

## The Cinematic Transcreation of Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* Into Deepa Mehta's *Film Fire*

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**Abstract:** Cinema is a new art form, also known as moving picture (dynamic Images), films and movies, came out at the end of the nineteenth century. It has enormous mass appeal. However, in recent time cinema is repeatedly interfacing with the life and literature in an expeditiously reconstructing cultural context. It is a significant medium of entertainment also. Cinema has received the challenge of portraying the terrifying occurrence or all kind of domestic and communal violence, woman exploitation and terrorism issues like nationalism, and protection of human rights beyond the national borders. Cinema is one of the most popular resources of information, communication and entertainment today. Now literature is not confined to only written texts. This research paper aims to do a comparative study of the short story *Lihaaf* by Ismat Chughtai, who was an Indian Urdu Language Novelist and its cinematic adaptation into first element trilogy *Fire* by Deepa Mehta, an Indo-Canadian filmmaker and scriptwriter and producer. This paper also explores agencies and the daily resistances of women in house and the ways they deal the religious, and nationalist discourses in post-colonial India. This paper also examines Deepa Mehta's first trilogy *Fire* and its exploration on national ideologies as intersecting with patriarchal norms to enact symbolic and actual violence on the bodies of women. Mehta's trilogy focuses the ways in which patriarchal norms authorizes violence against women's sexualities and bodies through different cultural and social practices. It explains Indian women's domination and the ways they oppose this domination. Cinematic transcreation of a text is a herculean task but it is more challenging when content is controversial, but it brings a change in our society.

**Key Words:** Cinematic Adaptation, Religious, Patriarchal, Discourses, opposition.

Short story *Lihaaf*, was published in 1942 In an Urdu journal *Adab-i-Latif*, it led Ismat Chughtai to much controversy and an obscenity trial by the Lahore high court in 1944. She wrote it two months before her marriage, which is considered one of the most controversial works ever written. Instead of an apology and pay the fine, she chose to fight the case in the court. The final verdict went in her favour as the story does not make any explicit of sexual activity, a lesbian relationship or any obscene words and this story is told from the perspective of a small girl. She wrote about the homoerotic relationships because she is aware of these kinds of relationships exist confined within the four walls of the house, which seems reasonable from outside.

As the virtuosity of Nawab is decided by the fact that: "No one had ever seen a nautch girl or prostitute in his house. He had performed hajj and helped several others undertake the holy pilgrimage" (*The Quilt Stories* 16). She depicts that marriage sometime entreats just like harassment and agreement rather than the mingling of two souls. Sometimes this kind of relation is carried not as a matter of affection and love but as a burden in the form of frustration and dissatisfaction. The tasks, duties and responsibilities between two persons for each other are not performed

for mutual understanding but only for the sake of the reputation of their families in society. Nawab married Begum Jaan for this reason and confined her into the four walls of the house and never bothered about the sexual expectations of his wife. He imprisoned a young girl to fulfil the social obligation of marriage, although knowing the fact that he would never be able to fulfil the sexual needs of his wife. This oppression leads a young woman into a sense of loneliness, frustration and depression. While Nawab fulfils his homosexual desires, she sees this from the chinks in the drawing-room, which makes her feel like rolling on a bed of hot coals. She feels heartbroken, but Chughtai does not leave her in this condition for a long time but allows her to make a bold choice to fulfil her sexual desires with Rabbu. When Rabbu goes on leave, Begum Jaan feels very restless. She enjoys the touch of Rabbu's tiny hands on her body, pretending of itching on her back. Although it is an unnatural way, she rejects the man-made rules of patriarchal customs and traditions for her sexual satisfaction, "Ah! What a pleasure..." she expresses her satisfaction between sensuous breaths.

The Indo-Canadian writer and director of the film *Fire*, Deepa Mehta is also aware of this, the reason she always chooses these topics that need social reform.

Deepa Mehta also received violent criticism for presenting physical relationship between two Hindu sisters-in-law in India. After the three weeks of screening *Fire* in 1996 in Bombay and New Delhi, some Hindu fundamentalists accused Mehta of corrupting tender minds which would spoil women, and these kinds of relationships as not a direct expression of Indian culture: if women are going to fulfil their physical needs through this unnatural way or lesbian act, then the concept of marriage will collapse, and order of reproduction will stop.

