in this film. Mehta's attempts to focus on women's and subaltern narratives are very significant because she emphasizes the urgent need to construct an alternative account of partition which "seeks to comprehend rather than to castigate, and to explore complexities rather than conceal them behind chauvinistic slogans" (Sidhwa, Butalia, and Whitehead 231). I argue that the nationalist attempts of border construction between India and Pakistan, the traumatic experiences of affected and dislocated people, and the violence against gendered bodies are legacies of

colonial and post-colonial racial, ethnocentric and gendered discourses. The partition line that the

British drew is an unresolved firing line in the South-Asian landscape. This troubling diplomatic

border line constructed during India's partition continues to exist through the violence against

minorities in India and Pakistan and through the growing Hindu and Muslim religious

fundamentalism and communal identities. The diplomatic construction of this border between

India and Pakistan continues to reinforce symbolic borders on people's sense of belonging,

identities and subjectivities. The new definitions of citizenship, home and state are constructed

through religious and communal identities in which minority groups are not allowed to belong to

national identity in post-colonial states. For example, the secular identity of India has been

inflected in the 1990s by the growing rise of Hindu religious groups in India. Therefore, the

definitions of Indians are redefined as fundamentally Hindus, elite and male. Considering the

dominance of religious identities for the last 11 years in India and Pakistan, the growing

militarization and masculinisation in Jammu and Kashmir, and the rising atomic violence in

India and Pakistan, I argue that the border between India and Pakistan still bleeds people's lives

and imprisons marginalized people. Mehta focuses on the external and internal bleeding in

human lives, and examines the ways the racial, ethnocentric and gendered discourses of the

British, nationalist and religious politics continue to construct new borders against subaltern

bodies and subjectivities.

85

**Chapter 3: Disrupting Home and Heteronormativity: Homoerotic Desire and Women's Identities in *Fire***

After three weeks of screening *Fire* (1996) in New Delhi and Mumbai (formerly Bombay) in December 1998, the writer and director of this film, Indo-Canadian Deepa Mehta, received violent criticism because of her depiction of a lesbian relationship between two middle class Hindu sisters-in-law in India. Some Hindu fundamentalists accused Mehta of engaging in a discourse that would "spoil women" (Moorti n. pag.) and of manipulating and corrupting tender minds by portraying a lesbian relationship as acceptable in a film which is not a direct expression of Indian culture (Moorti n. pag.). Also, some feminist scholars such as Madhu Kishwar and Uma Parameswaran question the authenticity of Mehta's knowledge about Indian culture and Indian family life. Kishwar specifically accuses Mehta of portraying the stereotypical image of Indian women's victimization (Kishwar 7- 8). However, these criticisms wrongly essentialize women within Indian culture, ignoring Mehta's well thought-out strategy for representing women's multiple identities, agency and sexual desire in relation to Indian social-cultural-religious-political contexts and issues such as Indian social and familial norms, religious rituals and regulations, and patriarchal and nationalist discourses towards women. By constructing women's identity in response to the Indian socio-cultural and political context, Mehta reveals the complex ways women's identities and agency are situated and have evolved in a particular Indian context which is completely different from western ideas of women's empowerment and identity.

As in *Earth* and *Water*, once again, Mehta is most interested in women's identity and agency. However, in *Fire*, their agency is enacted through homoerotic challenges to the

discourse of home and nation. Women's identity and agency and their homoerotic desire in *Fire*

are neither western nor traditional Indian, but situated in the current social context of India which

is a flux of modern western and traditional Indian social practices. The Indian social context by

which the women find themselves shaped is governed by a post-colonial, patriarchal nationalist

ideology. The time frame of *Fire* is modern India, which is now subject to local and global

influences that are negotiating women's issues in the politics of post-colonial nationalism.

According to Shakuntala Rao,"Indian is no more conceived as merely a 'modern' nation . . . but

also fundamentally a 'Hindu' nation (Rao 318). This patriarchal Hindu ideology tends to exclude

those people from their project of Indian nation building who are marginalized and subaltern in

terms of gender, class, "race", ethnicity, and religion; it is not, therefore, a uniform or

homogenous national identity, but a selective one. Similarly, this patriarchal Hindu nationalist

ideology constructs women's identity as a symbolic marker of national identity (for example,

woman finds her identity as mother) and thus erases the multiplicity, heterogeneity, and diversity

in women's identities. To construct women's identity as mother, Indian anti-colonial nationalist

ideology naturalizes heterosexuality by criminalizing any forms of non-procreative sex

(Alexander 5) and, therefore, controls women's body and sexuality. Post-colonial Studies and

Subaltern Studies scholar Partha Chatterjee analyzes the ways in which post-colonial patriarchal

nationalist ideology has resolved women's questions in the new contexts of social, cultural,

economic, and political changes in post-colonial India by constructing the idea of new

womanhood through the reinforcement of women's pure and respectable middle class sexuality

(Chatterjee, *Colonialism, Nationalism* 630). From this perspective of post-colonial critique,

Indian women are doubly subordinated by the neo-colonialism of anti-colonialist ideology on the

one hand and the patriarchal and Hindu religious ideology of this nationalist discourse on the other hand.

By focusing on how women's identity is shaped by the gendered nature of post-colonial Indian nationalist patriarchy, Mehta reveals the ways women's identities and agency are negotiated and dominated by the post-colonial, patriarchal nationalist discourses. To resist this patriarchal nationalist endeavour in constructing women's identity as mothers, Mehta portrays women's homoerotic desire and sexuality through the homosocial sphere, which disrupts the power and dominance of patriarchy in the Indian context. By portraying a homoerotic relationship between Radha and Sita, the two women protagonists in *Fire,* this film not only challenges the nationalist normative discourses regarding women's sexualities and desires in India, but also poses an alternative queer sexuality to heteronormativity, which is suggestive also of a 'queer diasporic viewing practice' (Gopinath quoted in Banerjee 24). Describing a queer diasporic viewing practice as a hybrid way of reading, Gopinath argues, "this viewing practice is one that 'conceptualizes a viewing public as located within multiple diasporic sites, and the text itself as accruing multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings within these various locations'" (Gopinath quoted in Banerjee 24). Following Gopinath's argument, I argue that the complex, contested, and multilayered readings of Radha's and Sita's homoerotic relationship posits new definitions of home, nation, and sense of belonging for non-heteronormative subjects in post-colonial India.

The depictions of women's multiple and heterogeneous sexualities, desires, and identities in *Fire* disrupt the post-colonial nationalist attempts to create a unified, singular identity of 'woman' as mother and wife, as keeper of the domestic sphere, by reviving  the ideas of purity, duty, and Hindu womanhood. At the same time, the representation of inter-cultural conflict and

contradiction through the depictions of multiple and diverse cultures and of multiple definitions of national and cultural identities of India, *Fire* also challenges the ways in which the ideas of diaspora, in so far as diaspora is framed by Stuart Hall (see below), home, nation, and citizenship are constructed through the anti-colonial patriarchal nationalist hegemonic discourses to constitute a sense of belonging, national identity, and heteronormativity. By depicting Radha's and Sita's homoerotic relationship in the private sphere, Mehta examines the ways in which Radha and Sita reconstruct the hetero-sexual nature of home and family as sites of intense desire and new ways of being. Mehta also demonstrates the ways in which Radha and Sita constantly negotiate with the patriarchal nationalist constructions of women's identities as 'bearers' of national identity by rewriting Indian traditions, mythologies, and cultures. The multiple ways in which Radha and Sita negotiate their sense of belonging to 'home', 'family' and 'nation,' and the ways they express their identities, agencies, and desires make it clear that they transform their forced exiles and imprisonments into sites of resistance.

As a means of better understanding of Mehta's intervention into an exploration of women's sites of resistance, in this chapter I will develop the following: a) the theoretical framework of diaspora, home, nation, and diasporic identity, b) the construction of patriarchal uniform Indian national and cultural identity by nationalist discourses in post-colonial India and Mehta's depiction of Indian national and cultural identities, c) the patriarchal nationalist constructions of women's identities and sexualities in terms of familial and domestic metaphors, and women's responses to the regulatory heteronormative discourses through their articulation of a homoerotic relationship in this film, and d) the ways in which Radha and Sita negotiate, contest, and resist patriarchal nationalist constructions of their sexualities and identities, and thereby deconstruct the heteronormative definitions of home, nation, and sense of belonging.

89

**Theorizing Diaspora, Home, and Identity:**

Traditionally, the term 'diaspora' has referred to the dispersions of four groups of people: Jews, people of African origin, Palestinians, and Chinese (Dufoix 19). Modern diasporas are defined in relation to voluntary or forced migration: "Modern diasporas are ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin - their homelands" (Sheffer quoted in Dufoix 21). This definition suggests number of factors involved with the term diaspora such as fixed locations/dislocations of origin and home, settlement in host countries, and nostalgia for lost homeland and maintenance of past identity and connection. However, these definitions of diaspora and diasporic identity were criticized/questioned by postmodern thought by the 1980s (Dufoix 23).

In the 1980s, cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall, James Clifford, and Paul Gilroy criticized modernist ideas of fixed and stable locations of origin and home, ideas of rooted and unified identity, and longing for authentic past and lost homeland. Although Radha and Sita are not members of a literal diaspora, their experience of marginalization, exclusion and expulsion is akin to a forced migration. This allows us to see their experience through the lens of diasporic theory, as they negotiate the conflicted identities experienced by those inhabiting diasporic spaces. Cultural theorist Hall, for instance, defines the term 'diaspora' as metaphor to discuss an identity that emerges in response to exclusionary and ethnocentric nationalist discourses. Hall states,

> I use this term here metaphorically, not literally: diaspora does not refer us to those
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> scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland

to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea. This is the old, the imperializing, the hegemonizing, form of "ethnicity". . . . The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of "identity" which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference (Hall 244).

While Radha and Sita are not literally of the diaspora, their condition parallels a diasporic position or 'outsider space'. In this sense, they, too, become exiles and members of a diasporic space, albeit a diaspora within India. The fact that they remain, geographically, in India is not the point, as they have lost their home, which is unable to recognize heterogeneity and diversity in women's identities and sexualities. In this, then, Radha's and Sita's migration from the domestic sphere, because it is a home which is no home, suggests that their identities, too, undergo the kinds of negotiations and hybridization experienced by diasporic subjects

Like Hall, post-colonial theorist Avtar Brah also theorizes diaspora and diasporic identities as potential frameworks for  criticizing fixed and authentic ideas of home and origin: "the concept of diaspora should be seen to refer to historically contingent 'genealogies', in the Foucauldian sense of the word. That is to say that the term should be seen as conceptual mapping which defies the search for originary absolutes, or genuine and authentic manifestations of a stable, pre-given, unchanging identity; for pristine, pure customs and traditions or unsullied glorious pasts" (Brah 196). Hall's and Brah's theoretical approaches critique the ideas of pure, stable, and unchanging identities and traditions and are therefore useful in our understanding of Radha's and Sita's experience of exclusion. Both theorists emphasize difference, ruptures, and

discontinuities among identities which undergo constant transformation under given circumstances and histories.

Hall's and Brah's definitions of diaspora and diasporic identity provide a conceptual framework for criticizing the gendered and racialized discourses of nation, national quest for pure and authentic traditions and past, and nationalist constructions of fixed and unified cultural identities even within a national state. In this chapter, I use the concept 'diaspora' as a potential metaphorical, theoretical framework to criticize the nationalist constructions of fixed origin and unified cultural identities, and heteronormative conceptions of gender. Especially, the critiques of 'home', authentic 'origin' and 'past' are important in the discussions of how women's multiple identities challenge the nationalist constructions of 'home' as 'pure' and 'feminine' space and of women's identities as symbolic 'bearers' of familial, national and cultural identities in this film. It becomes clear from Hall's and Brah's analyses that the term diaspora has conflicting and contested relationships with the ideas of home and sense of belonging. According to Brah, "[t]he question of home, therefore, is intrinsically linked with the way in which processes of inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances. It is centrally about our political and personal struggles over the social regulation of 'belonging'" (Brah 192). In a sense, then, while Radha and Sita are Indian and live in a nation-state called India, the impositions placed on them to conform to nationalist and heteronormative discourses regarding female identity propel them into migrancy, in the metaphorical sense: they are not at home in their home. Therefore, the identities of Radha and Sita constantly negotiate and challenge the patriarchal nationalist constructions of their homoerotic relationship as an example of 'perverse' sexuality. The patriarchal nationalist ideologies tend to look back to an idealized, masculinist past, to attempt to revive this lost past

and traditions through the constructions of women's bodies as repositories of familial and national honour and identities. In this context, then, Radha and Sita do not belong. This can be seen in the roles defined by the patriarchies and assigned to Radha and Sita. At the same time, the nationalist discourses construct women's bodies as symbolic centers and boundary markers of nation as home and family. Therefore, women's bodies become crucial in patriarchal nationalist discourses as sites of biological reproduction and of reproducing familial and national honour and identities.

**Construction of Patriarchal and Uniform Indian National and Cultural Identity:**

One of the features of post-colonial nationalist ideology is its creation of a unified Indian national and cultural identity, even though that construction excludes many, such as those who are marginalised in terms of gender, class, "race" and ethnicity by emphasizing the homogenous and static nature of post-colonial cultural and national identity. This promotion of homogenous national and cultural identity therefore ignores the diversity, conflicts and differences among people in the post-colonial identity. Hall notes that "cultural identity" is understood into two ways: "first, identity understood as a collective, shared history among individuals affiliated by race or ethnicity that is considered to be fixed or stable; and second, identity understood as unstable, metamorphic, and even contradictory--an identity marked by multiple points of similarities as well as differences" (Hall 233). Hall also points out that "[c]ultural identity. . . is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. . . .Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture, and power" (Hall 236).

*Fire* represents Indian culture as a site of similarities and, at the same time, differences, which suggests that cultural identity is multiple, fragmented, heterogeneous, and fluid. Mehta depicts this multiplicity and fluidity in Indian cultural identity by focusing on two important aspects of Indian culture in this film. Firstly, Mehta portrays many local aspects or issues of Indian culture, and secondly, she shows the cultural confrontations and conflicts within Indian culture by relating Indian culture to global culture and the idea of modernization. This connection between local and global undoubtedly engages in a transnational questioning of stable, homogenous gendered identities. As Ratna Kapur argues, "[a]t every point, culture is invoked to counter the dominant cultural tale that is frequently told in relation to these two characters [Radha and Sita], the rituals they enact and the story of the joint Hindu family. All of these stories are recuperated in the contemporary moment to destabilize the dominant meaning accorded to Indian cultural values" (Kapur 57).

