

Location, Location, and Location: Global, Local, and Glocal Sexual Identities in Deepa Mehta's *Fire*

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Introduction

It is said that the three most important things in real estate are location, location, and location. An emphasis on locus is also crucial when examining cultural productions of the late twentieth century, when migrancy complicates the notions of personal or national identity, and cultural productions must be considered in terms of their participation in global currents, local community, and glocal transformations. This paper will examine the problematics of location by looking specifically at Deepa Mehta's controversial film *Fire* (1997), which caused an uproar in India for its depictions of lesbian love in a local context, namely between two married Hindu women. The film “emphatically engages more than the subject of lesbian sexuality only” (hoogland 11),ⁱ and certainly the extent of the “lesbian panic”ⁱⁱ displayed in its wake suggests that the visibility of the Indian lesbian in the film brings other disturbing thoughts and social questions into view. Raising the visibility of the lesbian as an Indian woman challenges the idea that it is necessarily an imported sexual identity, and that even the discussion of sexuality—especially, women's sexuality—is foreign to India.ⁱⁱⁱ I see a local lesbian coming into view in order to make a crucial link between a range of possible sexualities and cultural mobility that must be addressed in both global and specific terms. Vinay Dharwadker observes that the Indian diaspora has “perceptibly modified” the four primary zones of intercultural contact—trade, employment, marriage, and religious conversion (216) – most significantly by relocating them overseas (254). In particular, “[t]he zone of marriage and family is perhaps the zone that has altered most in its internal structure, transmuting itself in to a fuzzy domain of varied interracial and intercultural social-sexual relations” including alternative sexual lifestyles” (254). Mehta's view of India from Canada indicates its diasporic perspective in its dominant use of English and perhaps its sexual thematics. My own critical gaze is also caught in these currents, as I locate myself as a Canadian woman in Japan, and find myself simultaneously thinking of Asia in local terms and identifying with the director's “Canadian” point of view.

Open Questions

Stephen Spielberg's successful 1985 film adaptation of Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* begins in a field of purple flowers, where two young girls are playing together—an idyllic beginning, it seems, until we can see that one of the girls is pregnant, and learn that it is by her own father. This scene is evoked in the opening scene of *Fire*, by a family of three walking through a field of yellow flowers, making it clear that “questions about sexuality appear ineluctably to entail questions of family” (Martin 119). Sitting amid the flowers, the father silently smokes as the mother tells the daughter, Radha, a story of villagers living in the mountains and sad because they have never seen the sea. An old woman says, “Don't be sad. What you can't see, you can see. You just have to see without looking.” The mother asks the daughter if she understands, but the daughter says no, provoking loving laughter from her mother, and suggesting to the viewer that visibility is not only what we see, but also what we want to see.

This beginning signals that the critical viewer determines how an image is read, but it also suggests that just because something is not seen does not mean that it does not exist. As Devdutt Pattanaik mentions in his preliminary discussion of the Hindu response to queer sexuality in *The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales* (2002), “[s]ame sex intercourse in modern India, though widely prevalent, is rarely “seen” (9), and lesbian sexuality is even less obvious in both society and Hindu narrative traditions. In *Fire*, as in *The Color Purple*, we see lesbian desire, but there are other overt manifestations of sexual desire, as well. In addition, like *The Color Purple*, gender, race, and sexuality are all employed as terms of difference, and in analogical, rather than hierarchical relation. This means, as Ann Pelligrini describes it, that these discourses are “interarticulated,” emerging through and against each other” (3). In other words, while making lesbian desire visible, Mehta is also employing the lesbian relationship as a trope to expose the secret lives that so many lead, and the tense friction that occurs between awakened desire and restricted choice.

