# THE INVISIBLE WOMAN: Resisting Heteronormativity in Indian Cinema and Claiming Sexual Agency

By

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I am suggesting that heterosexuality, like motherhood, needs to be recognized and studied as a *political institution*.

- Adrienne Rich (1993, 232)

## INTRODUCTION

Within the extensive body of Indian cinema, the existence of a critical discourse revolving around the resistance of heteronormativity is emerging. This new discourse is challenging the historical portrayals within Bollywood that have traditionally reinforced heteronormative norms, gender roles, and traditional family structures (Gopinath 2005; Jain 2012). Contemporary Indian media has gone through changes in recent years, which can be attributed to evolved public attitudes, modernization, and an increased willingness to engage with complex themes that relate to the emancipation of women (Arora 2021). The shift represents more than a mere change in cinematic trends; it signifies a broader societal transformation that allows for the emergence of non-heteronormative ideals (i.e., queer marriages, non-heterosexual live-in relations, queer-exclusive public spaces) and the exploration of LGBTQ+ themes (Arora 2021).

Up until the late 2010s, the Indian society showed reluctance towards accepting queer identities, and this resulted in Indian cinema and its hesitance in delving into non-heterosexual identities and narratives (Ramani 2023). Hence, the portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters was often relegated to stereotypes and caricatures (McGovern 2011). In 2009 Delhi High Court for the very first time read down Section 377 IPC in order to decriminalize homosexuality[1]. However, there was a wave of queer cinema that saw the successive release

[1] Section 377 of the IPC criminalized homosexuality by referring to it as "unnatural offences" and states that whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life. After 2009 Delhi High Court Judgement, in 2013 it was re-criminalized by the Supreme Court Judgement of Suresh Kaushal. But then the SC in Navtej Johar Case in 2018, it was again decided upon the validity of Section 377 IPC and finally, by reading down Section 377 IPC, held that consensual homosexual activity is not an offence.

of three films (i.e., *I Am* (Onir 2010), *Dunno Y Na Jaane Kyun* (*Don't Know Why,* Sharma 2010), and *Pankh* (*Wing,* Chattopadhyay 2010) where queer men were not laughed off as an aberration (Bakshi and Sen 2013, 173).

However, one of the most common archetypes of gay identity in Indian cinema is the comedian, providing little to no contribution to the plot of the movie (Bhugra, Kalra, and Ventriglio 2015). These gay characters are usually effeminate and only provide comic relief (Bhugra, Kalra, and Ventriglio 2015; Gopinath 2000). One such film was *Dostana* (*Friendship,* 2008), where two main characters pretend to be gay lovers so they can rent an apartment. They act flamboyant and hysterical to portray homosexuality (Bhugra, Kalra, and Ventriglio 2015, 458). Though, it should be noted, that the film was set in the United States, so the impression of homosexuality was portrayed as an out of India experience or as non-Indian, making it more accepted by the Indian audience (Bhugra, Kalra, and Ventriglio 2015, 458). Five year later, the same production house released another film called *Student of the Year* (2012) which had a gay college dean who would act promiscuously and inappropriately towards his fellow male teachers. These portrayals of gay men as comedic elements in the film reflect on the prevailing stereotypes and misconceptions around homosexuality in Indian society (McGovern 2011).

As for lesbianism, Gopinath (2005) argues that Indian cinema has shown "intense love" (Gopinath 2005, 118) between women in terms of friendship that slips into queer desires. While on the surface, the cinematic depictions might appear to conform to traditional gender roles and heteronormative relations, Gopinath underscores the subversive undertones present in these portrayals. Additionally, by framing these same-sex relationships as homosocial relationships, Indian cinema navigates through the sociocultural implications and taboos around queer love (Gopinath 2005, 153). While implicit coding of alternative

sexuality does not override explicit representations, Gopinath (2005) argues that these alternate formulations of female homoeroticism are not labelled as "lesbians," but rather as a subtle expression of desire (Gopinath 2005, 25). These portrayals then challenge the rigid categorizations of what it is to be a non-heterosexual woman and allow for hyper-femininity that does not necessarily imply heterosexuality (Gopinath 2005, 154).