The local aspects or issues are presented in this film in two ways in the broad sense: firstly, the portrayal of women and men in the Indian traditional familial atmosphere where women are forced to conform to the familial norms and duties; and secondly, the portrayal of Indian Hindu mythology and its impact on Hindu women in India. In the context of a Hindu joint family in New Delhi, Radha and Sita, two sisters-in-law are married to Ashok and Jatin, respectively. In this family Radha and Sita are expected to conform to the traditional familial norms and duties, such as taking care of their elder mother-in-law, conforming to religious rituals by fasting for their husbands' longevity, which is considered as *Kharvachuth,* and by operating a family food business where they are assigned to cook. On the other hand, Ashok and Jatin spend their leisure time outside of home with Ashok spending his time with a Hindu Swami with whom he seeks for that which he sees as 'eternal truth'—that is, a vow of celibacy. He examines his

power of restraining all kinds of sexual arousal by keeping his infertile wife Radha beside him

every night. The younger brother of Ashok, Jatin, who is newly married to Sita, is expected by

his mother and brother to continue the family name by reproducing a baby boy, but Jatin

becomes involved in an extra-marital affair with a modern Chinese girl, Julie. On the surface,

this summary suggests family discord, but nothing terribly out of the ordinary; however, if one

looks closely at the relationships and the parallels with Indian mythology, another interpretation

emerges.

Along with the portrayal of the repressive joint family structure and domestic violence

against the women protagonists, Mehta also shows the impact of Hindu mythology on women's

life by naming Radha and Sita according to two Hindu goddesses.  Mehta shifts the symbolism

by shifting the traditional story of Sita's trial by fire to prove her chastity to her husband, to the

portrayal of Radha's trial by fire at the end of this film. In Hindu mythology, Radha is very

devoted to the God Krishna, and their love symbolizes "an idealized, transcendent heterosexual

union" (Gopinath, "Local Sites" 141); on the other hand, "Sita, the heroine of the Hindu epic

*Ramayana*, proves her chastity to her husband, Ram, by immersing herself in fire, and thus

represents the ideal of wifely devotion and virtue" (Gopinath, "Local Sites" 141).  But, the way

Mehta presents Radha's trail by fire in this film, in contrast to the epic Ramayana's Sita's ordeal

by fire, is highly complex. Mehta's version of Radha's trial by fire emphasizes her unscathed

image and her personal choice to join her lover and sister-in-law, Sita. In changing Indian

mythology this way, transferring the mythical heroism of Sita's chastity to a contemporary

version of Radha choosing to forgo heteronormativty suggests a more internal trial by fire as

Radha broods and struggles with her choice in the early part of the film.  Mehta thus suggests

that the scripts of the past, such as that of Sita's heroic sacrifice, should no longer bind women.

95

She suggests that the women in Indian Hindu culture should no longer be bound to go to exile, nor are they sacrificed to fire anymore; rather, they can challenge the meaning of Hindu mythology and reveal that the interpretation need not remain static. Radha's new trial by fire is a more metaphorical and contemporary reading of the myth, a myth which has been interpreted, or misinterpreted by the Hindu patriarchy as symbolizing a static, essentialized and unchanging image of Hindu women in Indian culture. This misinterpretation of Hindu mythology is contested by Radha's revisioning of the myth and by the portrayal of the negotiations of personal choice which Mehta portrays in this film.

The multiple "differences" within "the" Indian cultural identity are portrayed in this film in relation to global culture and the idea of modernization. The global culture and the idea of modernization are portrayed in this film by presenting Jatin's relationship with a Chinese modern girl, Julie. Jatin does not want to live in a traditional joint family and to share the family's joint bank account. Jatin's desires to be independent economically and to make his own decisions about his life suggest the ideas of self individualization in modernity. Also, his affair with the modern Chinese girl and his fondness for fighting movies show the trans-culturalism within Indian culture; however, the intercultural relationship is also affected by hatred and rage. This intercultural conflict is presented in Julie's father's speech, which affirms that "there is no place for minorities" (49:42). In reply, Jatin admits that "You are right, sir. We Indians are a very complex people" (49:46). This conversation between Jatin and Julie's father is presented in this film as ambiguous as Mehta does not provide enough context of the Indian-Chinese relationship or Indians' racist attitude towards Chinese minorities in this film. But, it is clear that Mehta presents the intercultural conflict and questions the idea of authentic Indian cultural identity. According to Sailaja Vatsala Krishnamurti, by focusing on Julie's father's point about the racism

towards Chinese minorities in India, Mehta exposes "a much more complex history of cultural crossings, hybrid identities, and the politics of ethnicity" (Krishnamurti 33). Especially, Julie's desire to live in Hong Kong, her aspirations to learn an American English accent, and Jatin's and her illusions of an idealized notion of modernity or self individualization undoubtedly suggest the intercultural influence in Indian culture and the hegemonic power relations in intercultural connections.

The representation of difference within and between Indian cultures becomes significantly more complex when Mehta presents Indian cultural differences in relation to gender, class and "race". Mehta invalidates the idea of unified and homogenous Indian cultural identity by presenting the hierarchy of class and gender relations in this film. The portrayal of the servant of this family, Mundu, represents the power relations between middle class and working class people in India. His economic vulnerability when he is being fired and his social status of being a servant suggest the class hierarchy and power relations between bourgeois middle class and working class people in Indian culture. Both examples cited above suggest that the nationalist agenda excludes both racial minorities and the working class. However, it is very important to note that the power hierarchies between gender relations and roles that Mehta depicts in *Fire* are also reinforced by the patriarchal and nationalist constructions of home, family, and nation and through the symbolic construction of Indian women as symbolic markers, for example, mothers and wives, of that Indian national and cultural identity.

**Nationalist Constructions of Home, Family and Nation and the Role of Women's Bodies and Sexualities:**

*Fire* examines the ways in which women are constructed as primary markers "of an essential, inviolable communal identity or tradition" (Gopinath, *Nostalgia, Desire* 468) by the patriarchal nationalist discourses in India. Through the constructions of women in relation to domestic and familial metaphors such as mothers and wives, the nationalist discourses also construct 'home' as pure and sanitised feminine space. Referring to Benedict Anderson, Deniz Kandiyoti persuasively analyzes the conflation of woman, home, family and nation. As Kandiyoti points out, "nationalism describes its object using either the vocabulary of kinship (motherland, *patria*) or home (*heimat*) in order to denote something to which one is 'naturally' tied . . . The association of women with the private domain reinforces the merging of the nation/community with the selfless mother/devout wife" (Kandiyato quoted in Gopinath, *Nostalgia, Desire* 468). Borrowing the term "the burden of representation" from Kobena Mercer (Rajgopal 55), which is also considered as "forced identities" by Amrita Chhachhi (Rajgopal 55), I want to argue that *Fire* explores the ways Indian women are constructed as a signifier by anti-colonial nationalist ideology. According to Rajgopal, the idea of "the burden of representation" symbolizes women as "the symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honour, both personally and collectively" (Rajgopal 55) which erases women's multiple, heterogeneous and mobile identities. This anti-colonial nationalist ideology imposes the idea of unified nationalist cultural identity on women as "mother," for example in the term "Mother India," which regulates women's freedom of choice and invalidates women's multiple and diverse identities and their multiple forms of agency. This "burden of representation" is also described by post-colonial film critic Ella Shohat, who argues that the patriarchal nature of anti-colonial nationalist ideology

98

replicates colonial repression and imposes neo-colonialism on women's lives (Shohat n. pag.).

By considering women's position in anti-colonial nationalist patriarchal ideology as a doubly

minor position, she also argues that the anti-colonial nationalist ideology not only ignores the

social differences such as sexism, classism and racism in the society but also reinforces the

colonial patriarchal power relations between men and women. Therefore, the women are doubly

repressed by the neo-colonialist attitude of the nation on the one hand, and the patriarchal nature

of nationalism on the other hand. In this doubly minor situation, women are excluded from all

kinds of advantages of the nationalist movement and their freedom is still restricted in the private

sphere (Shohat n. pag.).

Given the conflation of woman, home, family and nation, it becomes clear that women's

bodies play important roles in nationalist discourses where women are constructed as sites of

biological reproduction of national collectivities and, at the same time, as symbols of communal

past and tradition. Mehta focuses on the ways in which the patriarchal nationalist discourses

revive nationalist Hindu past and traditions through the constructions of home as the feminine

and spiritual domains and through the constructions of women as repositories of religious, social

and familial norms and traditions. These patriarchal nationalist discourses are most evident in

three episodes depicted in this film: Ashok's identification with religious and nationalist leaders

and his practice of celibacy, portrayals of Radha's and Sita's familial and religious rituals such as

*Karva Chauth* and their confinement in domestic work, and depictions of the social, familial and

religious values attached to Radha and Sita as devoted wives and future mothers.

Mehta focuses on this symbolic construction of women by anti-colonial nationalist

patriarchal ideology through the portrayal of Radha and Sita whose identities are constructed as

wives and mothers in this film. This burden of unified national cultural identity as mother is

presented in this film in two ways in the broad sense: through the portrayal of traditional joint family structure and Ashok's practice of Gandhian celibacy, and through the religious norms and regulations on the women's life. In this case, I want to define the nationalist patriarchal ideology and the patriarchal nature of the institutions of marriage and family as "structural violence" (Brand-Jacobson 17), and the familial norms and religious rituals as "cultural violence" (Brand-Jacobson 18). To evaluate women's domination by the patriarchal nationalist ideology and the patriarchal nature of family, Mehta presents the ways in which the structural violence and cultural violence work together and consolidate women's oppression. For example, Ashok, the elder brother of the traditional joint family represents the patriarchal nature of Indian family structure: though he does not seem to be very violent, he controls the whole family and Radha's choice and sexual freedom. On the other hand, the image of Swami and his discourse of celibacy as a means of attaining the eternal truth suggest how religion works with the patriarchal structure of family and nationalism to reinforce each other. In addition, by portraying Ashok as very calm and rational but dominating, Mehta criticizes the bourgeois middle class hypocrisy concerning patriarchy.

Ashok's practice of Ghandian celibacy after learning about Radha's infertility suggests the ways nationalist ideology constructs women as mother by ignoring their sexuality and freedom of choice. The elder brother of this family, Ashok, takes a vow of celibacy when he comes to know that his wife Radha is infertile. Ashok conforms to a nationalist Hindu Swami and this religious leader promotes the discourse that desire is the root of all evil. Therefore, Ashok gives up all physical desires, and he has been practicing celibacy for 13 years, controlling all temptations around him. For example, Ashok keeps his wife Radha next to him every night so that he can test his power of sexual control. Ashok's practice of Ghandian celibacy is not only an

example of how women's sexualities are merely constituted as sites of biological reproduction, but also suggests the ways in which nationalist ideology, as also portrayed in *Water* and *Earth,* disavows women's sexualities and choice outside the marital relationship and biological reproduction. Radha's sexuality and desire are, therefore, denied by Ashok because he thinks that Radha's sexuality has no value as she is incapable of reproduction.

Although Radha's body is useless to Ashok, as it is not a site of biological reproduction, social and religious meanings are embedded in her symbolic value as bearer of social, familial and religious norms. Radha is the only one in the family who is responsible to look after her paralyzed and mute mother-in-law. More importantly, Radha's infertile body is used by Mehta as a means to examine Ashok's sexual abstinence. Ashok's practice of celibacy reveals the ways in which patriarchal nationalist and religious discourses not only enact sexual violence on women's bodies by denying their sexual needs and choice, but also reinforce the discourse of wifehood and motherhood by promoting women's duties to their husbands. For example, in one conversation, Radha asks Ashok, "If I could have children, would you need the way that you need me (31:23)?" In response, Ashok says, "Perhaps it was my destiny assigned to seek the universal truth. Each day Swamiji helps me to conquer that truth" (31:37). "How does it help me" (31:51) Radha asks. "By helping me, you are doing your duty as my wife" (32:10), Ashok replies. This conversation between Radha and Ashok clearly shows the ways in which patriarchal nationalist discourses legitimize marital sexual violence on women's sexualities and bodies through the promotion of the discourses of proper womanhood, wifely duty and sacrifice and male power to determine both his and her sexuality.

Ashok's practice of celibacy also suggests marital sexual violence against Radha. By associating Ashok's sexual abstinence with Gandhi's celibacy practice, Mehta echoes Jigna

Desai's point that "Gandhian nationalism deployed male celibacy as an ideal method of regulation . . ." (Desai 167) because nationalist and religious masculinities are embedded in male celibacy and self denial. The connection between Ashok's celibacy and Gandhian celibacy also illuminates how the institution of marriage and family promote the discourse of heteronormativity which is linked to the nationalist patriarchal ideology (Desai 165). As Mary John and Janaki Nair argue, "Celibacy received a fresh lease of life with Vivekananada's call to sexual abstinence for building a nation of heroes, one which anticipated in many ways the more publicized embrace of celibacy by Gandhi" (John and Nair quoted in Desai 165). Mehta further criticizes these discourses through the portrayal of Sita's and Jatin's loveless marital relationship in this film. Jatin is forced by his brother and mother to marry Sita to give birth to a baby boy to carry on the family name. By portraying the social, religious and familial values of Sita's body, as she is capable of producing a baby boy, Mehta examines the ways in which women are victims of marital rape and violence. For example, in one scene that portrays the "consummation" of their marriage, Jatin climbs on top of Sita, has sex with her, turns around and falls asleep, and Sita tries to wipe the bloodstains from bed sheets. Analyzing this sexual violence against Sita, Banerjee argues, "[w]hile the blood is a testament to the fact that Sita was a virgin and this is her first sexual encounter, it also marks the violence of Jatin's act" (Banerjee 32). Through the portrayals of Ashok's celibacy and his disavowal of Radha's sexual desires and choice and of Jatin's similar disavowal of Sita's desire through his use of her body entirely for reproduction, Mehta examines the ways in which nationalist ideologies construct women's sexuality as necessarily heterosexual and controlled by men. Further, they are expected, clearly, to be chaste and pure. The use of women's bodies, the expectations of chastity and purity all deny women's sexuality, a denial which is legitimized through the discourses of proper

102

femininity, womanhood, wifehood and motherhood promoted in the familial and domestic spheres in this film.

The patriarchal nationalist constructions of 'home' and 'family' as sites of spirituality, traditions and  feminine activities are portrayed through Radha's and Sita's normative rituals and duties as wives and through their confinements to domestic work in this film. *Fire* shows that Radha and Sita are burdened with all kinds of familial and domestic works. This film depicts Radha and Sita spending most of their time in the private sphere in the care of others, while Ashok and Jatin are engaged in their activities outside of the family. This dichotomy between the private and public sphere and the nationalist attempts to engender the private sphere as "feminine" and the public sphere as "masculine" clearly suggest the hierarchies of gender relations and gender division of labour.[6] For example, in the take-out food business of the family, Radha and Sita are engaged to cook food for customers while Ashok controls the economy of this business by occupying the position of cashier.  As Irina Negrea argues, "[i]n the economic structure of the family, women are the ones who have to cook and nourish, and this aspect of their lives has been turned into an aspect of femininity" (Negrea n. pag.).