The titular ‘fire’ of Mehta's film refers to cannot be reduced to smouldering lesbian lust, although it makes a provocative connection between one of the lovers, namely, Sita (Nandita Das), and the mythic Sita, the dutiful wife of Rama, who undergoes the test of fire to prove her purity. The “angst and choices” that Sita faces in *Fire*, says Mehta, may not be exactly the same ones experienced by the more than 350 million middle class Indians that lead similar lives,

but the confusions they share are very similar—the ambiguity surrounding

sexuality and its manifestation and the incredible weight of figures (especially female ones) from ancient scriptures, which define Indian women as pious, dutiful, [and] self-sacrificing, while the Indian popular cinema [...] portrays women as sex objects. (DVD Director's Notes)

In the dominant cultural narrative of the religious epic, Sita is conceived inside her father Ravanna's body after he eats a magic mango, and is born when he sneezes, and left in a furrow. In spite of such bizarre beginnings, it is Sita's modesty and duty towards her husband that captivate the Hindu imagination. This "public fantasy"^{iv} of Sita is deconstructed though Mehta's cinematic representation of the other Sita who rejects the exemplary conduct of her mythic namesake and, instead of selfless devotion to her husband, finds love in the arms of her sister-in-law, Radha (Shabana Azmi). The violent protest at screenings of *Fire* by the Shiv Sena were certainly fueled by the depiction of love between Sita and Radha, and counter-protests against the violence emphasized that while "individuals connected to the film claimed that it was not a lesbian-themed work [...] the attacks on it were impelled by homophobia" (Sukthankar n.p.), but the burning issue in *Fire* is not lesbian love *per se*, but lesbian love as a threat to the institution of marriage. Lesbian love can be tolerated as long as it is not really there. "Only by being relegated to a 'domain of unthinkability and unnameability' can the lesbian be culturally present" (hoogland 41). Inscribing the lesbian into the marriage script, then, taints the certainty of that script with doubt, and provokes alarm.

The idea of the Western lesbian's absence as a necessary prerequisite to being 'culturally present' seems to apply to the other cultural contexts, as well. According to Pattanaik, "[a]ll hell breaks loose in a Hindu household not so much when a son or daughter displays homosexual tendencies, but when those tendencies come in the way of heterosexual marriage...[N]on-heterosexuality is ignored or tolerated so long as it does not upset the heterosexual world order" (7-8). In discussions between *Fire*'s director and protesters, it often emerged that the depiction of a lesbian relationship caused outrage because it suggested an alternative narrative to that of marriage, and for "middle aged Indian men [...], it was the fear that *Fire* might shift the status quo of husbands, and women might just question their own insignificant role in marital relationships that lean very heavily in favour of husbands." Mehta, who considers the attacks on her film motivated more by politics than religion, describes her film as one "which explores choices, desires, and the psyche of people who are victims of people

who are victims of tradition.” Its purpose then is to expose the hypocrisy endemic in social relationships by making visible “the secret lives we all lead.” Indeed, as we view the film, clearly there are a number of sexual postures assumed by both male and female characters which might be considered at odds to procreative marriage, all stemming from the limited choices available to them because of gender and class.

Glocal Cultural Productions

From the cryptic riddle posed by Radha's mother in its opening scene, the film moves quickly to *the* visual symbol of India: the Taj Mahal. The monument is simultaneously a symbol to the “eternal love” between the Shah Jahan and his second wife, Mumtaz Mahal, who, after giving birth to her fourteenth child, died while accompanying her husband to Behrampur to crush a rebellion. Thus “the legend, the poetry and the romance”^v of India is encapsulated in the story of the Taj Mahal, making the magnificent marble tomb a magnet for foreign tourists and domestic honeymooners, such as Sita and her new husband Jatin (Jaaved Jaaferi). It is clear in this scene that Sita has been seduced by the love story as she listens with glee to the guide, and pronounces the film version her “absolute favourite.” When she realizes her husband does not like “romantic films,” she asks him what genre he prefers and he replies, “Kung fu, Bruce Lee.” This strikes Sita as so stridently anti-romantic, that she immediately asks Jatin, “Don't you like me?” The brusque reply, “Look, we've only been married for three days, okay?” indicates that Jatin is not in love with Sita, although it is in the expression of his film preference that we see where his heart really lies: he is in love with Julie (Alice Poon), a young Chinese woman who has refused to marry him because she plans to go to Hong Kong and become a movie star in martial arts films. These nods in the direction of two different local film traditions indicate that this story is participating in global and local circuits of culture.