Additionally, Dudrah (2012) argues along similar lines as Gopinath (2008) and recognizes the secret politics of gender and sexuality in Bollywood and asserts, "These codes and their associated politics are attempted to be spoken, seen and heard cinematically… as implicit and suggestive queer possibilities that are waiting to be developed further" (Dudrah 2012, 61). In this sense, there has been an evolution of these queer identities in Indian cinema since the 2010s (Sanyal 2023, 39). However, queer characters, especially lesbian characters, have constantly highlighted the need to "embrace heteronormativity" and eventually, "patriarchal heterosexuality triumphs every time" (Srinivasan 2013, 204). This necessity of resorting to heterosexuality stems from the very image of a woman as a (Hindu) goddess resulting in the understanding of womanhood through the lens of Hinduism (Desai 2003, 154).

Wadley (1977) argues that in classical Hindu texts, the image of the woman is full of duality as she navigates wifehood and motherhood, the former being described as "good, benevolent, dutiful, controlled" while the latter is "fertile, but dangerous and uncontrolled" (117). These two categorizations then do not provide space for the exploration of queer desire for a Hindu woman. Deepa Mehta explored this in her award winning film *Fire* (1996) where she crafted a narrative around two sisters-in-law who defy and challenge traditional roles within the Hindu familial framework. Gairola (2002) notes that the Hindu woman is made to identify her internal and social agency in relation to the authoritative gaze of the Hindu man, a gaze that is informed by religious ideals and norms, and hence, the Hindu woman becomes

paradoxically a subject and commodity (308). The intersection of religious ideals, societal norms, and gender dynamics create a complex framework within which the Hindu woman must navigate and gain agency. In a more recent film, *Maja Ma* (*Having Fun,* 2022), viewers see this depiction through a family and community oriented Hindu woman who comes out as a lesbian, and how this causes instability in her conservative community (Chatterjee 2023).

Hence, in this paper I will aim to critically examine the nuances of heteronormativity, its manifestations, and challenges within the context of Indian cinema's depictions of female queer desires in *Fire* (1996) and *Maja Ma* (2022). These female queer desires will be contextualized in familial relationships, i.e., being a wife, daughter, and mother, seeking to alienate female queer desires from the intricacies of family relationships. The two films have been deliberately chosen for their thematic exploration of heteronormativity and its relation to the idea of traditional womanhood. I postulate that heteronormative ideals not only dominate the prevailing cultural narratives but actively shape the expectations placed on a woman in familial settings in both films, resulting in the denial of queer desire. Additionally, my main text for this analysis is *Maja Ma* to understand the intricacies of female queer desires within the patriarchal structures of the Indian society. This analysis will be supplemented with insights drawn from *Fire,* a seminal work in Indian cinema that explores similar themes of Hindu womanhood and heteronormativity.

Before I move on to the theorists I will be referring to for this paper, I would like to acknowledge the cultural affiliations of the directors and the contextualize *Fire* and *Maja Ma*. Looking at *Fire* first, Mehta is a Canadian filmmaker with Indian heritage. The film has been largely funded by Canadian money (Gopinath 1998, 631) and won 11 major international awards, including the Special Jury Prize at the Mannheim-Heidelberg International Film Festival and the Audience Award at the Barcelona International Women's Film Festival. Additionally, Mehta's film is based on Indian writer Ismat Chughtai's 1942 short story *Lihaaf*

(The Quilt) wherein a lesbian relationship is depicted between a sequestered wife and her female servant-masseuse in an upper middle class Muslim household (Gopinath 1998, 633). On the other hand, *Maja Ma*, directed by Anand Tiwari and released on Amazon Prime was produced for an Indian release in an era where OTT (over-the-top) platforms are gaining popularity among viewers because of their coverage of taboo topics.