Along with the portrayals of the patriarchal nationalist constructions of home and family as feminine domains, Mehta also focuses on the ways in which the lost traditions and rituals are revived through women's normative rituals, for example, Radha's and Sita's fasting for their husbands' long life. In this ritual, which is traditionally named *Karva Chauth*, Radha and Sita are expected to keep fasting without any water, in order to insure Ashok's and Jatin's longevity. Also, this ritual suggests Radha's and Sita's proper devotions to their husbands. In one moment

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[6] One of the first discussions of the gendered public and private spheres was that of Sherry Ortner in *Sexual Meaning: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*, edited by Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

of this film, when Radha describes the significance of this fasting to Sita, she points out that they are proving how loyal and devoted they are to their husbands by keeping this fast. Through the depiction of this ritual, Mehta demonstrates how patriarchal nationalist discourses revive these traditions through the reinforcements of wifely duties and rituals. As KumKum Sangari, Sudesh Vaid and Chatterjee argue, the idea of tradition is linked to women through their tropes of home, family and spirituality while the masculine traits are identified with westernization and materiality (Desai 163). Also, Chatterje argues that "The new politics of nationalism 'glorified India's past and tended to defend everything traditional'; all attempts to change customs and life-styles began to be seen as the aping of Western manners and were thereby regarded with suspicion" (Chatterjee, "The Nation" 116).

Rather than focusing on the binary opposition between traditionalism and modernization, Mehta examines the ways in which patriarchal nationalism redeploys traditions through religious rules and rituals. The critique of traditionalism can be better understood through the complex characterization of Radha's and Sita's mute, paralyzed mother-in-law Biji. Biji stands for tradition, and she represents a strong upholder of wifely duties and devotion to husbands. Biji cannot speak and move, but only listen, and especially, she rings a bell to express her feelings. She usually rings the bell when any action made by Radha and Sita goes against the traditional and religious rules in the Kapur family. For example, when Sita comes to this family after getting married, she enters into Jatin's and her bedroom and puts on Jatin's trousers and begins to dance with Hindi pop music. Being a woman, wearing trousers instead of Sari is a deviance from gendered social norms about dress code. While Sita is busy having fun, Radha suddenly opens the door and informs Sita that Biji has been ringing the bell for a while. Hesitating due to the sudden appearance of Radha, Sita comes out from the room with trouser and blouse to see what

104

happened to Biji. Biji rings her bell ferociously to express her disapproval of Sita's deviance from gendered behaviour. In another scene, when Sita's and Radha's homoerotic relationship is exposed to Biji, she spits on Radha's face. Biji's actions clearly suggest the ways tradition is employed by religious norms and rules to discipline any action against gendered norms and behaviour. More importantly, Mehta critiques the ideology of engendering traditionalism through the portrayal of Biji as mute and paralyzed. Biji is a strong proponent of tradition on the one hand, but is paralyzed and mute on the other hand; clearly, this suggests the ways in which internal flaws and contradictions reside in the ideology of traditionalism. As Krishnamurti argues, "Mehta seems to frame the real agenda of the film: not to simply face off with tradition, but to question a traditionalism that is unable to accept its own changes and mutations" (Krishnamurti 33). Biji is a powerful figure who, like the panopticon, observes everything in the home, but she is constantly in need of care and nurture; thus, "Mehta makes an ambivalent comment by representing tradition as all-seeing and all-powerful, and yet surviving only through the graces of those who actively maintain it. When those entrusted with that maintenance begin to question their role, the structure of tradition is open to transgression" (Krishnamurti 34). By portraying Radha's and Sita's homoerotic relation within the traditional and religious norms upheld in the family by Biji, Ashok and, to a lesser extent, Jatin, *Fire* transgresses the burden of tradition in women's roles and identities.

Mehta also critiques the nationalist religious discourses for restoring nostalgic traditions and the past through the depictions of *Agnipariksha* (trial by fire) from the epic *Ramayana* and through the naming of the two female protagonists in accordance with Hindu goddesses. Portraying *Agnipariksha* through the Ram Lila performance, television serial and through Radha's metaphorical trial by fire, Mehta challenges the dominant discourses of Sita and her

devoted wifehood in the Hindu epic *Ramayana*. The naming of the two female protagonists as Radha and Sita mocks mythical Hindu goddesses as both of the goddesses are considered as examples of pure and chaste wifehood and womanhood in Hindu religion. Mehta rewrites this Hindu mythology by portraying Radha's and Sita's non-heteronormative relationship in the familial and domestic space. But the expulsion of Radha and Sita clearly suggests that non-heteronormative subjects have a conflicting relationship with the patriarchal nationalist constructions of home, family, nation and sense of belonging. As Gopinath argues, "[w]hereas 'the woman' carries a powerful symbolic freight in the constitution of the nation, a non-heteronormative subject necessarily has a very different relation to the constructions of 'home' and 'family' upon which nationalism depends" (Gopinath, *Nostalgia, Desire* 469). Mehta demonstrates how Radha's and Sita's homoerotic relationship is considered as a threat to the nationalist and patriarchal constructions of home/family/nation. For example, when Ashok comes to know about Radha's and Sita's homoerotic relationship, he forces Radha to go to the Swamiji for penance because their homoerotic relationship is considered not only as a threat to the normative heterosexual familial and marital systems, but also as a "sin" in the eyes of god and man. At the same time, Mehta focuses on the ways in which Radha and Sita negotiate their exclusions and reconstitute the home as a site of intense desire and, thus, of resistance.

 *Fire* demonstrates that the patriarchal nationalist discourses not only construct home and family as traditionally pure and chaste feminine space, but also imagine home, family and nation as fundamentally heterosexual and heteronormative. As M. Jacqui Alexander points out,

> The nation has always been conceived in heterosexuality, since biology and reproduction are at the heart of its impulse. The citizenship machinery is also located here, in the sense that the prerequisites of good citizenship and loyalty to the nation are simultaneously

106

sexualized and hierarchized into a class of good, loyal, reproducing heterosexual citizens, and a subordinated, marginalized class of non-citizens (Alexander quoted in Gopinath, *Nostalgia, Desire* 469).

Therefore, the non-heteronormative subjects are disavowed, elided and punished. These sexualized, gendered and ethnocentric hierarchies of patriarchal nationalist discourses are represented in Mundu's sexual repression and Ashok's disavowal of Radha's and Sita's homoerotic sexual relationship. Switching off the epic *Ramayana*, favourite serial of Biji, Mundu runs pornographic videos and masturbates in front of Biji because it is the only way he can express his sexual pleasure. Mundu's behaviour reveals the hypocrisy of the Hindu middle class family and, at the same time, explores the limited choice the working class people have in the Indian context. But because of the gender hierarchy in male-dominated Indian society, Mundu does have more sexual freedom than Radha and Sita.

The patriarchal nationalist and religious attitudes towards women's non-heteronormative sexualities are depicted through Ashok's cruelty to Radha when she is caught by fire. When Ashok comes to know about the lesbian relationship between Radha and Sita, he says to Radha, "Look Radha, what I saw in the bedroom is the sin of eyes of god and man, maybe Swamiji can help you, help us. Desire brings ruin"(01:38:17). When Radha criticizes Ashok for his sexual control, Ashok continues, "What kind of women you are. You should be touching my feet and asking me to forgive you" (01:39:45). Through Ashok's statement, Mehta reveals how non-heteronormative subjects are disavowed by the patriarchal discourses. Mehta also focuses on the ways in which the non-heteronormative subject is multiply displaced and constantly punished through the depictions of Radha's trial by fire and Ashok's cruelty towards Radha. When Radha continues to criticize Ashok for his celibacy, Ashok pushes Radha, and she is caught by fire as

she works in the kitchen. Without making any attempt to rescue Radha from the fire, Ashok avoids her and takes his mother and leaves home. This cruelty towards Radha suggests the ways in which Ashok symbolically and literally punishes Radha for her relationship with Sita. The final expulsion of Radha and Sita illuminates how non-heteronormative subjects are not allowed to belong to the patriarchal nationalist definitions of home, citizenship and sense of belonging in post-colonial India.

**Women's Responses to Heteronormativity and the Articulation of Homoerotic Desire:**

Mehta further focuses on the ways in which Radha and Sita subvert the patriarchal nationalist constructions of home and family as domains of chaste femininity and spirituality through their articulations of homoerotic desires in the repressive familial and domestic spaces. The portrayal of Radha's and Sita's homoerotic desire in this film not only challenges the dominant discourse of western lesbian relationship, but also challenges the nationalist heteronormative ideologies by transforming the domestic space as sites of intense desire, sexuality and new ways of being. As Gopinath argues, "By depicting the privatized, seemingly sanitized domestic space as a site of intense female homoerotic pleasure and practice . . . *Fire* interrogate[s] the teleological Euro-American narrative according to which lesbian sexuality must emerge from a private, domestic sphere into a public, visible identity" (Gopinath, *On Fire* 635). Following Gopinath's argument, I argue that the relationship between Radha and Sita portrayed in *Fire* is beyond any singular definition of a same-sex relationship. This homoerotic relationship is neither a westernized depiction of homosexuality, nor is it like traditional Indian same sex relationships such as depicted in the Kama Sutra (Desai 164). Rather, Radha's and Sita's psychological bonding and sexual relationship are portrayed through their daily activities in the homosocial sphere in the Indian familial context. The particular familial context of

Radha's and Sita's homoerotic relationship suggests the politics of location embedded in the particular context of queer politics of post-colonial India which is contextual and has multiple meanings and trajectories across the nation.

Also, Radha's and Sita's relationship can be defined as an example of an alternative diasporic queer sexuality. As Sita explains, "There is no word in our language to describe what we are to each other", and Radha responds, "You're right; perhaps seeing is less complicated" (Gopinath, *On Fire* 633). The sexual desire of Radha and Sita is portrayed in complex and multifaceted ways, and their relationship takes different forms under given circumstances. For example, the non-sexual relationship between Radha and Sita such as oiling Sita's hair, massaging Radha's legs, feeding one another and their hopscotch game, gradually turns into an intense homoerotic and sexual relationship. The multiple and diverse ways in which Radha and Sita articulate their sexual desire criticize the dominant western discourses of fixed lesbian identity. For example, critiquing the western film reviewers', especially Roger Ebert's review about the portrayal of lesbian relationship in *Fire*, Gopinath argues,

> [A]lmost all mainstream U.S. reviewers stress the failure of 'these Hindus' to articulate lesbianism intelligibly, which in turn signifies the failure of the non-West to progress toward the organization of sexuality and gender prevalent in the West ... *Fire* underscores the film's critique of colonial constructions in which non-Western sexualities are premodern and in need of Western political development and challenges dominant Indian nationalist narratives that consolidate the nation in terms of sexual and gender normativity (Gopinath 633).

Therefore, Radha's and Sita's diverse and heterogeneous expressions of sexual desire suggest the fluid and changing nature of sexual relationships and sexual identity. As Evelyn Blackwood and Saskia Wieringa argue, "[m]aking lesbian a global category is problematic because it imposes the Eurocentric term 'lesbian', a term usually used to refer to a fixed sexual identity, on practices and relationships that may have very different meanings and expectations in other cultures" (Evelyn Blackwood and Saskia Wieringa quoted in Moorti).

The complexity of Radha's and Sita's homoerotic desire becomes clear in the picnic scene and the oiling of Sita's hair scene. In the picnic scene, Sita offers to massage Radha's feet. In the Indian context, it is very common for a younger sister to offer to massage an older sister's feet; this kind of act symbolizes respect and affection. Thus, Ashok can misinterpret this scene to indicate family harmony and remarks that "I am lucky to have such a good family" (58:01); ironically, the scene clearly depicts intense desire and sexual pleasure of Radha and Sita. According to Banerjee, "This is deeply ironic since we, the audience, know that this scene is charged with intense homoerotic desire. The camera plays out this desire by shifting from Radha's feet to the expression of intense emotion and even amusement at their shared complicity on the faces of the two women as they look at each other" (Banerjee 27). Another scene like the picnic scene can also be read as exemplifying their homoerotic desire. In this scene, where Radha oils Sita's hair, both women exchange their gaze through a looking glass. By portraying Radha's and Sita's desire and pleasure through their looking, Mehta demonstrates women's sexual pleasure through a women's gaze where women are defined as both sexual subjects and objects. More importantly, Mehta challenges the long established tradition in Hollywood and Bollywood films of constructing women as sexual objects of the male gaze; instead, Mehta explores the ways in which Radha and Sita deconstruct the patriarchal nationalist constructions

110

of their identities as sexual objects and 'baby-making machines' through their expressions of diverse and multiple identities and interstitial agencies which I will discuss in the following section.

**Interstitial Agencies:**

Mehta focuses on the diverse, heterogeneous and multiple ways in which Radha and Sita articulate their contestatory identities and interstitial agencies to resist the patriarchal heteronormative discourses. Radha's and Sita's identities are affected by social, religious, familial and patriarchal contexts in Indian society. I identify their identities as liminal because they transform their repressive familial and domestic spaces as sites of resistance and intense desire and they reproduce their non-heteronormative identities through diversity, heterogeneity, liminality, difference and hybrid strategies. According to Homi Bhabha, "the hybrid strategy or discourse opens up a space of negotiation where power is unequal but its articulation may be equivocal. Such negotiation is neither assimilation nor collaboration. It makes possible the emergence of an 'interstitial' agency that refuses the binary representation of social antagonism" (Bhabha 58). I argue that the ways Radha and Sita negotiate with the patriarchal constructions of their identities through their articulations of diverse sexualities and homoerotic desires are significant in resisting the long established modernist approach to identity, agency, and actions. The dominant theoretical frameworks such as the modernist approach and enlightenment paradigm reduce identity to a binary model and obscure the daily resistance of marginalized people. In the context of constructing so called "Third World" women as passive victims by the dominant western discourses, the transnational feminist approach focuses on many historical and social relations in which selfhood is constituted. This transnational feminist approach challenges

111

the modernist approaches to identity which define actors in terms of discrete, unified and binary

structured identity (Stone- Mediatore 136).  According to Stone-Mediatore,

> "transnational feminists argue that this limited notion of identity [unified and binary
>
> structured identities] leads us to view power relations strictly in terms of binary
>
> oppositions, such as the opposition between men and women. Consequently, this logic
>
> obscures the historically specific, complex, and overlapping oppressions that burden
>
> many women of color" (Stone-Mediatore 136).

The binary structured definitions of identity and actors are very problematic because of their

totalizing ideas of "Third World" women as 'victims' and 'objects'. This model also ignores the

long standing structural violence such as colonization, neo-colonization, state violence and

patriarchy. The transnational feminist framework, therefore, argues for the examinations of

multiple layers of oppressions of women of colour, and it also examines the ways in which

women resist patriarchal nationalist oppressions through individual and collective works. The

transnational feminist approach criticizes the predominant ideas of actions and agencies and

argues that the enlightenment notion of action "stems from innate agency of a private

'individual' who expresses himself in 'public' deeds". These historical narratives, as Stone-

Mediatore argues, "obfuscate this social underpinning of agency when they report the actions of

people who dominate political and economic life and leave unexamined the social and cultural

institutions that made their dominance possible" (Stone-Mediatore 138).

Mehta examines the ways in which Radha and Sita transform the so-called feminine

space such as home and family, into sites of female eroticism and resistance through their

homoerotic relationship in the private sphere. At the same time, Radha and Sita resist the

dominant dichotomy between private and public sphere where home and family are considered as sites of pure and chaste femininity and spirituality while the public sphere is identified with masculinity and materiality. By situating Radha and Sita in a liminal\third\hybrid space, which is neither purely private nor completely public, Mehta produces Radha's and Sita's interstitial agencies and hybridized strategies in this film.The interstitial agencies and hybrid strategies of Radha and Sita are portrayed in multiple ways. In other words, the ways Radha and Sita articulate their hybrid identities are complex, contested and ambivalent.