Mehta's choice of Julie in the scenario of adultery shows the director's determination to complicate those circuits further still, as well “the typical processes of simplification and fixation inherent in processes of stereotyping” (Sanataolalla 171). Julie is the “other woman” but she is also “local.” That is, not just as an Asian, but as a woman living, and probably born, in India. If she does not look local, she does not sound local, either. In fact, we hear Julie's American English before we see her (“If I have to blow dry one more fat cow's hair, I'll puke”). As a speaker of American English, Julie reminds us of a very contemporary form of cosmopolitan culture, as opposed to British colonialism. Thus, Julie provokes different versions of the local as

well as the global. Further, she reconfigures assumptions about passive and delicate Chinese women. “‘Hunt’,” she tells Jatin, “It’s my favourite word,” and lifts her foot for Jatin to paint her toenails, in a conscious and deliberate translation of herself into a fetish, a fantasy object. Julie dreams of becoming a film star, fueling public fantasy as a sex object, like the women that she has seen in movies. She recognizes her own sexual power as cultural capital, like the American accent she has cultivated.

Mehta is applying strategies of representation here that insist on subtle gradations of identity that make categorization more difficult. In her cinematic depiction of India she foregrounds differences, but configured as possibilities rather than certainties. Richard Dyer has pointed out that the lack of differentiation in the depiction of African Americans in Hollywood film makes it

relatively easy to analyse their representation, whereas white people [...] are more difficult, if not impossible, to analyse qua white [...] Any instance of white representation is always immediately something more specific – *Brief Encounter* is not about white people, it is about English middle-class people; *The Godfather* is not about white people, it is about Italian-American people; but *The Color Purple* is about black people, before it is about poor, southern US people. (Dyer 143)^{vi}

And *The Color Purple* is about ‘poor, southern US people’ before it is about lesbian women. Possibly this is because black male sexuality plays such an overdetermined role in the representation of ‘black people’ that the lesbian presence in the film is occluded. The sexual identity of Julie, though, complicates more than the representation of race and sexuality. She speaks of the “excitement” of her relationship with Jatin, insisting on the need to maintain the thrill of sensation rather than deepen emotional connection. With such an outlook, Julie might easily view lesbianism as “an exciting new trend, a kinky ‘new lifestyle’, [...] a thrilling sexual spectacle, or titillating interlude (what else is new?) in a still pervasively heterocentrist cultural scenario” (45-6) that even Jatin could enjoy.

The relationship between Julie and Jatin can be read as a metaphor for the “desire and commodification of difference” (Fernandes 123) that smacks of global capitalism. Both Julie and Jatin have been influenced by film, and see in it economic opportunity.

As an adjunct to the family take-away, Jatin manages a lively video business next door, renting locally produced religious videos, such as *Ramayana*, depicting Sita’s trial by fire, alongside adult videos exchanged under the counter to special (male) customers. The *Ramayana*, as a representative narrative of a cosmopolitan Sanskrit

high classical tradition (Kaviraj 534) affected in the past by the impact of a “new emulative imagination prompted by English education” (534) here undergoes modification through technology. Julie plans to go to Hong Kong and become a heroine in kung-fu movies, and may allow Jatin to accompany her there if he is a “good boy.” These respective roles in the film business can be seen as indicative of the perception of cinema in India as “an institution of modernity” (Vasudevan 2809)^{vii} that counters the hegemony of tradition. Jatin and Julie see themselves as representative of a ‘modern’, assertive and confident middle class; instead of the shared living arrangements and economic responsibilities of the ‘ordinary’ middle class family, they opt for the interweaving of their personal desires and ambitions with the bigger interests of consumer capitalism. For Mehta, they serve her desire to “demystify India-- the India of the British Raj, of Maharaja and beautiful princesses surrounded by abject poverty just does not exist anymore” (DVD Director's notes).

