



Women in Deepa Mehta's the *Elements* Trilogy

Debjani Chakraborty

Abstract

While media have been used to propagate the traditional role of an ideal woman, we cannot deny the power of media as an effective tool to question and dismantle such normative images of women. Right from the inception of Bollywood, women have been portrayed as the ideal wife or mother. But the other side of it has been dealt with by limited directors in few movies. One such deviation from the accepted depiction of women is portrayed beautifully, in Deepa Mehta's *Elements Trilogy* – *Fire* (1996), *Earth* (1998) and *Water* (2005).

Fire transcends the boundaries of heterosexual marriage. *Earth* exposes the anxiety of partition which is validated by the mutilated bodies of women. *Water* depicts the dismal condition of widows. The *Elements Trilogy* projects the pathetic reality of women across time, within the geographical boundaries of India. The director portrays women in various dimensions which are otherwise stigmatized.

Keywords: Media, Sexuality, Woman, Representation, Elements Trilogy



Indian cinema has been very popular since its inception. Right from the beginning, the target audience was mostly men. Cinema and television serials portrayed women in stereotypical roles like daughter, wife, mother; which are mostly a reflection of being subservient to their respective male counterparts. Women in Indian cinema have been represented as ideal feminine figures who are expected to fit into the stereotypical image constructed by the patriarchal society.

The depiction of a woman as herself is limited to a countable few. Such depictions are found in the *Elements Trilogy*, which explores the different facets of women's lives in the contexts of sexual, social and religious tensions through *Fire*, *Earth* and *Water*. Interestingly, the trilogy revolves around women's lives and adopts a feminine perspective in its presentation and is directed by a woman herself, thereby forming a subtle bond of womanhood. The basic elements which are responsible for the creation are also responsible for the destruction. This duality is what forms the base of this trilogy upon which Deepa Mehta projects the reality of women across time in various Indian locales, through a feminine perspective.

Set in post-independent India *Fire*¹ portrays the unhappy married lives of Radha and Sita. It deals with the politics of sexuality. In both cases, the marriages are incompatible, where Radha's husband embraces celibacy and Sita's husband finds solace in his girlfriend. The middle-class society which forms the background of the dysfunctional family, stresses on the importance of heterosexual relationships within the boundary of marriage. The idea is that a wife is always a potential mother and so the element of passion in her is hardly addressed. In this context, fire refers to the inner passions of a woman. We find that Sita and her husband engage in loveless intercourse, perhaps with the motive of procreation, and Radha's husband embraces celibacy precisely because she is unable to conceive a child.²

Fire depicts the hypocrisy of middle-class society where the mother watches Ramayana upstairs and her younger son Jatin sells illegal pornographic CDs downstairs. The portrayal of the male servant's desire is in sharp contrast with Sita and Radha discovering each other while making love. The difference in the attitude shows us how the question of female desire had been suppressed and dominated by men. When Radha accidentally catches fire she realizes how hollow her marriage has been. The hatred is so much that her husband leaves her to die. The fire in the kitchen purges her of the dilemmas and confusions she has been through. This can be read in connection with 'agnipariksha' in *Ramayana*, where Sita was asked to prove her chastity by Ram.³ It gives validation to Radha's actions in choosing Sita over her husband. It also suggests that a same-sex relationship between two women, who want to start a new life together, is not wrongful in any way. Fire in this context is a symbol of purity. The same symbol, therefore, entails both passion and purity which are often perceived as binary opposites. So, passionate women are also pure in the sense their passion or desire for another woman or man is not immoral. The movie ends with the two women meeting in a temple, a place which is generally associated with heterosexual Hindu marriage. The last scene is significant because it implies that Sita and Radha are ultimately able to come out of the shackles of the male-dominated heterosexual institution of marriage, only after realising their subservient status in their family. Interestingly, in Indian mythology, Radha and Sita are reflections of ideal heterosexual, devout women.⁴ Radha is remembered for her devotion to Krishna, and Sita as the 'ideal' wife of Ram. Nowhere in Indian mythology do we get any such reference between Radha and Sita. *Fire* gives Mehta a scope to explore feminine desire and sexuality in a conservative male-dominated family. Thus, *Fire* plays with the images associated

with these names at multiple levels. The same fire which could have destroyed Radha, enlightens her.