Mehta also portrays Radha's and Sita's homoerotic desire and their agency to transform the repressive private space into site of intense desire by using lighting and colour expressionistically and impressionistically. According to David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, "[i]n contrast to French Impressionism, which bases its style primarily on cinematography and editing, German Expressionism depends heavily on mise-en-scene. Shapes are distorted and exaggerated unrealistically for expressive purposes" (Bordwell and Thompson 473). Mehta applies this Expressionist style to articulate Radha's and Sita's passion and intense desire for each other through the usage of unusual bright light and through the artistic distortion of image. For example, in the scenes of Radha's and Sita's first kiss and their love making scene, Mehta uses unusual bright light and shade to emphasize the intensity of their love and desire. In the scene of their first kiss (chapter 3), Mehta uses soft focus to depict the images of Radha and Sita in a painterly photographic style. The shade on Radha's face and the bright light coming from the window when she looks at the mirror and feels the growing love between her and Sita also suggest their emotion and intensity of their passion. Similarly, in the love making scene (chapter 9), Mehta employs Expressionist style through the use of soft focus and the portrayal of Sita's image as a more abstract shape. The combination of bright light and shade and the halo effect

113

(lighting a face from above) around the characters of Radha and Sita suggest the angelic quality of their love and produce the intensity of their romanticism.

Mehta also uses Impressionist film style, for example in the recurring scene of mustard flowers, to emphasize Radha's emotion and her development of identity and sexuality through childhood memories and dreams. The recurring scene of the mustard flowers where Radha tries to see the ocean is an example how Mehta portrays Radha's subjective vision or impression of herself filtered through childhood experience and memory. In the scene (chapter 3), Mehta uses Impressionist style in her cinematography when she uses available light to make the scene an artistic impression. Mehta does not distort the lighting by applying a halo effect around the characters; rather, the usage of natural light in this shot suggests Radha's perceptual experience of her identity and subjectivity, which blossom gradually in her homoerotic relationship with Sita. In this shot, Mehta also uses point of view cutting by showing Radha and her mother looking at something, which also suggests Radha's quest for freedom and her realization of herself.

The opening scene of Radha with her parents in the mustard flowers is significant to understand the ways Radha's identity and desire blossom gradually. The opening scene is also an example of how Radha posits herself in an interstitial space. In this scene, young Radha's mother tells her a story sitting in a wide open field of yellow mustard flowers. Referring to a story, Radha's mother urges her to see the ocean. When young Radha cannot see the ocean, her mother says, "What you can't see you can see, you just have to see without looking"(00:54). In mainstream Hollywood and Bollywood films, following feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, looking is intrinsically tied with a patriarchal gaze which constructs women's identities as sexual objects. As Mulvey points out, "[i]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking

114

has been split between active/male and passive/female . . . . In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (Mulvey 62-63). The statement of Radha's mother also suggests that 'seeing without looking' can be liberatory for Radha, as Radha can resist the symbolic domains of patriarchal heteronormative discourses by entering a third/liminal space through the practices of alternative seeing and viewing. By juxtaposing Radha's position in the open field and her mother's suggestion to see without looking, and the romantic story of Taj Mahal which symbolizes the patriarchal heteronormative discourses, Mehta delineates how younger Radha posits herself in a liminal space and constructs her identity and sexuality beyond any idea of heterosexual romance. In other words, in the recurring scene of mustard flowers where Radha tries to see the Ocean which is apparently unseen, Radha posits herself neither in heterosexual romantic marital norms, nor does she conform to the patriarchal nationalist constructions of her gendered identity and sexuality.

Radha's effort to see the Ocean without looking suggests her desire for freedom and choice through imaginative seeing. Especially, it is worth mentioning that Radha does not leave her husband without facing him and challenges her imposed role as dutiful wife. Radha's states her reason for leaving: "I desire to leave, I desire Sita, her warmth, her compassion, her body" (01:38:44); this is an example of her self-consciousness about her relationship with Sita and her agency to express her desire. Similarly, Radha's questioning of her husband as to how his sexual restraint will help her, is also an example of her agency. The long term forced celibacy on Radha's sexuality and her duties to take care of all family members have affected her expression of her agency and psychology. For example, after knowing that the servant knows everything about their lesbian relationship, Radha expresses her fear and psychological tension. This

115

psychological tension and her fear suggest that her subjectivity is affected by the socio-psychological atmosphere of a particular situation. Apparently, it seems that Radha's sexual identity blossoms because of Sita's active role in developing their homoerotic relationship. But I argue that the ways Radha articulates her agency are implicit and indirect because of forced celibacy and sexual violence on her body. For instance, in one scene, Radha says to Sita that this pleasure and desire are unfamiliar to her. In spite of sexual and domestic violence on Radha's identity and sexuality, Radha consciously makes her decision to become involved in a homoerotic relationship. I also argue that Radha's silence does not necessarily have to be seen as negative; silence can be defined as an agentic act in certain circumstances. In this context, Radha's silence does not identify her victimization; rather, Radha's silence is the effect of the structural and cultural violence in Indian society. Within the complex patriarchal aspects of Indian society and culture portrayed in this film, Radha challenges her normative roles and identity as mother and wife before and after engaging with Sita in a homoerotic relationship. But it is important to note that Mehta does not portray Radha and Sita as traumatized, which is very common in Bollywood and Hollywood films. The portrayal of hysteria in women's character after women's deviation from the patriarchally defined roles of mothers and wives is one kind of mechanism to reinforce women's conformity to the patriarchal society. As Moorti suggests, "in mainstream cinema, the woman has a very clearly delineated role to perform within a marriage. If for any reason she deviates from it, she is seen as betraying her biological role and she is expected to pay the price in humiliation and defeat" (Moorti). Mehta challenges the traumatised portrayal of women by depicting women's struggles to seek their identity through their bonding and desire.

However, Sita's expression of her agency is quite different from that of Radha. Sita is very critical of any kind of normative role and duty imposed on her body and sexuality from the very beginning, and she openly contests the patriarchal normative roles. For example, when Radha tells her the story about the significance of fasting for their husbands' long lives, Sita questions these normative roles of women and declares that "I am sick of all this devotion. We can find choices"(47:34). Realizing the impact of patriarchal and religious rituals on women's psyche, she also questions: "Is it not amazing that we are so bound by custom and rituals?" (42:03). She continues, "Somebody just has pressed my button. The button marked tradition and I start responding like a trained monkey" (42:10). Sita's awareness of patriarchal normative rules and roles concerning women's identities and sexualities becomes clear in a scene where she protests her husband's sexual and physical violence. Sita comes to understand, only after her marriage, that Jatin is having an affair with another girl, and she was married to him only because of her reproductive capability. Therefore, she refuses any kind of sexual interaction with Jatin, and she finds her choice of desire in Radha's affection and love. Sita's protest against sexual violence is evident in one scene where Sita and Jatin are involved in an argument and Jatin slaps Sita. Sita immediately slaps him back, which is completely unexpected by Jatin. Jatin misinterprets Sita's action and considers this action as an example of her sexual arousal. He tries to kiss her, but Sita pushes him away and protests her being used as a sexual object.

By portraying Radha's and Sita's homoerotic relationship as evolving through their homosocial activities in patriarchal familial space, Mehta examines how Radha and Sita transform the repressive private sphere into liminal space/interstitial passage. In this liminal space in the private sphere, Radha and Sita articulate their interstitial agencies and reconstitute themselves as productive agents. The depictions of liminal space such as the terrace, kitchen and

117

shrine are suggestive in this film because these are the spaces which resist the binary dichotomy between family and home as feminine spaces and public spheres as masculine domains. As Bhabha argues, "This 'interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy'" (Ashcroft and Griffiths 131). Mehta demonstrates the ways in which Radha and Sita construct these interstitial spaces as sites of their sexual desire, choice and self-worth. As Jayita Sengupta claims by analyzing the lesbian relationship between two women in *Fire*, "[t]he 'lesbian-bodied subject' in the film represents the subversive force which has the power to destabilise the dominant cultural realities and upset the power / gender relations" (Sengupta 109) and points out that the women's bonding works as the main force to empower women which keeps men away from their centrality in this film (Sengupta 109). But, at the same time, as the film shows, Radha and Sita are constantly under threat of patriarchal heteronormative discourses in these domains. Radha and Sita negotiate the patriarchal surveillance and normative regulations and make the familial and domestic spaces into sites of female sexuality and desire. For example, on the roof of their home, they perform their daily works such as putting clothes to dry, but it is also the place where they transgress any fixed boundary of feminine space and masculine domain. Rather, they re-constitute the roof of their home as space of female love and desire. On the roof of the Kapur family home, Radha and Sita come closer and discover their desire for each other. It is the space where Radha breaks Sita's fasting by offering her water and meets her thirst for water and love as well. Also, they play a hopscotch game on the roof, transgressing any rigid border between wifely duty and patriarchal control. Therefore, Radha refuses to obey her wifely duty when Ashok calls Radha to perform her regular duty as a wife. Rather, now echoing Sita, she clearly says to Ashok that "the concept of duty is overrated" (01:05:11).

118

As with the terrace, Radha and Sita also transform the so-called feminine space, the kitchen, into sites of intense non-heteronormative desire and love. This is one of the spaces in this film where they find pleasure through shared domesticity and looking, though they have to perform traditionally feminine work in the kitchen. Analysing the feminist agency and power embedded in their kitchen work, Banerjee points out, "[t]he bourgeois middle-class household is the site of patriarchy, but the workspace has the potential to free the women, even though men run it" (Banerjee 34). She goes on to argue that "Mehta is able to radically subvert these existing images to suggest moments of intense female friendship that slip into queer desire" (Gopinath quoted in Banerjee 34). The kitchen is the place where Radha expresses her interstitial agency and articulates her homoerotic desire for Sita. For example, in one scene, Radha and Sita use food to articulate their feeling and desire for each other. Radha mentions to Sita while they work in the kitchen that "[c]ertain spices are good for some occasions and some for others" (Mannur 43). Radha continues, "Did you know that black pepper gives you energy which is why it is given in such abundance to newly-wed husbands. For better or for worse!" (Mannur 43). When Sita asks Radha what kind of spices are given to brides, Radha responds, "Green cardamoms, to make the breath fragrant" (Mannur 43), and Radha puts a green cardamom in Sita's mouth. This scene clearly suggests the ways in which Radha and Sita transform the kitchen space as a space of desire and love.

However, in another kitchen scene near the end of the film, Ashok tries to convince Radha that what he sees in the bedroom is sin, so he suggests she go to Swami for penance. In this scene, Radha questions the impact of Ashok's forced celibacy on her sexuality and clearly expresses her sexual desire and love for Sita. As she states, "[w]ithout desire I was dead. Without desire there is no point to living and you know what else? I desire to leave, I desire Sita, her

119

warmth, her compassion, her body. I desire to live again. If you cannot control desire, ask to

Swamiji for help, not mine" (01:38:44). This statement demonstrates the ways in which Radha

transforms this space into sites of resistance and contestation. Significantly, it is the place where

Radha proves her love for Sita by undergoing a metaphorical trial by fire as Ashok is prepared to

let her be consumed by the fire. In this scene, Mehta depicts the symbolic trial by fire of Radha

instead of Sita's actual trial in holy *Ramayana*. This scene is highly metaphorical because by

portraying Radha's survival, Mehta rewrites the Hindu mythology and suggests the ways Radha

transforms herself into a new subject who is no more considered as a barren and dutiful wife. As

Banerjee argues,

> [T]he fire also burns away and cleanses Radha of the repressive notion of womanhood
>
> that she has borne up until this point. Ultimately, the bourgeois, patriarchal household is
>
> unable to withstand the incursion of female same-sex desire within its confines. She
>
> [Radha] finally rejects this household and is in the process freed of this burden, and she
>
> joins Sita in the film's final rain-drenched scene in a deserted mosque. The rain is yet
>
> another symbol of cleansing, and also of regeneration, fertility and hope (Banerjee 35).

The final scene of Radha and Sita's reunion at Hazrat Nizamuddin Shrine also

demonstrates the ways in which Radha and Sita turn their forced exile into site of productive

hybrid identities. This place does not belong to any dominant religious discourse; rather, Mehta

challenges the dominant religious ideology in India by portraying their reunion at a shrine which

is a place of minority discourse that signifies freedom. According to Jigna Desai, "The Shrine

[is] known as a refuge for the destitute as well as for poet figures in the film as the space of

liberal secularism outside of the domestic space of the home" (Desai 173). Explaining the

significance of depicting the Shrine as a symbol of same sex desire, Desai continues that

120

"Nizamuddin's works include references to same-sex love and desire for poet Amir Khusro" (Desai 173). The shrine is the place where Radha and Sita finally challenge the patriarchal nationalist and religious heteronormative discourses by leaving their home and making their decision to stay united. They also produce their interstitial identities as they produce and reproduce their new subjectivities through transgression and transformation. Also, in the liminal space of the shrine, they transgress the fixed boundary of their identities as mothers and wives, rejecting the patriarchal nationalist discourses of unified national identity and sense of belonging.

Radha's and Sita's homoerotic relationship and their conscious decision to leave the male dominated home and family are examples of their resistance to the patriarchal nationalist constructions of home, family and nation as spaces of pure femininity and authentic traditions. By transforming the repressive familial and domestic space into sites of homoerotic desires and resistance, Mehta reconstructs the nationalist definitions of home, nation and sense of belonging. The depiction of Radha's and Sita's homoerotic identities in the familial context suggests the ways in which non-heteronormative subjects posit themselves in liminal spaces which produce their identities as productive hybridic identities. Radha's and Sita's hybrid identities emerge when they begin to question the nationalist constructions of their identities in terms of familial and domestic metaphors and in relation to fixed and authentic traditions. The complex, diverse and multiple ways in which Radha and Sita articulate their desires and sexualities suggest that women's sexual identities are not unified and homogenous; rather, identity can be constituted through diversity, multiplicity and hybridity, and it constantly transforms into different forms under particular circumstances. Focusing on Radha's and Sita's homoerotic relationship in the familial space and  their articulation of desires and sexualities in diverse and complex ways, Mehta subverts the narrow constructions of women's identities and sexualities produced by the

patriarchal nationalist discourses in this film. At the same time, Mehta examines the ways in which Radha and Sita reconstruct their emergent identities and sexualities through their articulations of diverse, heterogeneous, hybrid identities.

## Conclusion:

Deepa Mehta's elemental trilogy-- *Fire*, *Earth*, and *Water*-- explores the ways in which women are constructed as symbolic bearers of meanings and identities that serve the purposes of others—whether those identities are located in communal, religious, cultural, and/or national discourses. This thesis, focused on Mehta's trilogy, specifically, deals with the ways in which the homogenous and unified constructions of identity by the patriarchal nationalist and religious discourses of India, historically and in contemporary contexts, continuously enact a systematic violence to and long-standing domination of women's identities, sexualities, and agency. Yet, this thesis also considers how Mehta's three films work to disrupt those ideologies and to loosen that control over women's bodies, by providing examples of women's agency and resistance despite systematic oppression.