The characters Julie and Jatin share in a certain sense Mehta's directorial gaze. They represent, on the one hand, “the new and disquieting cosmopolitan of today” (Pollock 15) that is American globalization, while on the other, insisting on the reciprocity of cultural influence and the production of glocal versions. The East has fired the erotic imagination of the West at least since the seventeenth century, without, it seemed, finding any interest in the West in return: “It is we who think of her, but she hardly thinks of us” said Gustave Flaubert.^{viii} But, indeed, just as martial art films from Hong Kong are big box office in America, so American popular culture has had an impact on the Eastern imagination. Jatin wants his women in mini-skirts, not saris; Julie yearns for the lifestyle of a film star in Hong Kong, but has cultivated an American accent to make her for appealing to a ‘global’ audience. Her ambitious plans are watched approvingly by her father, who hates India as a measure of inferiority and failure. He rues his “working class” parents’ misguided choice to immigrate to India, instead of Canada or Australia. India, he sneers, does not even have a decent toilet, and yet at school, his son is contemptuously called “Chinky.” India, like America, he says, is “no place for minorities.” Surrounded by men – boyfriend, brother, and father – Julie shares their image of how women make it to the top as a sexual commodity. Needless to say, the erotic aesthetic she aspires to is dominated by heterosexual reference. Julie's experience seems to have taught her that when you want something, you get it from men.

Local Lesbians

The relationship between Sita and Radha describes no explicit trajectories beyond India. Mehta grounds lesbian love in the local. It also counters assumptions such as Julie's, to suggest, in the words of African American dramatist Ntozake Sange, that women "need to know that they can get things from other women who are not necessarily their mothers. You don't have to get things from men all the time—from the male patriarchal deity, or from the male patriarch himself—you can bypass them" (Splawn 197). Both women have had close relationships with their mothers, and that sense of intimate community is replayed in their lesbian relationship. After being kissed by Sita, Radha has a dream of the field of yellow flowers, of her mother, and wakes with a start, as if she has just experienced an intensely erotic dream. This does seem to signal an explicit sexual awakening, as if Radha can finally see what she could not see, namely, the extent of her love of women. Unable to fulfil her duty as a wife by supplying her husband with a child ("No eggs," she explains to Sita), she does all that she can in other ways to atone for this failing. She has not had sex with her husband for more than a decade, but she serves him by helping him overcome desire: he calls her to lie beside him in bed when he desires sex so that he can test himself against that desire. At all times, in the tender care of her mother-in-law; her role in supporting her husband's celibacy as he attempts to find oneness with the universe under the guidance of his swami; and in the constant attention and service to others' needs, she never has or takes time to look at herself. Standing in front of the mirror, getting dressed to welcome Jatin and Sita home from their honeymoon, Radha does not glance at her reflection. It is only later, after Sita has kissed her, that Radha looks at herself in the mirror, raising her fingers to lightly caress her own lips.

Hoogland points to the ubiquitous presence of the lesbian "double" in 1990s (Hollywood) cinema, as a "resurrection of a stock figure in Western folklore, the image of the lesbian as a woman who falls in love with her own mirror-image" (33). It is the mirror that is doubled in an early key scene in *Fire*, when Sita arrives home from her honeymoon, and goes upstairs alone to Jatin's room. There in the room, hung with posters of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan, Sita goes immediately to the clothes closet. Finding some of Jatin's clothing inside, she takes out a pair of his jeans and holds them up against her as she looks in the mirror. Checking to see that no one is looking, she pulls on the jeans, pulls off the sari, and stands before the mirror, delighted by her reflection. She then takes out a cigarette from a package on the bedside table, and without lighting it, inhales deeply, performing that ritual. She then

turns on the radio and goes back to the mirror and dances before her reflection, for herself, before being interrupted by Radha, who calls her to help look after the soiled Biji. The doubled mirror, the eager assumption of a “trouser role” and the closet itself, are all coded lesbian if a viewer chooses to see them as such.

There is another mirrored image of Sita, as well, represented by the cultural narrative of the dutiful Sita in the *Ramayana* epic. We see this story acted out in the low budget video version that Biji likes to watch; and we also see it acted out “in drag” in an all-male performance attended by Radha's husband Ashok (Kulbushan Kharbanda) and his swami. Just as Canadian director David Cronenberg made clear in *M. Butterfly*, Mehta represents Sita as an Indian cultural fantasy “based on a stereotype of femininity, a femininity that can be put on as a costume, can be performed as an effective masquerade by anyone, woman or man, who has compelling reasons to do so” (de Lauretis 316). However, these formal enactments of the epic create a kind of queer mise-en-abime that frames Radha, rather than Sita, and indeed it will eventually be Radha, not Sita, engulfed in flames in the harrowing concluding moments of the film.