Having established the contexts of *Fire* and *Maja Ma*, I will be drawing on the works of scholars like Gopinath, Vanita, Kidwai, and Dudrah who interrogate the complex interplay of queer relationships, societal norms, and religious ideals. Their collective works offer expansive viewpoints and theoretical foundations that critically examine the nuances of socio-cultural elements that often frame narratives in Indian cinema. By doing so, I will be able to study the intricate connections between heteronormativity, queer female desires, and family relations within the context of two Indian movies. By situating the analysis within the broader academic discourse facilitated by these scholars, the objective is not only to uncover connotations of female sexuality and heteronormativity but also to comprehend the complex dynamics of personal relationships within familial and societal structures that the characters navigate.

This paper will be broken down in to five sections. In the first section, I will introduce Queer Theory and its application to my research. I will primarily focus on the works of South Asian queer theorists, such as Gayatri Gopinath, Shohini Ghosh, Ruth Vanita, and Saleem Kidwai, who have extensively studied gender and sexuality in relation to India's varying social, cultural, and political environment. In Section B, I will conduct a critical content analysis of Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996) by studying the image of the Hindu woman as a wife who is placed in a patriarchal heteronormative family. Likewise, in Section C, I will analyze a modern day version of *Fire*, titled *Maja Ma* (2022), directed by Anand Tiwari. Created on the same premise of married women and the enforcement of heteronormativity, *Maja Ma*

offers the idea of the "good" Hindu woman who is constructed based on societal expectations and religious norms which does not permit the co-existence of queerness. Both films will then be studied in Section D, through a comparative analysis that will identify the continuities and disparities in their depiction of the "good" Hindu woman in relation to queer relationships, gender roles, and the enforcement of heteronormativity. Additionally, I will also explore how the two films show the evolution of the understanding of queer women who are placed in patriarchal heteronormative settings. Lastly, in Section E, I will conclude my paper by conceptualizing the "good" Hindu woman within the realm of societal and cultural expectations.

**SECTION A: APPLICATION OF QUEER THEORY**

As defined by Eve Sedgewick, the term 'queer' refers to "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality, aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (Sedgewick 1993, 7). She defines the term as a fluid and multifaceted way of expressing one's identity, rather than adhering to binary categories. Thus, her definition challenges conventional and normative ideas of gender and sexuality, that are held back by societal norms and expectations. In this sense, Queer Theory challenges the foundational ideas of gender and sexuality and advocates for the reconceptualization of these constructs, diverging from binaries and heteronormative framework.

Coining the term in 1991, Teresa de Lauretis describes 'Queer Theory' as a field of study that challenges traditional assumptions of gender, sexuality, and identity by questioning hegemonic heterosexuality and patriarchy which are considered "natural" (1991, iii). The assumption of heterosexuality results in the idea being embedded in the everyday psyche of an individual, normalizing it to the point where it becomes heteronormative. In this paradigm, heterosexuality and patriarchy are interwoven, resulting in a power dynamic that encourages

male dominance. Ingraham (2004) comments on this and defines heterosexuality as an accepted "power arrangement that limits options and privileges men over women and reinforces and naturalized male dominance" (74). In this sense, queer theory questions what is considered "natural" or "normal" and seeks to dismantle the entrenched ideologies that encourage heteronormativity within society.

Challenging the assumption of heterosexuality, Adrienne Rich (1980) in her seminal essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" asserts, that the assumption that most women are "innately heterosexual" acts as a theoretical and political block for women which results in heterosexuality not being a choice or preference but rather an ideology that needs to be "imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force" (Rich 1980, 648) She condemns the oppression of lesbians through heteronormativity and asserts that this deems lesbianism and lesbian experiences as non-existent (Rich 1980, 647). Consequently, the concept of lesbianism is seen as a threat, due to the elimination of the male figure and male sexual desire, because lesbians are women who desire other women.