The systematic violence enacted on women's identities and sexualities by social normative systems has profound impact in the construction of self and identity of women. For example, growing as a young girl in a middle-class Hindu family in Bangladesh, I began to realize the effect of the hegemonic normative discourses on my own self and identity when I saw that my mother was expected to conform to the familial, social and religious norms regarding wifehood and motherhood. As I experienced patriarchal definitions of gendered identity and roles in my early childhood, these normative discourses affected my growing understanding of my own self and identity as an 'ideal', 'chaste' and 'devoted' daughter and wife until I was exposed through education and changing perspectives regarding social discourses and practices. I mention, here, my childhood experiences of gendered identity and roles to better situate my interests in Deepa Mehta's trilogy and the interlocking power relations among social forces revealed in her work. These forces--between patriarchy, religion, social, cultural, and familial

norms-- work together in Mehta's trilogy to perpetuate systematic violence toward and domination of women that affect their lives. The importance of Mehta's films is their focus on these underlying power relations between different kinds of patriarchal discourses and practices with colonialism, the anti-colonial reform movement, nationalism, religion, and class ideology, in historical context and in contemporary social and culture contexts of India.

Mehta's films address the domination and violence enacted on women in three different historical moments, in three different socio-cultural locations, and in three different political contexts; however, despite the differences, there is an overlapping and intersecting interest in all the films on the exploitation of women's bodies, both in a physical sense and in a symbolic (signifying) sense. She does this by exploring both the intersecting and disparate social forces— such as colonialism, anti-colonialism, religion and patriarchy—that lay claim to women's bodies as means of reproduction and symbolic markers of national and cultural identity. Further, she locates this critique of the cultural exploitation of women in India's anti-colonial nationalism, in its reform agenda, in post-colonial cultural nationalism, in the growing Hindu religious nationalism, and in the contemporary social and cultural realities of urban middle class families in twentieth century India. As this thesis demonstrates, the significance of Mehta's work lies in its revelation of the interconnections among social, cultural, political and economic systems which govern societies and construct women's identity under particular historical, cultural and social conditions. We often overlook this intersection between different kinds of discourses and social practices which control women's identities and bodies and limit their choice and freedom. Mehta's films expose these underlying relations between structural violence and cultural violence which legitimize social injustice and oppression as social and cultural norms and acceptable rituals. For example, through the depictions of the issues of widows' home, place and

identity, *Water* focuses on how widows' lack of matrimonial property rights along with other factors of domination perpetuate their economic, social, and sexual vulnerability in colonial Indian society. This film also shows how the elite Brahmin patriarchy works with religious and anti-colonial nationalist ideologies to legitimize widows' oppression in the name of duty, chastity, and purity. Similarly, *Earth* and *Fire* demonstrate how the domination of and violence against women's identities and bodies involve broader aspects of the ideological effects of colonialism, by focusing on the interlocking relationship between intersecting social forces at multiple cultural, social, and political levels as depicted in Mehta's films.

As this thesis explains, the ways that patriarchal nationalist and religious discourses enact violence and domination on women's identities and sexualities are at work differently in terms of the particular social, cultural, political, and familial contexts depicted in these three films. However, there is a profound, even "elemental," similarity in the motive of the enactment of violence on women's identities which is to establish and retain control of women's bodies, desires, sexuality, and agency. Mehta's films investigate the ways in which this control is accomplished through the enactment and policing of normative roles and rules, religious rituals and regulations, through the enforcement of religious and cultural mythologies, familial norms and duties, and gendered constructions of devotion, purity, chastity, womanhood, wifehood and motherhood, all situated in what is claimed as a pure and authentic past of tradition, culture and identity.

Mehta's depictions of historical and cultural contexts of the nation-building project, that is, the formation of national culture and history in her films, reveals the existing tension and contestation between anti-colonial nationalist discourses about women's roles and sexualities and the growing social and political changes in women's lives in contemporary India. As Mehta's

trilogy shows, the constructions of the Indian nation, in terms of national culture, tradition and identity, are gendered in specific ways:  while anti-colonial nationalist discourse constructed Indian woman, both symbolically and physically, as a site upon which nationalist ideology demanded their political liberation and agency. In their ideological and political struggles of anti-colonial nationalism against British colonialism, as specifically *Water* and *Earth* show, Indian women were constructed as repositories of the spiritual essence of Indian identity and culture. The patriarchal nationalists' ideological and political stance regarding women's roles and sexuality during the colonial and anti-colonial nationalist struggles as depicted in *Water* and *Earth* often work to reveal a 'cultural anxiety' created by rapid social and political changes in contemporary India. In other words, while *Water* and *Earth* demonstrate the ways in which women's issues and bodies were constructed as the ground upon which Indian anti-colonial nationalism claimed their liberation, *Fire* depicts how the formation of national culture and identity finds its reasoning in the name of an authentic past and tradition. The cultural anxiety of Indian patriarchy created by social and political changes in contemporary Indian society can be seen in *Fire,* which depicts radical change in women's articulation of homoerotic desire and sexuality. For example, the cultural anxiety of patriarchal nationalism, produced by globalization and inter-cultural connection in contemporary Indian society as depicted in *Fire*, forces women to return to their traditional place in the name of restoration of traditional Indian culture and pure female identity. In this aspect, Mehta's portrayals of structural and cultural violence enacted on Indian women's lives provide examples of how actual women's lives may be affected by the discourse of a pure past and tradition promoted by patriarchal and religious nationalism in India.

To countertact this negative tendency, Mehta challenges any singular definition of culture, nation, and identity through the depictions of diverse and heterogeneous identities,

experiences, stories, histories, and cultures in Indian society. These three films demonstrate that there is no singular definition of identity and culture; rather, Mehta shows difference, ruptures and discontinuities among identities which undergo constant transformation under given circumstances and histories. In Chapter Three, for example, I discuss the ways in which *Fire* presents Indian culture as sites of difference, diversity, and multiplicity by focusing on trans-culturalism in Indian culture. The trans-cultural relationship is portrayed in *Fire* through the depictions of Chinese characters and ideas of modernization. The inter-cultural relationship presented in *Fire* is affected by hatred and rage. For example, *Fire* demonstrates the ethnocentric and racist attitudes of dominant Indians towards Chinese minorities. However, the representation of difference within and between Indian cultures becomes more complex when Mehta shows this difference exists at various levels of social differentiation such as gender, class, ethnicity, caste, religion, and sexuality. For example, Mundu's character in *Fire* suggests the power relations between middle class and working class people in India. Similarly, Mehta shows difference, diversity, and multiplicity of experiences, stories, histories, and identities through the depictions of various ethnic and religious identities in *Earth*. For example, the depictions of a Parsee family, Lenny's playmate Pappu's marginalized social position, and the social differentiation among the group which is comprised of different social, ethnic, religious and gendered backgrounds--all these suggest the ways in which Mehta depicts difference, diversity and heterogeneity.

Mehta's films also break the hegemonic western discourse of "Third World" women as merely 'victims' by depicting women's subjectivity, empowerment and resistance articulated through their daily activities. The representation of women's multiple and heterogeneous identities, their homoerotic desires and active sexuality, resist, contest and negotiate with the patriarchal discourses in multiple ways. As this thesis demonstrates, women's articulations of

127

their own multiple identities, desires and sexualities challenge the modernist approach to identity, agency and actions. The ways in which female protagonists respond to patriarchal violence and domination are complex and sometimes indirect and unconscious. For example, in *Water*, Mehta suggests widows' resilience in building a sense of community through their shared imagination, memories, dreams, and stories, in spite of their severe hardship and poverty. My chapter on *Water* focuses on Chuyia's and Shakuntala's growing support of each other and questioning of the existing hierarchy of gender and social relations and the normative religious rules and regulations which inhibit and control widows. Similarly, Chapter Two addressing *Earth* demonstrates Ayah's and Lenny's direct and indirect agency and resistance, as articulated through their daily activities against the nationalist and religious constructions of women as repositories of communal, religious, and national identity and the nationalist border-making process which polices women's sexualities and bodies. Lenny's act of memorialisation of Ayah and her questions regarding British and nationalist ideologies are important examples of her intervention into the political and national actions of dividing and destroying human relationships on the basis of religious segregation. At the same time, the ways in which Lenny memorializes the violence of partition that is enacted on women's bodies are compelling and interventionist because her subjective perspectives and narratives not only problematize the dominant political and national narratives of the partition and violence but also pose a feminist historiography. Ayah's articulation of her sexual desire and her selection of Maalish-Wallah as her future husband are examples of her direct resistance to the patriarchal nationalist and religious discourses which would control her body and her choices. Though Ayah fails to resist the patriarchal nationalist violence enacted on her body, the depictions of Ayah's abduction,

disappearance and her ambiguous position in post-colonial India reveal the contradictions, gaps and ambivalence of political and national narratives of partition and violence.

Similarly, Chapter Three addresses the ways in which Radha's and Sita's homoerotic desire deconstructs the patriarchal definitions of home, family, sense of belonging and identity. The ways Radha and Sita articulate their homoerotic desire through their homosocial activities in the private sphere in fact challenge the patriarchal religious constructions of home as sanitized and feminine spiritual space and women's sexuality as chaste, pure, and asexual. The complex ways in which Radha and Sita express their desire and sexuality transform the so-called repressive familial space into a site of intense desire and new ways of being. *Fire* also shows that by situating their identities in a liminal space such as the terrace, which is neither purely private nor completely public, Radha and Sita articulate their interstitial agencies and hybridized strategies to transform their forced exile and imprisonment into productive sites of desire and resistance.

The depiction of women's agency and resistance in Mehta's films challenges the hegemonic and reductive western discourse about "Third World" women's victimization and objectification. By depicting women's oppression in relation to broader contexts of social forces rather than focusing on one discrete reason for women's oppression, Mehta demonstrates how the social and cultural institutions support cultural practices and make women's domination possible. The western discourse on "Third World" women often focuses on women's oppression in relation to the oppressive nature of "Third World" culture and society as if "Third World" culture is static and ahistorical. In this case, Mehta challenges this hegemonic discourse by focusing on the historical and contemporary contexts of Indian women's domination in colonial and post-colonial periods and depicts the power relations between British colonial ideology and

patriarchal anti-colonial nationalist and religious discourses which used Indian women to fulfill

their political and ideological interests and, thereby, profoundly affected women's lives. By

focusing on many historical and social relations in which women's selfhood is constituted and

their agency emerges, Mehta's films bring Indian women's oppression and their resistance to the

foreground and helps us understand that there are always strategies of resistance, even in the

everyday.

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**Appendix I**

**Literature Review:  Deepa Mehta's "Elemental Trilogy"**

**Scholarship on *Water*:**

Scholars such as Shamini Shanker-Jain and Vijaya Singh analyze the spatial significance of the widow's Ashram in *Water*. Shanker-Jain focuses on the ways in which widows make a home away from home through their shared memories, imaginations, and dreams (Shanker-Jain 179).  Shanker-Jain also examines the ways widows negotiate their forced confinement through intervention, resilience, and courage (178, 187), and idea I will pursue further in my thesis.  On the other hand, Vijaya Singh analyzes the environmental space of the Ashram in relation to Mehta's relationship with India and Canada. Her analysis focuses on the binary between local and global and the indoor and outdoor space of the Ashram (Singh 193). She thus criticizes Mehta's privileged diasporic position and accuses Mehta of ignoring an examination of British ideology in this film (Singh 196). Singh's critique of Mehta's privileged diasporic position and her "orientalist and neo-imperialist slant in its narrative" (Singh 199) is echoed in the work of other scholars.  As I will argue, these critiques do not take into account the complexity of the transnational multiple identities of diasporic artists; nor do they address the complexity and ambivalence of the portrayals of colonialist and anti-colonialist ideologies embedded in the text, issues I will further explore.

Like Singh, in another article entitled "The Diasporic Gaze: Deepa Mehta's and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water*," Sudha Rai also criticizes Mehta's diasporic gaze, and she accuses Mehta of portraying the static image of widows' miseries in India (Rai 208). She argues that *Water* fails to

create a counter discourse of widows' victimization, but I will argue that the historical context of

widows' vulnerability in colonial India and the ways in which women's agency is shaped and

controlled by specific context of oppression, are completely ignored in Rai's analysis of this

film. Uma Mahadevan also criticizes Mehta's portrayal of British colonialists as benevolent and

civilized in this film (Mahadevan 172). She argues that Mehta fails to depict the British

'civilizing mission' as a tool to justify its colonial rule in India (Mahadevan 172). Similarly,

Uma Parameswaran in her article "Problematising Diasporic Motivation [in] Deepa Mehta's

Films" draws our attention to the concluding paragraph of Mehta's highly controversial film

*Water*: "There are over 34 million widows in India according to the 2001 census. Many continue

to live in conditions of social, economic and cultural deprivation as prescribed 2000 years ago by

the Sacred Texts of Manu."  Based on this concluding text, Parameswaran also accuses Mehta of

presenting widows' miseries as stereotypical and universal in India (Parameswaran 20), and she

blames Mehta for misleading her viewers on India through reiterated motifs and patterns of

oppression in her films. My thesis will address this criticism, especially the critique of the

representation of widows' domination and the depiction of British in Mehta's *Water* in relation

to the political and social contexts of British colonialism, nationalist reform agendas, and the

upper-class Hindu ideology in colonial India. My analysis of the broader context of colonialism

and the nationalist reform agenda and, at the same time, the particular context of widows'

domination in 1930s in colonial India provide critical frameworks for understanding Mehta's

representations of the gendered nature of nationalist social reforms and the strategic stance of

British in which women are used politically and ideologically.

Other scholars focus on the historical context of widows' oppression in colonial India and

examine the ways in which women's issues are used as a tool to legitimize colonial ideologies,

145

reformists' agendas, and anti-colonial nationalist discourses in India. For example, Tuntun Mukherjee examines the ways in which Deepa Mehta's *Water* invites critical engagement with the past and questions the social and sexual sufferings of Hindu widows in 1938 in colonial India. Inspired by Walter Benjamin's hopes for transformative ability of cinematic image, Mukherjee examines how *Water* invites the audience to question the dominant patriarchal and religious discourses regarding Hindu widows by focusing on memory and history (Mukherjee 35-36), an idea which informs my own perspective of Mehta's entire trilogy. He argues that by addressing gender issues in Indian context and by questioning the taken for granted discourses regarding women's oppression, Mehta's film becomes feminist text (Mukherjee 40). Through the presentation of dialectical images, he argues, this film invites renewed critical engagement with the past and creates a provocative social text (Mukherjee 41, 47). By focusing on widow's social and religious oppressions in 1930s India, another scholar Rama Rani Lall, argues that Mehta examines three major power structures in this film: the ideological power of the religious scriptures and priests to legitimize their subjugation of women and widows, the patriarchal hegemonies of landlords and gentry who use widows for their sexual needs, and the lack of social consciousness among women to bring social change in their lives (Lall 236). This view parallels my own thinking of Mehta's project.  I will argue that Mehta's position closely fits with Mukherjee and Lall, and my analysis has contributed to better understanding of women's incorporation in the political and ideological motives of British, nationalist, and Hindu patriarchy in colonial India. In this case, my research shows how women's issues are constantly negotiated by different ideologies during the anti-colonial nationalist and reform movements.

