

representation visibilising and validating the ways in which women can love women.

There have been several critiques about the film from film critics, feminists, and women who love women. The most obvious criticism points to the directorial cop-out in portraying both women as situated in unhappy marriages. Their choice to seek each other seems more to escape their marriages rather than as a positive choice. In the arena of possibilities, one would wish that at least one of the two women were not married or in an unhappy marriage: then the point of positive choice could have been more deliberate. But on the other hand, there are very few women who come from situations that are not oppressive, and it is made very evident in the film that both women clearly assert their lesbian choice over their marriage.

Other critiques center on the class-biased portrayal of the servant as a masturbating, comic figure<sup>ii</sup>. In addition, there is the cliched portrayal of the “foreign bitch” (the Chinese woman) who seduces Indian men for the gratification of her sexual appetites. In both cases, the director has resorted to common Hindi film stereotypes.

Another bone of contention is the lack of clarity portrayed between the act of masturbation by the servant while watching porn videos where the mother-in-law is forced to watch, and the act of sex between the women. Both seem to come under the grey area of “wrong” sex for a confused Radha, who is shown as unable to make the distinction between consensual and forced/violative acts of sex.

There have been many more critiques, but those we will not go into, given that this is one film attempting to portray a single story. To make it mean everything for everyone is a load the film (any film, for that matter) cannot carry. Instead, for us the critiques imply the absence of other cinematic images of women who are strong, who explore their sexuality and make choices about their sexuality outside the “normal” paradigm.

**W**hat we would like to do, though, is examine the film in the context of lesbian existence and realities in India<sup>iii</sup>—a complex issue, because women—only spaces and female friendships are woven into social practices and consciousness.

# THE TROUBLE WITH MEN

by Sudip Mazumdar

When a woman loves a woman, suggests a bold new film,  
her husband needs an attitude check.

**D**eepa Mehta, the Toronto-based filmmaker, was terrified of what the Indian censors would do to *Fire*, her latest feature film. Of course, she had achieved international acclaim for *Sam and Me*, an examination of the life of an immigrant in Canada, and for *Camilla*, starring Jessica Tandy and Bridget Fonda. But she didn't think that her name would protect her new movie. After all, *Fire* depicts the growing intimacy between two sisters-in-law trapped in loveless marriages, and shows the two women making love. When *Fire* was shown at a film festival last year in the southern city of

Trivandrum, Mehta received death threats from men who accused her of making a “dirty” movie.

So Mehta steeled herself for the worst from the board of censors, but it never came. One member told distributors that *Fire* was an “important film and every Indian woman should see it.”

So far, women—and men—are heeding the advice. Since the film opened to raves last week, theaters in New Delhi and Mumbai (Bombay) have had to put up FULL HOUSE signs for many showings. To social critics, those signs needed explaining. Could it be that India's gradual

Some feminists have contended that there are exclusively women's spaces existing within traditional Indian society, where women have had and continue to have the freedom to explore intimate and sexual relationships with other women. Such spaces would, the argument runs, be endangered if lesbianism was brought out as an open, politicised agenda. These—along with the existence of ancient erotic sculptures of women with women, and the existence of many women-centered traditions and rituals—create a belief that as a society we are tolerant of same-sex relationships. It is necessary to explore the many strands underlying this belief.

Almost all women in our society have experienced women-only spaces—for confidence sharing, healing, mutual comfort and support—at some point in their lives. Often deep bonds, intimacies and sensuousness—sometimes extending to the sexual—have characterised these spaces. At the interstices of a patriarchal society with the potential to maintain the structures that control women—or transform them, these spaces act as essential “breathing spaces” and sources of energy for women to share and recuperate from the misogynist

society that we live in. However, “women-only” spaces are “allowed” only if women in it are seen as sexually inactive within them. The possibility of women actively choosing women as sexual partners is thus denied.

These spaces can become autonomous—but only when women begin to challenge and transform the structures within which we operate. Sometimes both processes of maintaining and transforming happen simultaneously. Women have used these spaces to express choices, other than what is sanctioned by patriarchal structures of society. Often, these choices are a silent testimony of resistance. Lesbian women by expressing sexual desire for each other engage in acts of resistance that challenge the norm of female sexual passivity.

It is this shift from same-sex behavior to the articulation of a lesbian identity that has tested the limits of the supposed “tolerance” of same-sex relationships—and sometimes provoked negative, even hostile reactions. In *Fire*, although neither Radha or Sita identify as lesbian, it is not so much the several challenges to the heteropatriarchal, Great Indian Joint

opening to the outside world is loosening up attitudes toward sex?

It's probably not that simple. Mehta herself believes that her film has tapped into a deeper rethinking of the relations between men and women and how they are shaped by the Indian patriarchy. In particular, many of her fans come from the country's growing middle class. “I am absolutely thrilled by the reaction,” says Mehta. “My purpose in making the film would be fulfilled if it just makes people think.”

*Fire*, the first film in an ambitious trilogy, tells the story of Radha (played by Shabana Azmi). Radha is miserable in her marriage to Ashok, a businessman from south Delhi. Under the influence of a local guru, Ashok has taken a vow of celibacy in the belief that it will bring him spiritual salvation. To test his control over sexual desire, he often makes Radha lie next to him. Meanwhile, Ashok's younger brother, Jatin, accepts an arranged marriage to Sita, while continuing an affair with his Chinese mistress. The spurned wives meet on the sidelines and gradually fall in love. But the larger point, of course, is the inadequacy of their men. “It is one of the more irreverent films of the 1990s,” says movie critic Nikhat Kazmi of the *Times of*

*India* newspaper.

The film is trendsetting in another way: it is one of the few acclaimed commercial dramas to be released in Hindi. The Indian film industry produces hundreds of Hindi-language movies, but most are flimsy song-and-dance extravaganzas with cardboard characters. (*Fire* was shot in the mix of Hindi and English used in most middle-class homes, then dubbed into Hindi.)

Not everyone has loved the movie; a critic for the *New Delhi Statesman* called Mehta a “pretentious” filmmaker who made a “pornographic and distasteful” film. But Mehta—who has already finished her next film, a story of the Subcontinent's partition called *Earth*, and is working on the screenplay for the last of the trilogy, *Water*—says she has been heartened by the public reaction. Members of all-female audiences have begged her to organise shows for men. But perhaps the most encouraging reaction to her film came from a male colleague, who has started fetching his own drinks, instead of asking his wife. Now that's progress.

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