Lesbian by Default

Radha is the long-suffering wife, always ready to serve without complaint. When her husband calls her name, she goes to him immediately. When he tells her to go away, she obeys. After all, she cannot be a mother, and thus can only be grateful that her husband has not found another woman. In fact, her history weakens the power of the lesbian story by its implicit suggestion that if Radha could be a “normal” wife and give her husband children, she would be having sex with him, and not seek love elsewhere. There is only one ambiguous remark that counters this “rationale” for her lesbian behaviour, and suggests that Radha is not unhappy to be not having sex with her husband. While they are shopping in the market, Radha remarks to Sita,

RADHA: The way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Apparently that is a famous English saying.

SITA: A woman without a husband is like boiled rice: bland, unappetizing, useless. That must be an Indian saying.

RADHA: I like being boiled rice.

There is no elaboration to this remark, but it does seem to indicate that Radha is content to be a “woman without a husband.” Later in the evening, though, after lying

next to Ashok until he has proven he has his carnal desire under control, and tells her to go and sleep, Radha asks him how this practice helps her. Ashok answers, solemnly, "By helping me, you are doing your duty as my wife." The implication is that since she cannot give him children, this is an alternate version of her wifely duty. And later, in a frank conversation with Sita, it is evident that her inability to be a mother has affected her sense of self-worth to such an extent that she had given up, relinquishing any claims to desire or personal need: no eggs, no future.

There is certainly no "lesbian panic" evident when Sita kisses Radha on the mouth, although Radha leaves the room in surprise. There is shyness in the wake of that kiss, but when Sita asks her to oil her hair, Radha readily agrees and while watching each other in the mirror, Radha rubs Sita's head in a loving women's ritual. Later, she will confide to Sita that this "isn't familiar for me ... the awareness of needs, of desires." The relationship between the two women is a tender one, and throughout the film, Mehta does not undermine it. Both women need and want each other. But while Radha seems confidently aware that she now can "see" her desire for other women, Sita's sexual orientation is more ambiguous. At the site of the Taj Mahal, she was eager to please Jatin, and in her room, before the mirror, she was delighted by her performance with unlit cigarette and over-sized jeans. And although she initiates the sexual relationship with Radha, it is with the impetuosity of an adolescent. Hoogland points to the adolescent as an "emblem of indefiniteness and ambiguity" (65) in the Western cultural imagination, and thus operative in "(pre-liberation) women's literature as both a mask for and a signal of an unstable and transgressive, that is lesbian sex/textuality" (66).

In *Fire*, Sita is indeed an 'unstable and transgressive' presence in the household. First, it is her clothing that "upsets" Biji (Kushal Rakhi), Radha's mother-in-law. Incapacitated by a stroke, which has left her mute, Biji summons and expresses herself by ringing a small bell. Seeing Sita in jeans immediately provokes "ringing" disapproval from Biji. Yet just as Ashok and Swami-ji can enjoy a performance of cross-dressing men enacting Sita's test of purity, so Biji can enjoy a camp song and dance routine between the two women, with Sita in "butch" drag and Radha in make-up, until she observes what Mundu calls "too much electricity" between the women. When Radha and Sita wait for, and even encourage, their husbands to leave at night and pursue their preoccupations, Ashok to his swami, and Jaten to Julie, Biji rings her bell insistently. Ashok assumes her affection for him is behind his mother's reluctance to let him leave.

If Radha is initially hesitant to express her ideas, she grows bolder, and happier. Mundu notes the change, and, with some jealousy, the cause: "Now there are two heroines in one kitchen." The lesbian relationship insinuates itself more deeply into the fabric of family, revealing itself in the sudden significance of a foot massage at a family picnic, or the gentle resistance of Radha to perform her wifely duties. "Why don't you feed Biji tonight?" she asks Ashok. When she refuses to lie next to him so that he can "control" his sexual desire by not having sex with her, Ashok is concerned for her health. Thus, the household is subtly split by an invisible wire, which separates the two women, Radha and Sita, from Ashok, Jatin, and Biji. The women grow more assertive as their pleasure in each other develops, while Ashok appears as benevolent but misguided, Jatin as a "pompous fool," and Biji, as sinister. Does it not seem that Mehta is stacking the deck wholly in favour of the empowering lesbian relationship that leans the two unhappy lives towards the light, and leads them to question the grand cultural narratives that have hitherto shaped their destiny scripts? *Fire* indeed depicts a deep and wonderful relationship between Radha and Sita that is erotic, supportive, and liberating. So why then is this film not a lesbian cultural production? One might be coy and say the butler did it.