The ideological discourses of nationalism and patriarchy are also examined by Amita Nijhawan. She examines the allegations of both the Indian government and the Hindu

fundamentalist political parties regarding the representation of negative image of India in this film in terms of the political and historical contexts of the anti-colonial nationalist movement in colonial India. Nijhawan argues that the nationalist attempts of the Hindu political parties to mask their patriarchal oppression and their moral uprightness and reform agenda are in fact rooted in British colonial ideologies (Nijhawan n. pag.). Both the British and Indian men, she argues, used Indian women as political tools to legitimize their control and rule over Indian women and state. Mehta's *Water* brings out this issue of widows' reform agendas and the change in laws in 1930s in India. She asserts that this film reveals "the historic struggle of a nation trying to find its feet between Hindu nationalist traditions and British colonial ideologies, Indian aspirations for education and emancipation, and fear of cultural annihilation" (Nijhawan n. pag.). Similarly, placing the violent responses to *Water* by Hindu fundamentalist parties in the broader context of the rising of *Hindutva* ideology in India, Edwina Mason examines the embedded Hindu fundamentalist ideologies in the violent reception of Mehta's shooting of the film in Varanasi. Mason analyzes the ways in which the Hindu fundamentalist groups create an imagined 'Other' in conflict with the construction of a pure and singular Hindu 'Self' (Mason 257), an issue that is of primary importance to my reading of the film. Mason argues that Mehta and her film *Water* were considered as that threatening 'Other' to the cultural and national integrity of India because of its portrayal of Varanasi and Hindu widows (Mason 258). Pointing out the Hindu nationalist ideologies in the violence against Mehta's shooting in Varanasi, Mason firmly argues that "the protests over *Water* were ultimately intended to revive a Hindu nationalist agenda" (Mason 253).

Questioning Mehta's motive in depicting widows' plight in colonial India in 1938, Chinmoy Banerjee accuses Mehta of ignoring the contemporary history and reality of widows'

plight in India today (Banerjee 86). He also criticizes Mehta's exoticizing through her romantic portrayals of widows and Indian hijras in this film. For Banerjee, Mehta produces this film for 'multicultural market' where ethnic difference is sold for economic reasons and where Indian identities are exoticized for Western consumption (Banerjee 84). Focusing on the general trend of exoticism in diasporic productions, he argues that "[t]he exoticism that the colonial West imposed on India as Europe's other is taken over by the Indian producer as an Indian property and sold in the global market" (Banerjee 84). Shohini Chaudhuri, on the other hand, very effectively examines the complexity and diversity in the articulation of exoticism and its variant reception among diverse audiences across the world. She argues that the manifestations of exoticism are not only complex, but also the audiences to whom it is directed are diverse, heterogeneous and multi-ethnic. Therefore, she deconstructs the idea of multicultural market as predominantly marked as 'white' and questions whether the film is targeted at only 'western viewers' (Chaudhuri 9). She argues that the binary relationship between East and West "does not heed the cultural heterogeneity and multicultural allegiances of audiences around the world or the codes of representation themselves" (Chaudhuri 8). For this reason, I will argue that a transnational and feminist framework assists us in better understanding these issues, as it takes into consider changing local and global contexts. She also argues that Mehta deconstructs the privileged tourist/ethnographic gaze by depicting "culturally particular forms of sensuous bodily knowledge" (Chaudhury 13); for example, the representation of widows in this film is firmly rooted in a particular historical context. Chaudhuri, however, does criticize the absence of an examination of present-day politics of Indian nationalism in this film, which constructs women as emblematic of cultural traditions, and Gandhi as a symbol of goodness thus simplifying history (Chaudhuri 18). I will engage with these criticisms in my chapter on *Water*.

**Scholarship on *Earth*:**

A number of critics, such as Robert Budde, Neelam Raisinghani, and Jeanette Herman analyze how disabled and gendered bodies are employed as tropes in Deepa Mehta's *Earth*. The usage of body as trope is read differently by different scholars. For example, Robert Budde examines the symbolic value of Lenny's disabled body in *Earth*. He poses questions regarding the process of decoding of Lenny's disabled body through various ideological lenses (Budde 44). The use of Lenny in this film, Budde argues, suggests two important issues: the metaphorical conflation between geopolitics and Lenny's body, for example, Lenny's body symbolizes the embodiment of the broken country and the use of a disabled identity (45). As a metaphor of postcolonial nation-state, Budde asserts that Lenny's disabled body depicts certain omissions and denials, for example, "it denies a huge historical weight that is abandoned in favour of a sense of postcolonial independence as a kind of comfortable impaired state; it denies any sense of continuing counter-colonial resistance … and places the colonizer in the parental position" (Budde 45). For Budde, *Earth* fails to present the complex narratives of the violence of partition because of the its romanticized narrative structure and ignores the politics of disability representation and the subjectivity involved in Lenny's disabled body (Budde 45). Questioning the representation of Lenny's body as "valuable deformity" (Budde 48), Budde argues that "the 'content' of Lenny's body in Mehta's film reaches its full artistic limit neither by occupying an 'identity category' nor by fulfilling a full 'confession' or 'self-disclosure'" (Budde 48). Referring to Gayatri Spivak, he concludes that Lenny's body is an 'assemblage' that plays out in this film "as a representation focus without an identity 'territory'" (Budde 50).

On the other hand, Neelam Raisinghani and Jeanette Herman persuasively examine the ways in which *Earth* focuses on the gendered violence against men and women. Especially, they

analyze how women's bodies occupy symbolic space in the nationalist discourse during the violent history of partition in this film. For example, Neelam Raisinghani in her article entitled "Wounded India in Deepa Mehta's 1947-*Earth*" argues that this film portrays the complex relationship among nationalism, masculinity, and femininity through collective memories (Raisinghani 157), a position with which I agree. According to Raisinghani, *Earth* reveals "how women's bodies can be made the contested ground, the very territory upon which notions of subjectivity and communal frenzy are constructed during such turbulent times" (Raisinghani 162). She also asserts that Mehta depicts how women are constructed as a code of nationalism, and the ways in which their bodies are made as weapons of national politics (Raisinghani 162). This interpretation enables the audience to understand how the sovereignty and freedom are celebrated at the cost of women's bodies. As Raisinghani argues, *Earth* reveals how "Shanta's body becomes the contested ground, upon which notions of subjectivity, agency and national prejudices are constructed during the times of ethnic violence" (Raisinghani 163). Similarly, another scholar Jeanette Herman argues in "Memory and Melodrama: The Transnational Politics of Deepa Mehta's *Earth*" that *Earth* demonstrates the ways in which gendered violence is an underlying part of the social contexts in which the events of partition unfold (Herman 119). Herman's emphasis on memory informs my own turn to women's memories as eclipsed in offical narratives of partition. Analyzing the violence against gendered bodies that is depicted in relation to class, gender, and ethnicity in *Earth*, Herman asserts that the mutilated, dismembered, and wounded bodies signify the material effects of the political partition, divided community, and countries (Herman 131). Drawing attention to the final scene of Shanta's abduction and rape, Herman argues that Mehta's refusal to resolve Shanta's story is an example of complexity and ambivalence of abducted women's situation in the aftermath of partition (Herman 139-140).

However, Herman also examines the ways in which *Earth* challenges nationally and communally inflected political narratives about India's partition through memorialization. By focusing on personal and traumatic experiences of women, lower- caste groups, and subaltern people, Herman contends that "*Earth* constructs a multifaceted, transnational, and trans-communal popular memory of partition " (Herman117).  In my thinking on *Earth,* women's historical rememory of the history of partitions provides an alternative history about partition and challenges male-dominated nationalist historiography.

The transnational memory depicted through Holocaust discourse is analyzed by Dorothy Barenscott in her article entitled "'This is Our Holocaust': Deepa Mehta's *Earth* and the Question of Partition Trauma". In this article, Barenscott examines the outcomes, meanings, and the theoretical potentials exist within *Earth*'s visual engagement with "the discourses of Holocaust trauma" (Barenscott 2). Referring to partition historiographer Gyanendra Pandey's book *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, Barenscott points out the key limitations of partition historiography within a broader aspect of colonialist and nationalist historical writing that Pandey discussed in his book (Barenscott 3). Therefore, Barenscott examines the potential of those works which emerge out of the specificities and aftermath of partition violence and related to resettlement of refugees, the recovery of abducted and raped women and the complexities of familial and communal relationships. These types of scholarly works, she argues, challenge the discrete nationalist histories and explore the limits of historical writings and the representation of violence of partition (Barenscott 5). Barenscott argues that the "visual vocabulary of Holocaust imagery"( Barenscott 6) of *Earth*, positions this film in a wider dimension of the historical moment of partition and calls for a discussion of contesting identity and subject positions in this film (Barenscott 6). Discussing the potential of

melodramatic mode of presentation in Holocaust films, Barenscott also reveals the ways in which "*Earth*, at some level, is engaging with filmic strategies that simultaneously occur within the conventions of melodrama to signal the excesses of what is being represented while also employing the use of stereotypically 'Holocaust' sequences to signal the severity of what is being shown" (Barenscott 10). According to Barenscott, the representation of stereotypical imagery of Holocaust films in *Earth*, for example, the train sequence, mass migration, produces a "sense of ambivalence in their incompleteness, dissatisfaction in their rendering, and overall lack as indicative of the stereotype as a discursive strategy of the film" (Barenscott 10). Analyzing the narrative strategies of *Earth*, for example, the depiction of racial commentary and jokes, the writer argues that the film reveals how "the circulation and assignment of stereotypes outside and *within* the fabric of pre and post- partition society function—at once a source of comic relief among friends, a way to come to terms with ethnic and social difference, or a function of deeply ingrained colonial thinking" (Barenscott 11). Analyzing the representation of human dimension and the history of partition as highly ambiguous, the writer argues that *Earth* breaks down any easy distinction between perpetrators and victims by focalizing through a middle voice and through the unsettlement of its narrative structure (Barenscott 17). Exploring the complexity and ambiguity embedded in the memories of Lenny and her narratives of Ayah's body, the writer argues that this film exposes "an altered vision of borders and in-betweenness" which complicates and expands notions of violence, trauma, and survival (Barenscott 17).

However, scholars such as Giacomo Lichtner and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay examine the political and historical debates over the nature of India's nationhood as depicted in *Earth* and *Lagaan* (Lichtner and Bandyopadhyay 431). By analyzing the representation of historical context of partition in relation to the emerging new historiography, they argue that these films "politicize

152

history, constructing an innocent past with the aim of advocating a more inclusive Indian society" ( Lichtner and Bandyopadhyay 431). They point out that the political use of history ignores the suffering and traumatic narratives of victims in India's partition; rather, the hegemonic historiography of Indo-Pakistan division focuses more on searching for the causes of the partition. The writers argue that by interrogating and deconstructing the hegemonic political narratives of Hindu right-wing in which Muslims are considered as sole perpetrators, these two films provide a "therapeutic history" (Lichtner and Bandyopadhyay 435), which focuses on alternative historical narratives of subaltern people, and, I would add, women. They also assert that by focusing on Lenny as a child narrator, *Earth* provides historical narratives from innocent and neutral perspectives.  Lenny's perspective reflects the social and gender relations in modern India, especially, Lenny's "lack of prejudice lets her see a common humanity before she sees different religions" (Lichtner and Bandyopadhyay 439).  They also point out that by focusing on the relationships of main protagonists from different religious and social contexts, this film also reveals that the violence during the partition is completely "artificially fabricated political tensions" (Lichtner and Bandyopadhyay 439). They also argue that Mehta's examination of British political motive behind the partition has provided "a politically charged revisionist discourse" in *Earth* (Lichtner and Bandyopadhyay 439). According to Lichtner and Bandyopadhyay, Mehta's critique of the political narratives and her focus on subaltern narrative in relation to gender relations, social structure, religious tolerance and national identity suggest the demand for "a socially more progressive and cohesive modern India" (Lichtner and Bandyopadhyay 442). However, in spite of *Earth*'s potential to deconstruct hegemonic political narratives, the writers also expose some of the limitations of its use of history and its focuses of personal jealousy as one of the main causes behind Shanta's abduction (Lichtner and

153

Bandyopadhyay 443). As they point out Mehta's "emphasis on jealously obfuscates the film's overall interpretation of the period and greatly weakens its potential to explain the political mistakes committed on the eve of the partition of India that cost hundreds of thousands of human lives" (Lichtner and Bandyopadhyay 443).

While Herman and Raisinghani particularly focus on the potential of *Earth* to depict the critical issues regarding gender, ethnicity, class, and nationalism and the usage of women's bodies by nationalist discourses during the partition, Kavita Daiya is very critical about Mehta's representation of gender, race, and ethnicity in this film. Daiya argues that Mehta fails to challenge the conventional narratives around ethnicity, gender, and identity in the history of partition (Daiya 59). Daiya also argues that Mehta relegates the important aspect of Lenny's coming of age "in a bourgeois household to an idealized, romanticized family life depicted in sepia tones, soft focus, and lighting in warm colors" (Daiya 59) and therefore, ignores the actual complexity of Lenny's experiences about her mother's abuse which is portrayed in the novel (Daiya 59). Daiya also points out that *Earth* legitimizes multiple forms of betrayals and violence through the representation of romance and communal harmony. Critiquing the stereotypical portrayal of Muslim masculinities in this film, Daiya argues that "*Earth*'s simplistic message of communal harmony and secularism through inter-ethnic romance thus simply reproduces and reifies contemporary stereotypes of Muslim masculinities and identities in India" (Daiya 60). However, critiquing the concluding scene of Ayah's abduction, Daiya asserts that Mehta's diasporic identity enables her to depict gendered and ethnic violence during the partition on the one hand but, on the other hand, Mehta reproduces the hegemonic nationalist construction of women's abduction as the final moment of horror by concluding the film through Ayah's abduction and silence (Daiya 61). Daiya also argues that Ayah's abduction is presented as a

154

visual spectacle not only for Lenny and her family, but also for film's spectators. Rather than portraying Ayah as an agent and social subject, Daiya argues, this film reproduces silences which "have long been overlaid by patriarchal nationalist rhetoric of death as the only honorable option for women raped during partition" (Daiya 62).

In another article entitled "Gazing at the Beast: Describing Mass Murder in Deepa Mehta's *Earth* and Terry George's *Hotel Rwanda*", Joya Uraizee examines the portrayal of mass violence and genocide in Deepa Mehta's *Earth* and Terry George's *Hotel Rwanda* (Uraizee 10). She argues that the depiction of mass violence and genocide is portrayed in *Earth* through two sets of looks" (Uraizee 11). The first set of looks, as Uraizee ponts out, is horror and despair, and the second set of looks is fear and betrayal as exchanged between Lenny, Ayah, and Ice-Candy-man in two scenes of mass violence and Ayah's abduction (Uraizee 11). Analyzing the portrayal of violence and Ayah's abduction depicted in these two scenes, Uraizee claims that "*Earth* is less successful at educating us about the material conditions of the survivors and more successful in generating voyeuristic pleasure for the audience watching the impact the violence has on individuals" (Uraizee 11). Uraizee also critiques the portray of Ayah's abused body, and the film's focus on Ayah's and Masseur's love making scene, especially, Ayah's back and breast in this film. The focus on Ayah's body, as Uraizee claims, "encourages us to view Ayah as a sex object rather than a person, anticipating her subsequent trans-formation into a helpless victim of the beast" (Uraizee 16). Analyzing how looks are operated in *Earth* in terms of violence and genocide, Uraizee concludes that the gaze is operated in this film through the portrayal of Ayah's erotic, sexualized, and passive body (26). She also argues that by focusing on personal failings of Ice-Candy-man and Ayah's objectified body, Mehta fails to portray the complexity of Indo-Pakistan division in this film (Uraizee 26).