The next masterpiece in the trilogy is *Earth*⁵, which gives us a glimpse of how the political and religious turmoil tore the peaceful social fabric into pieces, during the partition of India. It deals with the politics of nationality. Partition is not only a geographical division of territory but also a division of the bodies of women. The events are narrated through the perspective of an eight-year-old girl named Lenny who belongs to an elite Parsi family. Her caregiver Shanta is a beautiful Hindu woman. The close-knit friend circle of Shanta consists of people from various religious backgrounds. The difference in the social environment before and during the partition is evident in *Earth*. Suddenly the friends become the enemies and the loved ones are betrayed and violated. Here *Earth* is compared to a woman who was violated in body and soul, culture and tradition, nation and civilization.⁶ We find the horrors of the partition in the terrified eyes of Shanta while she was being carried away by hundreds of Muslim men. The two communities that coexisted peacefully before the partition had suddenly turned hostile and violent. Something similar is depicted in the scene where Dil Nawaz is seen waiting in the station to receive his sister. The train arrives but with the lifeless and violated bodies of Muslim women and children. These terrible acts of violence are the results of the partition of India. Shanta, who might be seen as a human version of undivided India, was friendly to Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, and Sikhs. Her decision to marry Hassan can be read as an attempt to unite Hindus and Muslims at the wake of partition. But her attempt proved unsuccessful. It shows how men dominate women across religious beliefs, national boundaries and cultural identities. Lenny's mother used to take off her husband's shoes after he returned home. Why is it that an adult man who is professionally successful is unable to take off his shoes on his own? These subtle details are reflective of the position of an educated and sophisticated married woman in a wealthy Parsi family. Lenny is dominated by her cousin, a boy of almost her age, who asks her if she knows about rape and says that he will be showing it to her later. The seriousness of the act of rape is reflected in the image of Lenny's doll being forcefully ripped apart which a tearful Shanta tries to mend. The agony caused by the lifeless mutilated bodies of the brutally raped women, Lenny's doll which was ripped apart, Lenny's cousin's reference to 'rape', ultimately culminates in the scene where Shanta is carried away by the Muslim mob. Dil Nawaz, who loved Shanta, betrays her. She is also betrayed by her country which belonged to her before the partition. The little girl seems to narrate through her childlike innocence, but these events are highly loaded with socio-political tensions.

Set in the backdrop of pre-independent India, *Water*⁷ shows the dismal condition of Hindu widows. It deals with the politics of religion. Unfortunately, Chuyia was prey to both child marriage and widowhood. The idyllic setting of the ashram is in sharp contrast to the dilapidated ashram. This contrast shows how hollow and pathetic our attitude has been towards widows.

What is more striking is the prostitution of a beautiful young widow, Kalyani, who lives a rather isolated life in the ashram. She is ferried across the river to the customers. She is forced into prostitution, to run the ashram. The purity of the river and the widowhood are questioned.⁸ The river which nurtures lives also serves as the route of Kalyani's prostitution and her untimely death. The purity of widowhood is further problematized by Madhumati who is in charge of the ashram. Thus, *Water* in many ways, points out the paradoxes ingrained in the conservative patriarchal Indian society. Interestingly, Shakuntala, who is a devout Hindu, hates and even questions her widowhood. The widow is a category which is marked by the physical absence of control by the

husband. But the society of 1938 never permitted a widow to inherit the property of the deceased husband. Instead, widows were perceived as a threat and were relegated to the ashram or a life of renunciation, so that they would be kept under control by the absent presence of their dead husbands. They were considered as spiritually and socially unholy and were blamed for their husband's death. But Shakuntala succeeds in crossing the invisible boundaries of the ashram when she finally sends Chuyia away with Narayan. The scene which depicts Narayan holding Chuyia in a moving train is symbolic because it suggests that a new future is waiting for Chuyia. Shakuntala plays a pivotal role in *Water* in saving the little girl from the oppressive future that was waiting for her in the ashram.

The varied contexts in the trilogy are of utmost significance as they point out the reality of women in Indian society. Whether it is pre-independent India or post-independent India or even a Partition evidencing India, women have been the vulnerable targets of men at large. The patriarchal society has always tried to control women of all ages.⁹ Shanta, Lenny's mother, Lenny, Radha, Sita, Chuyia, Kalyani, Shakuntala, are all victims of a male-dominated patriarchal society. No protagonist is 'ideal', Shanta is engaged in an inter-religion relationship, Radha and Sita find their love in each other, Kalyani being a widow is forced into prostitution and even considers remarriage, Chuyia who is an eight-year-old widow is sent away with Narayan, and Shakuntala questions her widowhood despite being a God-fearing Hindu woman who eventually sends Chuyia away. They are victims of a male-dominated worldview and society where they hardly get to assert themselves. The feminine perspective helps us to see the unjust reality of women irrespective of temporal and spatial shifts.

Notes

¹ Deepa Mehta, director. *Fire*. Trial by Fire and New Yorker Films, 1996.

² Ibid

³ Devdutt Pattanaik, *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*. Penguin UK, 2013.

⁴ Devdutt Pattanaik, *Indian Mythology: Tales, Symbols, and Rituals from the Heart of the Subcontinent*. Inner Traditions/Bear & Co, 2003.

⁵ Deepa Mehta, director. *Earth*. New Yorker Films, 1999

⁶ Manju Jaidka, *A Critical Study of Deepa Mehta's Trilogy Fire, Earth and Water: Fire, Earth and Water*. Readworthy, 2011.

⁷ Deepa Mehta, director. *Water*. David Hamilton Productions, 2005

⁸ Tutun Mukherjee, 'Deepa Mehta's film water: The power of the dialectical image.' *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 17, no. 2 (2008): 35–47.

⁹ David F. Burton, 'Fire, Water and The Goddess: the films of Deepa Mehta and Satyajit Ray as critiques of Hindu patriarchy.' *Journal of Religion & Film* 17, no. 2 (2013): 3.



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