Chughtai depicts the cultural and psychological problems a woman suffers after her marriage by portraying the role of Begum Jaan, which not only presents a woman but whole communities. She raises the question of sexual discrimination. She introduces new woman where the patriarchy nurtures the male hierarchy and represses the female sexuality. She frankly writes her views on relationships, love, men, sex, violence, religion, and tradition and in it the gender issues. This work reveals a discourse of self-consciousness about Women's identity and sexuality. For this, she is known as the 'unselfconscious feminist', where she is doing all the things but liberated from the idea that she is doing something extraordinary.

*Lihaaf* is based on the patriarchal Muslim background in Agra, where *Fire* represents patriarchal Hindu ideology. There is no similarity in the plot of the stories, however, both writers raise the same kind of issues of Patriarchal system of Indian culture and homoerotic desires that conceal behind the four walls of the house. The time frame of Chughtai and Mehta is before independence and modern India respectively but now homosexuality is a global subject. Mehta and Chughtai in different time frame focus on the women and their identity, which is constructed Indian patriarchal minds. Ismat Chughtai and Mehta resist patriarchal identity of women (as a mother), instead of that, they portray homosexual relationship between Radha and Sita (sisters-in-law) and Begum Jaan and Rabbu (Begum and maid), these women protagonists challenge patriarchal mindset. Homosexual relationship of Radha and Sita, Begum Jaan and Rabbu give a new definition of family, home, Nation and sense of belonging for a non-heteronormative subject in India. Radha and Sita and Begum Jaan and Rabbu's relationship in the private/home sphere, reconstructs the heterosexual nature of home and family as sites of intense sexual desires and new ways of being. The characters of Deepa Mehta undoubtedly engage in questioning of stable, homogeneous

gendered identities. They show cultural confrontations and conflicts within Indian culture and local issues of Indian culture by relating Indian culture.

As in *Lihaaf* in the voice of a small girl, Chughtai narrates that: "Nawab having married to Begum Jaan, he tucked her away in the house with his other possessions and promptly forgot her. The frail and beautiful Begum wasted away in anguished loneliness" (16). "But the Nawab did not have a moment to spare for her. Nor did he allow her to go out. Relatives, however, would come to visit and stay on for months while she remained a prisoner in the house" (17).

Radha and Sita are married to brother Ashok and Jatin respectively in a Hindu joint family in New Delhi. Both sisters-in-law fulfill their duties such as religious rituals by fasting for their husband's longevity, taking care of their elder mother-in-law and by helping their family food business by cooking. Ashok maintains his celibacy and spends most of the time with a Hindu Swami. On the other side Jatin is involved in an extramarital affair with Julie, a Chinese girl. He marries Sita because of his family that wants to continue their family name (expecting from Sita to reproducing a baby boy). If one sees from outside the four walls of a home, everything seems ordinary and reasonable, but if someone looks closely into the home sphere, a different interpretation emerges.

In this film Radha and Sita spend most of their time in the house in the care of all family members and business. They are also devoted to their husbands by keeping fast (karva Chauth) while the male of the house are engaged in their activities outside the family. Deepa Mehta demonstrates how Sita's and Radha's homoerotic relationship is considered as a threat to the nationalist and patriarchal construction of family, home and Nation.

The religious attitudes towards women's non-heteronormative sexualities are portrayed through Ashok's cruelty. 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. Desire brings to ruin" (01:38:17) When Radha criticises Ashok for his sexual control, Ashok continues, "What type of woman you are. You should be touching my feet and asking me to forgive you" (01:39:45). When Radha continues to criticise Ashok for his celibacy, Ashok pushes Radha, as she works in the kitchen, caught by Fire.

The portrayal of homoerotic desire of Radha and Sita and Begum Jaan and Rabbu challenge not only the patriarchy nationalist heteronormative ideologies but also western lesbian relationship, by transforming the domestic space as sites of the intense desire, sexuality and new ways of being. Sita says to Radha in a scene that "there is no word in our language to describe what we are to each other", and Radha responds, "you are right perhaps seeing is use complicated". This is an example of an alternative diasporic queer sexuality.

In *Lihaaf* it assumes about the homoerotic relationship between Begum Jaan and Rabbu in the lines of a young girl. "I woke up at night and was scared. It was pitch dark, and Begum Jaan's quilt was shaking vigorously as though an elephant was struggling inside. "Begum Jaan", I could barely form the words out of fear. The elephant stopped shaking, and the quilt calm down. "What it is? Get back to sleep. " Begum Jaan's voice seemed to come from somewhere" (20).

Sita is different from Radha from the very beginning. She openly contests any kind of patriarchal normative role and duty imposed on her sexuality and body. When Radha tells her about the importance of *karva Chauth* fasting. Sita replies "I am sick of all this devotion; we can find choices" (47:34). When she comes to know about the affair of Jatin and her truth of marriage than she refuses any kind of sexual interaction with Jatin.