Similarly, Rani Neutill in the article entitled "Bending bodies, borders and desires in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* and Deepa Mehta's *Earth*" argues that *Earth* fails to focus on the ways in which the partition of India erases multiple forms of queer desires, identifications, and homosocial play which are narrated in the novel of Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (Neutill 75). In spite of critiquing the gendered nature of nationalist violence in *Earth*, the writer argues that Mehta duplicates the hetero-normative discourses of nationalism by ignoring the sexual fluidity and multiple forms of desires as represented in the novel (Neutill 75). Neutill also points out that post-colonial feminism poses questions regarding the gendered nature of nationalism, but ignores the ways in which the partition of India "became a form of state sanctioned and mandated *heterosexuality*" (Neutill 75). While this may be true in *Earth,* Mehta clearly addresses heteronormativty of the nationalist project in her subsequent film, *Fire.* Neutill also critiques Mehta's lack of attention to the complex history of partition and Mehta's portrayal of women as victims to nationalist ideologies of fallen women (Neutill 77). While the first point is necessarily so, as Mehta cannot address all the complex causes of partition in the film, as that is not, finally her subject, the latter statement seems unjust, as I will demontrate.  Neutill also suggests that feminist scholarship regarding the partition must pay attention to multiple forms of borders, bodies, and desires that are foreclosed by the heteronormative violence of partition (Neutill 76) and I very much agree with this sentiment.

My thesis has challenged the scholars' such as Robert Budde, Joya Uraizee, and Kavita Daiya claim that Deepa Mehta portrays the women protagonists as victims and therefore, reproduces silence which is celebrated by patriarchal nationalists as honorable option for abducted and raped women. My research, rather, focuses on the ways in which violence is enacted on gendered bodies and how women's bodies have occupied special significance in this

156

violence where women become symbolic markers of communal and national identity. I have also

addressed the ways in which the women protagonists such as Ayah and Lenny contest, resist, and

negotiate with the nationalist and political constructions of raped women as abject despite the

ways nationalist and patriarchal ideologies discipline women's desire, sexuality, and identity. My

thesis has also addressed the ways in which the articulation of Ayah's and Lenny's multiple

identities and their resistance challenge the nationalist and political narratives of home,

citizenship, and identity, and I suggest that by focusing on Ayah's abduction, rape, and her

ambiguous position in postcolonial India and Pakistan, Mehta not only reveals the untold stories

of women during the partition, but also investigates the gaps, contradictions, and ambivalence of

political narratives regarding partition and violence.

**Scholarship on *Fire*:**

A great number of articles and reviews have been written about Deepa Mehta's film *Fire*.

A number of writers and scholars such as Uma Parameswaran, Kanishka Chowdhury, Amitava

Kumar, Madhu Kishwar, and Jaspal Kaur Singh criticize Mehta's diasporic position, her

portrayals of Indian society and Indian women's sexuality as homogenous and static.

Problematizing the diasporic space occupied by diasporic artists, Uma Parameswaran compares

Mehta's success and/or failure in *Fire* with the conflicting liminal space that diasporic writers

occupy.  In this space, Parameswaran says, diasporic writers get an audience in one location at

the cost of exploiting another location (Parameswaran 295). Invalidating any artistic value to

Mehta's work in *Fire,* she argues that Mehta's *Fire* is an artistic failure and this film is only

well-known because of its lesbian content (Parameswaran 294). I find this attitude strikingly

dismissive of Mehta's complex approach to homoeroticism as a means of agency in the film.

Also, Parameswaran questions Mehta's diasporic location and argues that "she [Mehta] is a

victim of diasporic liminality in that she has not figured out who her audience is; she has one eye

on the west, the other on India . . ." (Parameswaran 298). In a globalized world, these two

audiences are not the only ones we might imagine for the film. In another article entitled

"Problematising Diasporic Motivation [in] Deepa Mehta's Films", Parameswaran comments that

Mehta's very controversial film *Fire* (1996) is "an artistic failure, a fissured

success"(Parameswaran 12). Defining the causes behind this failure, she defines the use of

symbolism as offensive to India in this film as when Mehta uses the setting of the Taj Mahal, the

performance of Rama, and the *Karva Chauth* (a fast kept by wives to ensure the longevity of

their husbands). At the same time, the writer critiques Mehta's relationship with India and her

positioning as a NRI (Non-Resident Indian). In addition, referring to Mehta's interview with

Paul Kirkland in 1997, Parameswaran accuses Mehta of presenting India as "exotic"

(Parameswaran 17) and defines Mehta's undertaking as neo-imperialist and as symbolic of a new

power structure; but she fails to analyze how this power structure works in the Diaspora. The

complexities of the relationship between the diasporic artist and her natal home are completely

ignored in Parameswaran's article. It is as if, as a member of the diaspora, for Prameswaran,

Mehta and her viewpoint are no longer "authentic," but contaminated by the west.  I have

addressed the issue of authenticity in introductory chapter in my work.

Kanishka Chowdhury in the article entitled "Transnational Transgressions: Reading Mira

Nair's *Kama Sutra* and Deepa Mehta's *Fire* in a Global Economy" analyzes Mehta's *Fire* and

Nair's *Kama Sutra* in terms of changing relationship between diaspora and homeland

(Chowdhury 182). He analyzes the politics of representation of the Other in relation to gender

and class in *Fire* and *Kama Sutra* (Chowdhury 186) and argues that Nair and Mehta present

India "in empty homogenous time: an undifferentiated India in the sixteenth century in *Kama*

*Sutra* and a contemporary New Delhi shorn of its socio-political realities in *Fire*" (Chowdhury 187)., Chowdhury argues that *Fire* focuses on women's subordination as a result of the failure of marital relationships rather than presenting women's oppression as a part of broader socio-political relations (Chowdhury 193). In my chapter on *Fire*, I show that women's oppression in *Fire* is most definitely linked to social, religious and cultural contexts. Similarly, Madhu Kishwar dismisses Deepa Mehta's *Fire* as a boring and naive film about two frustrated housewives. Kishwar focuses on the representation of the lesbian relationship between two sisters-in-law without depicting other aspects of their lives in this film (Kishwar 3). She accuses Mehta of lacking knowledge about Indian family life and emotional bonds. Again, Kishwar raises questions about Mehta's diasporic identity and accuses her of ridiculing the philosophical aspect of Hinduism and exploiting Indian culture and tradition for western audiences. She accuses Mehta's filmic practice in *Fire* of being an "exercise in self-flagellation by a self-hating Hindu and a self-despising Indian--a very common type among the English--educated elite in India" (Kishwar 5). She relates Mehta's *Fire* with the colonial missionizing project, which took Indian women as a tool to validate British role as colonial reformer in India. Therefore, she accuses Mehta of being one of "Macaulay's children[7]" (Kishwar 12) and accuses her of marketing Hindu/Indian woman as commodity in global market.

Like Kishwar, Amitava Kumar describes *Fire* as "the neo-Orientalist Western imaginary" (Kumar 192-193). Pointing out the beginning shot of the Taj Mahal and the concluding scene of the image of a woman burning, Kumar argues that the framing of this film

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[7] Thomas Babington Macaulay became the president of a Committee of Public Instruction was set up in Bengal in 1823 in India. Following his notorious 'Minute on Education,' a thoroughly English educational system was introduced in British India which, in Macaulay's words, would create "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect" (Anderson 90-91).

promotes the ideas of the west as the viewer. He also asserts that the contexts of *Fire* produce the

"Third World" as different. According to him, "[t]he *difference* that *Fire* reproduces is the India

familiar to the Western media-watching eye. . . .The Western viewer consumes this difference

without in any way feeling responsible for it. This is voyeurism" (Kumar 193).  In spite of its

portrayals and evocations of the passions of three women in middle class joint family in Indian

context, he argues that *Fire* fails to warn the audience to examine the limits of easy sympathy

(Kumar 193). In another article, Jaspal Kaur Singh accuses Mehta of demonizing patriarchy and

fetishizing oppression in homogenous and monolithic ways (167). Singh accuses Mehta of being

complicit with western ideologies by depicting women's oppression in simple binaries. Singh

also criticizes diasporic artists of valorizing west as a liberatory space, for example, queerness

tends to be defined in terms of modernity and westernization which ignore the fluid sexualities in

"Third World" contexts.

A number of scholars analyze the ways in which Mehta's portrayal of lesbian relationship

undermines radical feminist discourse, gay's and lesbian's politics as lesbianism is portrayed as a

result of failure of heterosexual relationship in this film. For example, Brinda Bose examines the

ways in which *Fire* fails to depict radical feminist discourse about women's desires, sexualities,

and resistance because of its portrayal of homosexuality as "the only available recourse for two

women . . ." (Bose 251). Bose argues that by portraying lesbian relationship between Radha and

Sita as a result of their failure of heterosexual relationship with their husbands, Mehta

undermines gay and lesbian right activists' long demand to pursue homosexual preference within

the broader context of sexual choices (Bose 251). She also criticizes Mehta's refusal in labeling

Radha's and Sita's relationship as lesbian relationship which further undermines the radical

stance of the filmmaker (Bose 252).  Rather, Mehta sought to avoid controversial reception

through her refusal, Bose asserts. She also points out that *Fire* depicts Radha's and Sita's relationship through the portrayal of two negatives: the denial of conjugal heterosexuality and Radha's and Sita's fantasies which are heteronormative in nature, for example, Radha's childhood dream with her parents, an ideal family unity. Therefore, Bose argues that their lesbian relationship does not liberate them from heterosexual fantasies and this film fails to depict lesbian relationship as "a true, free 'choice'" (Bose 255, 256). Bose also criticizes the ways in which Mehta portrays male characters as "voyeurs, the fetishists and the bearers of the look" in spite of the portrayal of lesbianism (Bose 257). Finally, she asserts that nonetheless *Fire* has enormous significance for sexual desiring subjects in Indian context, but it fails to bring any radical feminist stance regarding hetero-normativity because of its portrayal of women's choice as "a male- driven impulse" (Bose 260).

Similarly, Gita Rajan criticizes the ways in which Mehta portrays a lesbian relationship between Radha and Sita in *Fire*. Rajan asserts that Mehta's critique of patriarchal discourse through the portrayal of homosexuality is "faulty at best" and "selfish at worst" (Rajan 66). According to Rajan, the final scene suggests that women cannot be subject in female friendship; they are only subject of illicit desire (Rajan 66). Rajan also criticizes Mehta's refusal of labeling Radha's and Sita's relationship as lesbianism, which undermines gay's and lesbian's support for *Fire* because of its depiction of homosexuality (Rajan 66). Rajan also argues that Mehta's depiction of homosexuality as the only option available in this film to liberate women from repression undermines the struggles of millions of heterosexual women against domestic violence in India (Rajan 66).

In another article entitled "Mirror Politics: Fire, Hindutva and Indian Culture", Mary E John and Tejaswini Niranjana argue that *Fire* depicts patriarchy "as being founded on the denial

of female sexuality" (John and Niranjana 581). According to them, the film's depiction of

women's subordination resulted from the denial of sexuality fails to focus on myriad aspects of

oppressions of women's lives in Indian context (John and Niranjana 581). They also criticize

*Fire*'s depiction of free sexual choice as the only criterion for women's liberation and argue that

repressed women's sexuality emerges as emblematic of an oppressive traditional culture in India

which is in need of transformation by the West (John and Tejaswini 581). According to John and

Tejaswini, the portrayal of lesbianism as incidental—as a result of failure of heterosexual

relationship-- reiterates the stereotype that people become gays and lesbians when they are

deprived of 'normal' sex (John and Tejaswini 582). My thesis has addressed Mehta's complex

depiction of multiple, fluid, and hybrid sexual identities of women in *Fire* which is ignored by

the abovementioned critics and scholars. My research also focuses on women's sexuality and

desire in relation to the hetero-normative discourse of post-colonial nationalism. My analysis of

queer politics of *Fire* in relation to the patriarchal nationalist and religious constructions of

family, home, nation, and women's identity has contributed to the emerging field of diasporic

and post-colonial critique of the heterosexual nature of nationalism.

However, at least two scholars discuss *Fire*'s potential to disrupt the religious and

nationalist discourses regarding communalism, religious fundamentalism, and the exclusion of

others by rewriting Hindu mythologies and religious discourses in this film. For example,

Alexandra Lynn Barron in his article entitled "*Fire*'s Queer Anti-Communalism" examines the

ways in which *Fire* critiques religious fundamentalism by rewriting the patriarchal dominant

discourse of *Ramayana* (Barron 70). Barron argues that the criticism of religious fundamentalism

is depicted in *Fire* through the deconstruction of trial by fire scene, a popular scene in Indian

film and popular culture (70), something that Mehta would most definitely know.  By herself

162

deploying this scene, she takes advantage of these intertextual echoes. By analyzing the cinematography of this trial by fire scene, he argues that Mehta allows the audience to identify with Radha in this scene, and the film asks the audience to contest the dominant version of Ramayana where women's sexuality and desire are policed in the name of religion (Barron 70). Barron also asserts that Mehta creates an alternative version of Ramayana in the interest of women where women can articulate their desire and sexuality (Barron 79, 81). He also analyzes the violent reception of *Fire* by the Hindu fundamentalist religious groups and places this reception in the broader context of racializing and othering minorities in India. As he asserts, "the controversy over *Fire* is not an isolated incident of nationalist homophobia, but instead is part of the larger fundamentalist project that depends on disciplining some national subjects and expelling others" (Barron 67); with this, I am in agreement as I will demonstrate in my chapter on *Fire*. According to Barron, *Fire* critiques the dominant nationalist process of othering minorities and communal divides in a number of ways. For example, this film interrogates nationalist division and communal acts in India by depicting Chinese-Indian characters and the prejudice against Chinese in India (Barron 71). Moreover, by portraying Radha's and Sita's final reunion at a Muslim shrine, a place outside of family, home, and in a literal sense, nation; *Fire* enables us to imagine a space outside of fundamentalist discourse of a Hindu nation (Barron 71).