No Sex Please, He's a Servant

The family servant, Mundu (Ranjit Chowdry), is deeply implicated in the lesbian plot. He is the first to spot the "hanky panky" going on between Radha and Sita. In fact, he, too, is guilty of 'aberrant' sexual behaviour: masturbating to pornographic videos. Since he has neither time nor a VCR of his own, Mundu "borrows" adult videos from the family shop and watches them when he is supposed to be watching religious ones with Biji. The old woman is thus forced to be a mute witness to both the pornographic video and Mundu's sexual activity. It is the reaction to the discovery of this deceit that leads to Mundu's decision to "out" Radha, and it is here, where sexual, gender, and class conflate, rather than in the lesbian relationship itself, that Mehta's cultural criticisms are most powerful, and most unsettling, for it is only at this point that the risks involved in lesbian love become apparent.

On the cusp of falling in love with each other, Radha and Sita prepare to fast for the long lives of their husbands. During the day, there is no work to be done; they don their best saris and Radha tells the story behind the ritual fasting. As she speaks, Mundu fantasizes, revealing his own desire for Radha and his hatred of Sita's husband Jatin. His fantasy is an ironic representation of a popular public fantasy. After the

story is finished, Sita and Mundu vie for Radha's approval, each offering their critique of the story. Sita pronounces the queen "a wimp." "I'm so sick of all this devotion," says Sita, "We can find choices." "Sita, Madam, is too modern," says Mundu. How could the queen possibly leave the handsome king when she is his wife? "Once you're married you're stuck together, like glue. Sad... but true." And how does Radha feel about the queen? "I don't know. She didn't have much choice."

It would seem that Mundu has even fewer options. He is as invisible as any lesbian, even as he runs back and forth, responding to orders from every member of the household. It is, of course, Mundu, who waits for the milkman at dawn, and Mundu who runs the cold bottles of pop over to Jatin's "special customers." When he discovers that Radha and Sita have closed the restaurant and gone to "have fun," he decides to have some of his own, and grabs a video. While the women enjoy themselves and dream of living together and supporting themselves by starting their own take-away, Mundu sits in Biji's room masturbating -until the door opens and Radha catches him in the act. She is disgusted at the video (Jatin's) and furious that Mundu should do such a thing in front of Biji, and slaps him several times. Mundu replies, "All I do here is work, work, work. There is zero recreation time for me. Why is taking such little pleasure deserving so many slaps?" When Radha refuses to relax her anger, Mundu resorts to psychological blackmail by mentioning that the "hanky panky" between Radha and Sita "is not good for the family name...think about it." That is, he threatens to go public with Radha's private, indeed secret, life.

Although Radha demands his dismissal - perhaps as much from her fear of what he knows about her as from outrage at his behaviour - Ashok is forgiving. He consults Swami-ji in the matter, and when counselled to exercise compassion, Mundu stays on. Jatin's involvement in pornography is really just a matter of lost revenue to him, and he readily accepts Swami's advice, as well. Sita assures Radha that "the twisted little bastard" will not tell anyone about their relationship, revealing her own threshold of tolerance for sexual difference, and concern about what others may think. For Radha, though, her relationship with Sita has been translated completely. She still loves and desires Sita, to be sure, and it is not the fear of being "outed" that intimidates her. Rather, she now sees the connection between her "selfish" needs and those of Mundu and wonders, is it so wrong to be selfish? In narrative terms, it does appear so. The rifts grow deeper between the family members. Radha and Sita still lie in each other's arms, but their agenda is now a more urgent one: they have to leave. With video sex out of reach, Mundu is now a voyeur. Hearing the lovers' intention to leave, he

decides to inform Ashok, who promptly fires the servant, before going to the bedroom and finding the women making love. Disclosure has much more serious consequences than it did in the case of Mundu because he was male; a servant; unattached to the family except as an employee; and his sexual misbehaviour was seen as adolescent. There is no room for compassion now, although Ashok wants to hold Sita responsible for Radha's behaviour, because he can play the youth card there, as well, and also find blame with his younger brother's personal affairs. But Radha will not let him do that, refusing not only to apologize, but also insisting on leaving.