Despite Queer Theory's foundations being in the West, for this paper, I will primarily be focusing on the works South Asian queer theorists who have focused their research on the Indian subcontinent. This is due to the nature of the paper that requires a narrow and specific exploration of the intersection of cultural, sexual, and gender identities within the unique context of India that deals with religion, caste, and class. In this sense, universalizing queer subjectivity is the erasure of narratives of queer people of color and overlook class differences within queer subjects (Judge 2018; Chatterjee 2021, 2).

The emergence of queer politics in India is fairly recent and emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s due to the transnational shift in sexual health of gay men during the HIV/AIDS crisis (Chatterjee 2018, 13). As per Narrain and Bhan (2005), "the first recorded

queer protest in India was organized by the *AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan*[2] (ABVA), which took place in 1992, when a rally was organized in Delhi against police harassment of gay men" (9). Similarly, lesbian resistance emerged in the late 1990s, in response to the Shiv Sena's attack on Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* (Chatterjee 2018, 14). Shraddha Chatterjee (2018) in her book *Queer Politics in India* points out the difference in queer politics between gays and lesbians, stating that gay movements revolved around the normalization of disease, health, safety, and sexuality, whereas lesbian movements advocated for the expression of female sexuality (Chatterjee 2018, 14). She writes, that Indian women were challenging the notion of only being heterosexual and were creating a space to discuss the lives of women who did not follow the standard trajectory of marriage and reproduction by expanding on the idea of what it means to be a woman (Chatterjee 2018, 14).

Khanna and Price (1994) discuss this issue further in their article "*Female sexuality, regulation and resistance*" and state that the "sexuality of middle-class, higher-caste Indian women had to be protected from the dangers of child marriage, managed eugenically to ensure the birth of sound children… As for poor working class women, their sexualities had to protected against promiscuity and prostitution" (31–2). They draw attention to the regulation of female bodies and female sexualities that are controlled based on societal, patriarchal and colonial norms that strive for female purity (Khanna and Price 1994, 34). The heteronormative model built around married, able-bodied, heterosexual couples solidifies the binary understandings of gender which devalue a woman's worth based on her sexuality, be it her sexual needs, identity, or preference. The exploration of sexuality within the South Asian context reveals a convoluted landscape where heteronormative frameworks intertwine with gender, religion, class, and caste constructing the idea of home and nation, resulting in the side-lining of marginalized voices.

[2] Translates to *Protest Against AIDS Discrimination,* founded in 1989

Gayatri Gopinath (2005) in her seminal book *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* critiques the heteronormative framework that obscures the experiences of queer individuals due to cultural narratives that construct the idea of 'home' and 'nation' in heterosexual terms. She writes, "Given the illegibility and unrepresentability of a non-heterosexual female subject within patriarchal and heterosexual configurations of both nation and diaspora, the project of locating a "queer South Asian diasporic subject"-and a queer female subject in particular-may begin to challenge the dominance of such configurations" (16). By centring queer narratives, Gopinath highlights the possibilities for alternative understandings that do not conform to heteronormative constraints. Additionally, she emphasizes the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, and diaspora by recognizing the marginalization of non-heterosexual women within South Asian communities.

Similar to Gopinath's (2005) argument, Ghosh (2001) studies queer bonding on television in the 1990s and early 2000s, focusing on how non-heterosexual bonding transcends cultural and national boundaries. In her chapter Queer Pleasures for Queer People (2001, 207-221) in *Queer India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society* edited by Ruth Vanita, she describes how television programs challenged heteronormativity and created a space for queer representation, however, this representation was paired with ambiguity and an open-to-interpretation outlook (216). This could be seen in a popular sitcom called *Hum Panch (Us Five)*, where Kajal, played by Bhairavi Raichura, was heavily masculinized, despised the institution of marriage, and wanted to run a mafia empire. In one episode, an effeminate male dancer falls in love with Kajal and the narrative is built in ambiguity, letting the viewers decipher whether the dancer mistakes Kajal for being a man or because he is attracted to masculine women (217).