In the film, Mehta transforms domestic spaces into private space such as kitchen, terrace and shrine are the private sphere is liminal space for desire and love of Radha and Sita. On the terrace Radha breaks Sita's Karva Chauth fast by offering water to her; where they find a thirst for water and love as well. On the roof, they also play a hopscotch game, as they come closer and discover for each other. In kitchen Radha expresses her homoerotic desire for Sita to Ashok and states "without desire I was dead. Without desire, there is no point in living, and you know what else? I desire to leave, and I desire Sita, her warmth her compassion, her body, I desire to live again. If you cannot control desire, ask Swamiji for help, not mine". In this way she transforms this space into sites of resistance and contestation. At the Hazrat Nizamuddin shrine in the final scene Radha and Sita hug each other and confirm that they had embarked on their journey to prove their identity and to reach self-fulfillment at any cost of the taboo and social stigma.

The common theme of the film *Fire* and short story *Lihaaf* is female sexuality and women identity. Both of

them first represent their women characters' helplessness, frustration, loneliness, suppression and depression, but then the proclamation of liberation by developing forbidden relationships.

*Fire*, the story of a middle class Indian "Joint Family", a concept utterly alien to most Americans, who allow children to incur debts at will, separate from the rest of the family's requirements (even underage youth may carry credit cards in the United States, though parents can be forced to pay their bills). Individualism has its price, but there must be a compromise between our responsibility to the community and us as independent creative beings. *Fire* is so skillfully written by Mehta, so complete in its characterisation and its trajectory, that she has obfuscated our cultural limitations, leaving us with no doubt about the repression, contempt, sorrow, and barrenness lived by this clan, and two women- daughters-in-law, Radha and Sita ensnared in a household where each person is consumed by narcissism. Mehta has drawn such a full picture that it would make no difference if the story took place on another planet. We feel the loneliness desire, need and cruelty at their core, and we root for the flowering of fulfilment, by whatever means, however illicit.

The message that Mehta sends in the very beginning of the film is that there is already a trace of coldness and aloofness on the part of Jatin in his behaviour towards his new wife. Sita has been forced to define her womanhood in a way that compels her to question her attractiveness. When she asks her husband Jatin, at Taj Mahal, "Don't you like me?" It is the sex appeal that is framed to which Jatin's cold response is matter-of-fact, "We have been married only three days." In Indian society where heterosexuality is the ideal and women are under control, this definition is imbibed and internalised by women. Indian films go a long way in putting a stamp on heterosexuality and romantic love. The idea of romantic love has indoctrinated site. Heterosexuality has been glorified in the movie after movie.

Gayatri Spivak in her essay, "Can the Subaltern speak?" says that "the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant", a process that Deepa Mehta contests in her film showing how Indian women "caught in the constructive web of familial commitments, arranged marriages and notions of duty" are trying to maintain an equilibrium between all the three. An Indian girl, from her childhood, is deliberately trained in how to be a good woman and hence through "conscious inculcation of culturally designated feminine roles", she is taught docility and

submissiveness. Radha, who has grown up from the little girl in the opening scene of the film, loved nature deeply, believed in her potential, and dreamt of freedom, has by now become a typical Indian woman who is expected to perform her duties and conform to rules without questioning, conscious of a sense of duty, she is a good woman.

Women are weighed down by the Indian scriptures, and they are supposed to be pious and dutiful all the time. The notion of duty is reinforced in the film through shots of the Ramayana where Sita is shown as the pious and dutiful wife of Rama. Ashok, in keeping with his Indian upbringing, demands of his wife, "You should be touching my feet."

*Fire*, a beautifully crafted sensual film, portrays an allegory where the country seems to be struggling between tradition and modernity and questions women's roles; it is the suppression of desire and the flame of sensuality that propels the story. The film begins against the background of Taj, where the newly married couple Sita (Nandita Das) and Jatin (Javed Jaffrey), try to understand each other. On returning home, Jatin leaves his wife and promptly joins his mistress. The young wife soon learns to bond with her sister-in-law, Radha (Shabana Azmi), who is also left to fend for herself while her husband's evenings are spent with the Swami who preaches abstinence and warns that desire is the root of all evil. Both the marriages are a farce.

The Sita Radha relationship shatters the male constructed roles for women. The film, in its way, questions the social norms which deny the individuality of women and discriminate against them on the grounds of morality. Their resistance evolves in the form of female bonding. It emotional and psychological selves are discovered through the physical.