Confounding Radha's obstinacy is Ashok's own horror at his sexual arousal at the sight of the two women making love. The lesbian image plays before his mind's eye like a tasty segment of pornography, and his body succumbs to its attractions. He is more convinced than ever that "desire brings ruin." Within the narrative, then, Ashok enacts a version of the "lesbian panic" that resulted in the actual destruction of theatres in India. Laura Hart, in *Fatal Women*,^x attributes this excessive response to the impact that "coming out" has "on the subjects to whom the information is addressed. That is, it is not simply disclosure of one's 'self' that the homosexual coming out effects, but also a shattering of the recipient's fantasy of a stable sexual identity" (hoogland 43). Confronting Radha in the kitchen where she is cooking, and outraged by her systematic avowal of her desire for Sita's body, warmth, and compassion, Ashok grabs Radha ("You want passion?!"), and as they struggle, Radha's sari catches fire. Watching her burn, like a widow, like a witch, Ashok turns and picks up Biji, rescuing the mother figure, and leaving the lesbian to self-destruct. Radha does leave, but she has been robbed of her choices. She kneels before her lover in the closing scene, cast out, abject.

Conclusion

Mehta's film uses the lesbian entanglement to weave a broader critical picture of the traditional ties that bind families so tightly they are unable to escape without violence. At the same time, it specifies the particular ways in which stories open up into each other, travel, and change. The contemporary version of globalization, generally identified as an ugly Americanized "clear-cutting, strip-mining multinational cosmopolitanism" (Pollock 17), is perceived as dominating and homogenizing is generally set in opposition against traditional local culture, which is more positive. *Fire* complicates this view of the tension between the outward impulse of the cosmopolitan and the local's insistence on tradition and more limited cultural

boundaries by showing how the local can also dominate in the assertion of repressive practices; and that the expansive modality of the global can be liberating; while the glocal, even in its most stuttering attempts to articulate possibilities, suggests that the universal and the particular are not in fixed opposition.

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Notes

ⁱ Hoogland is referring to a text, not a film, namely Alice Walker's 1982 novel, *The Color Purple*, but her remark is equally relevant to *Fire*.

ⁱⁱ "Lesbian panic" is a term used by Patricia Juliana Smith to describe a narrative strategy, which is "the disruptive action or reaction that occurs when a character -or conceivably, an author-is unable or unwilling to confront or reveal her own lesbianism or lesbian desire" (569). In this case, I use the term loosely to parallel Smith's narrative strategy with the destructive reaction of a segment of the public to the visibility of the lesbian in Mehta's film.

ⁱⁱⁱ Consider, for example, a 2003 survey by *India Today* magazine, which was billed as "the first comprehensive all-woman survey on the sexuality of the Indian woman." The questionnaire broached issues such as masturbation, causing some women to tear the questionnaire up and others to call the police. In *The Independent* supplement in *The Daily Yomiuri*, 28 September 2003, p 14.

^{iv} I borrow the term from Teresa de Lauretis, who offers Homer, the Bible, *Paradise Lost* and such recent cinema as *Gone With the Wind* and *Terminator* as examples from Western cultures of "scenarios of the popular imagination that have been expressed in myths, medieval sagas, sacred texts, epics, and other forms of oral, written or visual narrative that tell the story of a people, a nation, or a representative individual (Everyman) to reconstruct their origin, their struggles, and their achievements" (307).

^v A phrase typical of any website dedicated to the Taj Mahal, this one appears at www.liveindia.com/tajmahal/1.html

^{vi} Quoted in Santaolalla, 171.

^{vii} From Ravi Vasudevan's 1995 article, "Film Studies, New Cultural History and Experience of Modernity," in *Economic and Political Weekly* 28 (November 4): 2809-14. Quoted in Fernandes, 140.

^{viii} From 1853 correspondence, translated by Irvin Cemil Schick, this quotation refers to the Oriental woman, but is perhaps just as applicable to the feminized East. In Schick, 123.

^{ix} The quote appears as an epigraph to Chapter 3 in Hoogland.