Similarly, Kulvinder Arora examines the depictions of *Ramayana* in *Fire* and *Junky Punky Girlz* and demonstrates the ways in which Mehta critiques the patriarchal code embedded in the Hindu epic text *Ramayana* (Arora 222). Arora argues that the women in *Fire* create alternative identities through their articulation of same sex desire and resist the concept of paternalistic duty portrayed in the *Ramayana's* Sita (Arora 222). Arora also argues that *Fire* appropriates Hindu mythologies and traditional cultures and subverts the dominant religious and

nationalist discourses regarding gender roles and female sexualities (Arora 222). In addition,

Arora points out that by creating same sex desire as a part of Indian culture and tradition, *Fire*

rewrites mythological narratives and challenges the hegemonic ideologies of patriarchal

nationalism. Especially, by articulating same sex desire in the so- called repressive private

sphere, Mehta reconstructs the role of tradition in modern day in Indian context and depicts an

anti-nationalist response to Indian culture and tradition (Arora 223). Arora also critically

analyzes the negative criticism about *Fire* where this film is considered as exploitative of Indian

religion and sexuality and argues that *Fire* deconstructs *Ramayana's* trial by fire and poses an

alternative reading of women's sexuality and desire (Arora 236). Analyzing the discourse of *sati*

portrayed in *Fire*, another scholar Rahul Gairola also persuasively examines the ways in which

Deepa Mehta deconstructs the patriarchal discourses of *Sati* through the representation of fire as

a visual motif in this film. Gairola argues that by employing fire as an important visual motif,

Mehta appropriates the mythology of Hindu religion and at the same time, deconstructs this

mythology to challenge Hindu patriarchal discourses (Gairola 316). According to Gairola, a

number of scenes regarding the symbolic trial by fire suggest the empowerment of female

protagonists, especially, the concluding scene regarding Radha's symbolic trial by fire where

Radha is proved to be pure though she is considered by patriarchal discourse as impure. Gairola

also argues that *Fire* offers "'Third' world women options for breaking the codes of patriarchy

and compulsory hetorosexuality" (Gairola 319). He also argues that Mehta's *Fire* allows women

to occupy a visual agency through the representation of women's desire and sexuality as he

asserts that "Mehta's film creates new avenues of representation that offer the Hindu

widow/woman the option of finding love with another woman" (Gairola 322). Comparing

Mehta's *Fire* with Spivak's scholarship, he concludes that *Fire* is a revolutionary film that

empowers marginalized Hindu women who struggle to articulate their marginalized sexual

identities in postcolonial India (Gairola 322).

The articulation of women's desire, sexuality, and agency through homoerotic

relationship is discussed by a number of scholars such as Bidisha Banerjee, Bandana

Chakrabarty, Ratna Kapur, Irina Negrea, and Jyoti Puri. According to Puri, this film opens up

possibilities for women's passion for life and resistance by destroying the normative forms of

sexuality and heteronormativity (Puri 207). According to Puri, through the portrayal of Radha's

and Sita's passionate, romantic, and sexual relationship, *Fire* unravels the normative social

regulation which controls middle-class women's sexuality (207). Focusing on the limitation of

the ending scene of *Fire* which does not prescribe clearly marked oppositional politics, Puri

nonetheless argues that "the strength of the film lies in how it wittingly or unwittingly opens up

possibilities of transnational categories that are frequently normalized and thereby contained--

such as lesbian and feminist" (Puri 207). In another article entitled "Now There's Two Heroines

in One Kitchen: Lesbianism and Me(h)tafilmic Discourse in Deepa Mehta's *Fire*", Irina Negrea

argues that Mehta portrays lesbianism as an active choice in *Fire* which empowers women (n.

pag.). Negrea points out that the "metafilmic discourse" (Negrea n. pag.) of *Fire* highlights the

discrepancy between romantic heterosexual love that is very common in popular Hindi films and

the reality of an arranged marriage. Referring to feminist film critic Teresa de Lauretis's

expression, Negrea asserts "*Fire* is a film that addresses its spectator as a woman, defining all

points of identification as 'female, feminine, or feminist'" (Negrea n. pag.). Negrea also asserts

that the portrayal of women's homoerotic relationship is not only different from their experience

in arranged marriages, but also this relationship represents their resistance to the oppressive

structure of arranged marriage.  Therefore, Negrea argues that by portraying lesbianism as an

165

active choice, Mehta depicts an alternative fulfilling and meaningful relationship which is able to subvert the traditional and constrictive structure of marriage (Negrea n. pag.).

Similarly, Ratna Kapur discusses the agentic power of women to challenge the normative discourse of Hindu family household (Kapur 59-62) in the article entitled "Too Hot to Handle: The Cultural Politics of *Fire*". She challenges the reading of two women as victims; rather, she argues that there are many significant moments where Radha and Sita articulate their agency in *Fire;* particularly, the moment when Radha describes her leaving for Sita's compassion and love is an example of her agency (Kapur 60). According to Kapur, *Fire* does not depict any universal cause of women's oppression; rather, it focuses on the intersectionality between family, sexuality, culture, tradition, scriptures, history, and more (Kapur 61). This film, she also argues, emphasizes the unequivocal statement about women's pleasure and sexual choice through the depiction of lesbian relationship (Kapur 61). Kapur's analysis of women's pleasure and sexuality importantly focuses on the contesting relationship between Indian traditions, culture, and women's sexuality. Kapur places different responses, for example, Hindu Right, lesbian groups, and feminist group's responses to *Fire* in the broader context of contestation over the meaning of Indian culture and identity in Hindu nationalism and argues that these responses focus on uncomplicated notions of culture--"culture as a museum piece, as something that is static and immutable, that can be excavated and restored to its pristine purity" (Kapur 56). Rather, Kapur analyzes in this article how culture is something that is constantly changing and is in the process of construction. By placing Indian culture in relation to sex and sexuality, she argues that the controversy and the film itself reveal that culture is hybrid and cultural identity is always shifting. She also argues that the controversies around *Fire* reveal "who counts as part of Indian culture and who is excluded, and who is an outsider" (Kapur 58-59), a point I will take up later.

166

Kapur's analysis has provided important framework in my analysis of the cultural identity of women in *Fire*. My thesis has addressed the issue of cultural and national identity constructed by Hindu nationalist and religious ideologies in relation to the ideas of family, home, nation, diaspora, class, gender, and sexuality. My analysis of how women protagonists deconstruct the patriarchal religious and nationalist constructions of home, nation, and identity has interrogated the limitation of national narratives and imagination of identity, culture, and sexuality.

The analysis of interplay between Indian culture and women's sexuality is also discussed by Dilip K. Das, Sujata Moorti, Shohini Ghosh, and Geeta Patel. Geeta Patel in her article entitled "On *Fire* Sexuality and Its Incitements" points out several discourses which are very common in the controversies around *Fire* such as the question of religion, question of cultural capital, and the politics of forming public opinion (Patel 229). Connecting these three discourses together and defining religion as property, she also points out the political economy of culture and religion (Patel 229). Questioning the religious ideology of Hindu fundamentalist political parties such as Shiv Sena, Shohini Gosh analyzes violent responses to *Fire* by Hindu fundamentalist religious and political groups and critiques the Hindutva imagery of Indian (Hindu) culture as homogenous, static, and pure (Ghosh 67). She argues that "[t]he idea that both 'Culture' and 'tradition' are dynamic, changing, fluid, flexible, impermanent, porous and often contradictory destabilizes the Hindu Right's notion of a centralized 'cultural nationalism, and a singular 'nationalist vision" (Ghosh 67). By dismantling the religious and cultural myth embedded in Hindutva ideology, she argues, *Fire* posits changing notion of culture and tradition (Ghosh 67).

Analyzing newspaper reports and media commentaries about Deepa Mehta's *Fire*, Sujata Moorti examines "the historically conditioned contexts"(Moorti n. pag.) of reading, viewing, and

meaning making process in which discourses of nation are produced, circulated, and consumed.

Moorti also examines the ways in which the understanding of cultural product is deeply affected

by particular historical conditions; therefore, she argues that the viewing and reading of *Fire* are

shaped by the specific historical, political, and economic processes in Indian context. Rather than

focusing on the binary opposition between the local and global, Moorti argues for the connection

between the moment of production and consumption within the current transnational flow of

cultural production of *Fire*. Moorti also analyzes the ways in which gender, sexuality, and nation

interplay as the female body becomes a central site of discourses of power and regulation

(Moorti n. pag.). The emerging controversy around *Fire* in India, as Moorti points out, enables

the audience to understand the ideological underpinning around the articulation of female

subjectivity, location of sexuality, and national and cultural identity. The violent responses to

*Fire* by the Hindu religious groups also reveal how women have emerged as contested symbols

of Indian national and cultural identities. Therefore, the controlling of female sexuality has

become key element in nationalist imagination of Indian identity.  Moorti also argues that the

monolithic binary construction of contaminated west and authentic Indian paradigm which is

engendered by Hindu religious and nationalist groups during *Fire* controversy fails to understand

the complex and contradictory subject positions underlying in variant debates around this film

(Moorti n. pag.). Like Moorti, Dilip K. Das also places the discourse of controlling women's

sexuality in the context of *Fire* controversy in the book chapter entitled "Lesbianism As

Resistance: Sex, Gender and Identity Politics in Deepa Mehta's *Fire*" and points out that "the

*Fire* controversy showed how complex and anxiety-ridden the question of desire and its

contingent identities could be, especially with regard to women's reproductive sexuality" (Das

179). He also argues that women's bodies become the sites on which the patriarchal discourses

write their narratives of community and nation (Das 179)—a position which is reinforced by my own analysis.

The interplay between home, heteronormativity, nationalist and religious discourses regarding Indian traditions and culture, and women's sexuality and desire is also analyzed by a number of scholars such as Gayatri Gopinath, Jigna Desai, and Bidisha Banerjee. These scholars focus on the complexity of diasporic productions, the ambivalence of diasporic identity, and the contesting and complex relationship between diaspora and home in relation to gender, class, traditions, cultures, and globalization. Their works emphasize the importance of queer diasporic framework, transnational analytic framework, and multiple readings of diasporic texts—an emphasis I will continue. For example, analyzing the representation of queer sexuality in diasporic productions such as Deepa Mehta's *Fire,* Gayatri Gopinath examines the ways in which non-heteronormative diasporic subjects, especially women, negotiate their elision from national imagery of home, nation, and sense of belongings in the article entitled "Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora: South Asian Sexualities in Motion". According to Gopinath, "[w]ithin the familial and domestic space of the nation as imagined community, nonheteronormative sexuality is either criminalized, or disavowed and elided; it is seen both as a threat to national integrity and as perpetually outside the boundaries of nation, home, and family" (Gopinath 469). She also examines the ways in which the diasporic queer production challenges the nationalist discourses about women's pure sexuality. At the same time, the representation of queer sexuality in the particular context of middle-class household in post-colonial India disrupts the westernized notions of women's sexuality as the coming-out narrative. She argues that Mehta's *Fire* appropriates familial tropes of traditional culture and depicts homoerotic relationship through homosocial activities in private familial space (Gopinath 480, 481). By depicting homoerotic

relationship in the private sphere, as Gopinath points out, this film refuses the notion that the proper articulation of same –sex desire is within the politics of visibility in the outer space and challenges Euro-American notion of same-sex eroticism (Gopinath 482). Rather, the representation of Radha's and Sita's homoerotic relationship through their homosocial sphere suggests "'lesbian' desire may both look and function differently" (Gopinath 482) in South Asian diasporic productions.  Gopinath elsewhere argues that *Fire* creates 'alternative circuits of pleasure and fantasy by depicting queer desire' as a means of liberation from patriarchal heteronormativity (Gopinath, O*n Fire* 634).

In a discussion of Mehta's trilogy, Madhuri Chatterjee in her article entitled "Women's Bodies, Women's Voices Exploring Women's Sensuality in Deepa Mehta's Trilogy" claims that Mehta looks at family, relationship, desire, sexuality in an unconventional way with the evolving notion of identity, and her narratives posit a critical analysis on culture, sexuality, and politics (Chatterjee 76). Referring to the relationship between two sisters- in- law in *Fire,* she proposes that this film undermines the patriarchal constructed roles and inquires into social norms that deny women's desire and sexuality in the name of morality (Chatterjee 77). According to Chatterjee that women's resistance against social and religious normativities is depicted in the form of female bonding (Chatterjee 77).

Similarly, by analyzing the non-heteronormativities depicted through the homoerotic relationship between two women in *Fire*, Jigna Desai examines the queer politics in this film. At the same time, she analyzes national, transnational, and diasporic responses to *Fire* and reveals the discourses are engendered in the production, distribution, and consumption of *Fire* across national borders. By analyzing different responses to *Fire*, for example, Hindu fundamentalists' violent responses, liberal feminists' responses, lesbian responses, she demonstrates the shifting

and contesting meanings of diasporic productions (Desai 160). More importantly, her analysis

reveals the "contestations over sexualities and related normativities and the competing class

struggles over cultural citizenship in the postcolonial nation-state" (Desai 160). According to

Desai, the discourses around the film's competing meanings in national and diasporic contexts

suggest negotiations not only between nation-state and subject but also the politics and

economics of transnationality (Desai 160). On the one hand, as she points out, the nationalist

discourses engender traditionalism by reinforcing 'authentic' Indian culture in relation to the

heterosexual practice of marriage and family; on the other hand, the nationalist discourses

promote liberalism and globalization in terms of economic mobilization and profit. However, she

argues that the film mobilizes tradition in a complex way where same sex relationship is not

depicted in the name of modernization and westernization. Rather, the film depicts women's

homoerotic relationship through homosocial practices (Desai 162). Rather than representing the

binary between tradition and modernity, she argues that this film examines the shifting definition

of tradition and modernity with the process of globalization and negotiation over nationalist

definitions of home, nation and citizenship (Desai 164).

Similarly, Bidisha Banerjee in the article entitled "Identity at the Margins: Queer

Diasporic Film and the Exploration of Same-Sex Desire in Deepa Mehta's *Fire*" argues that *Fire*

offers "a positive model of female desire . . . [which] gives the two women a sense of self-worth

and identity" (Banerjee 21). The alternative sexuality is presented through traditional female

friendship and female bonding—this relationship is defined by Banerjee as "homosocial bond"

(Banerjee 26). Banerjee point out that the representation of homoscoial bond between Radha and

Sita not only depict women's desire and homosexuality but also the ways in which women turn

to each other through their daily activities suggest women's direct resistance to patriarchy and

heterosexuality (Banerjee 26). Banerjee also analyzes the ways in which two women transform the heteronormative space as site of intense homoerotic desire as she contends, "by radically exploring female same- sex desire within the confines of the middle- class patriarchal household … Radha and Sita redefine womanhood and femininity within the domestic space of the family, as well as the national space of postcolonial India" ( Banerjee 31). She also argues that *Fire* deconstructs globalized and essentialized homosexual identities as neither of the two women can be strictly defined as lesbian nor completely heterosexual; rather, the portrayal of their homoerotic desire in this film must be read in a complex and multilayered ways (Banerjee 20). Therefore, Banerjee argues for "a queer diasporic viewing practice" (Gopinath quoted in Banerjee 24), a term coined by Gayatri Gopinath, which focuses on hybrid readings of texts. Therefore, focusing on the complex politics of location of Deepa Mehta, she argues that the making of this film in the diaspora and the setting in India function significantly in representing homoerotic desire in transnational contexts. Therefore, she claims that diaspora can emerge as a critical analytical framework "if diasporic writers and film- makers resist the imposition of expectations of idealized representations and offer more self-consciously oppositional narratives" (Banerjee 23).