Deepa Mehta's film explores the socialisation process and questions subordination or compliance to the norms defined by patriarchy. The women are placed center stage. Apart from the condition of victimhood and rebelliousness, the film also focuses on transgressive behaviour, which violates the norms of traditional morality and constitutes a deviation from the socially approved moral norms of sexual relationships. In *Fire*, Radha and Sita trespass into zones not acknowledged as legitimate and define a new relationship through individual questionings and go on to deconstruct the patriarchal situation.

Touch is essential to the women, as their repressed desire pushes them to explore and discover the sense

of their body seriously. Ironically, the men abstain from this touch, especially where their wives are concerned. The gesture of oiling someone else's hair or massaging the elder sister-in-law's feet becomes intimate sexual acts in the process. In one climactic scene, Radha's clothes catch fire, and she is enveloped in flames while her husband Ashok leaves home with his mother in his arms. The act becomes a kind of agni pariksha (trial by Fire) for her. She finds her way to Hazrat Nizamuddin's shrine where Sita awaits her. The narrative moves away from constructing frameworks to render the acquisition of agency possible for both Sita and Radha. Radha and Sita transgress the male discourse which entraps them. They do not sweep aside the existing order; instead, they assert their discourse on the masculine one, by breaking it up, subverting it and in a sense, re-writing it. The film is open-ended — there is no finality of closure but a remarkable journey into the feminine psyche and space it resents no resolution but interrogates human relationships.

*Fire* exposes humdrum domesticity as hampering, not only for women but men as well, as for the pornography inflicted husband in the movie, who does not want to join the family business, as he does not want to marry Sita (Nandita Das) or his Chinese girlfriend, for that matter. However, women, it is clear, cannot skirt such dangerous liaisons; their aspirations must center on domesticity. In the absence of male company, the text posits the spouting lesbianism between the sisters-in-law, played by Nandita Das and Shabana Azmi, onto modes of loneliness, neglect, joint family patterns and the restrictions of the domestic space. Disappointingly, *Fire* relegates to the closet what is a homosexual epistemology. In blaming love and desire between women, onto errant husbands neglectful of their wives, Mehta moves from the flagrant espousal of radicalism to both, benching a Right-wing politics (though this was entirely missed by the Right in its violent destruction of the cinema houses that dared a screening) as well as encoding a taut critique of domesticity.

The film is regarded as a disaffirmation of the real values according to Hindu nationalists. Compassionate portage of a lesbian relationship in film challenges the contemporary pedantic Indian attitudes to sexuality that harshly declaims of male homosexuality and usually fails push to undertake the possibility of the same sex, female sexual relationships. Homosexuality is considered as a western imposition. It is not regarded as a biological disposition rather an effect of a deciduous culture.

Mehta debilitates the Hindu patriarchy by keeping her heroine's name as Radha and Sita considered as exemplars of feminine devotion and virtue. The film is opposed by Hindutva movement after releasing in 1996 because of the look at the portrayal of Radha and Sita as lesbians as a degradation of the pure nature of the traditional heroine names. On the other hand, the film was also praised for breaking the silence and challenging Hindu nationalists about Indian same sex sexuality. Some plead a cause for lesbian rights were desperate by Mehta's saying that first of all the film is not only about lesbianism. Its main point is the decision of the main female characters to neglect the traditional norms and roles in Indian culture, where the institution is often refusable to women.

Mehta contends that the film about women's ability to make choices rather than a particular form of sexual preference. Mehta quoted in Levitin, "An introduction to Deepa Mehta". Mehta says: "Lesbianism is just another aspect of the film. It is probably the last thing they [Radha and Sita] resort to when they derive certain confidence out of the relationship". Mehta says that film is all about the choices one makes in their life rather than a particular form of sexual preferences" (278-279).

It is probably the last thing they [Radha and Sita] resort to when they define absolute confidence out of the relationship. Though born in India, she lived much of their adult life in Canada, and it might be doubted that she really should be known as an Indian director or filmmaker. In fact, in the original version of film *Fire*, the dialogues were in English rather than Hindi might be reinforcing this protestation.

In this way we find much more in the film than the text, Mehta covers lots of topics in her script, directly and indirectly, she not only raises the problems of the society but brings them towards a solution and gives her audience new aspects of life. Chughtai is not only a prolific writer but also a social reformer. In her story, she presents the aspects or issues of society and Mehta takes it to the happy ending. Mehta and Chughtai both give a loud voice and choice to women who are suffering from these kinds of problems in their lives and show gay and lesbian relationships as typical human traits than a taboo.

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