Commenting on the idealized image of Indian family values, Ghosh (2001) writes

> Teleserials (like soap operas) narrate stories set in domestic spaces that are generally conflicted, if not entirely dystopian. By representing the family and home as fraught

> with marital discord, domestic violence, sibling rivalry, property disputes, and oppressive familial hierarchies, television ruptures the utopic imaginary of "Indian family values"… Television's challenge to family values and sexual normativity includes the representation of characters who, while not explicitly identified as gay or lesbian, rupture heterosexist assumptions. (216)

Based on her writing, it can be understood that the depiction of an idyllic family in Indian television was superficial due to the underlying issues, be it matrimonial or societal. The need to portray family values and sexual normativity serves as a reflection of prevailing cultural norms and expectations. Television shows like *Hum Panch* were created in an era when heterosexual family-oriented dramas were popular amongst movie goers (Ghosh 2001, 216). These depictions obscured complex realities that did not align with heteronormative ideals and reiterated existing societal structures and values.

**SECTION B: A *FIRE* (1996) WITHIN THE INDIAN WIFE**

In an era where Aditya Chopra's *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995)[3] was a hit among the Indian audience for its portrayal of family values, Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996), did the opposite with its depiction of female homosexuality. Produced at a time when homosexuality and expression of female sexuality was considered a taboo in India, her film received immense backlash from political parties who vandalized cinema halls and harassed movie goers (Kapur 2000, 54). Even though the film received a green light from the Censor Board, with only a minor change, that the name Sita[4] be changed to Nita (Patel 2002, 223), Hindu right wing mobs disrupted screenings of the movie and alleged that the film is "against Indian tradition" (Patel 2002, 225). In this section, I will explore how the film *Fire* explores the

[3] *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) is a heterosexual love story of two upper caste people that affirmed "old-fashioned" values of pre-marital chastity and family authority, affirming the idea that Westernization does not have to affect the essential Indian family identity (Chopra 2019).

[4] Sita is the consort of Rama from the Hindu epic Ramayana. She is the embodiment of what a Hindu woman should be: pure, loyal, sacrificial, and dedicated towards her husband. Radha on the other hand, is not married to Krishna, however, is known for her devotion and love to him. She is commonly associated with Krishna as his consort.

theme of female queer desires from the point of view of two wives by challenging dominant narratives around heteronormativity in the Indian familial context.

The film revolves around two sisters-in-law Sita and Radha (played by Nandita Das and Shabana Azmi) who are married to two brothers Ashok and Jatin (Kulbushan Kharbanda and Jaaved Jaaferi). The brothers are shown to be undesirable and disenchanting; while Ashok is ascetic and engrossed in his spiritual awakening, Jatin has an Indian Chinese lover named Julie who he refuses to end his relationship with. Sita and Radha slowly form an intimate bond that leads to sexual intimacy. When Ashok catches them, Radha does not beg for forgiveness, instead she packs her belongings and leaves her marriage, where she was denied pleasure for over a decade. Sita also leaves the house eventually and meets Radha at the Nizammudin tomb, a sufi shrine, as a way to imagine life outside the Hindu fundamentalist ideology (Barron 2008, 71).

The names of the characters, Sita and Radha, are both names from Indian epics and are women associated with two Goddesses, Rama and Krishna. Sita and Radha portray attributes of devotion and self-sacrifice to their male counterparts and are the benchmark of Indian womanhood. While Sita is the wife of the Hindu King Rama, she embodies purity, dedication, loyalty, and sacrifice for her husband and their family. Contrastingly, Radha is the consort of Krishna, however, she is not his wife. Despite being married to one of the cowherders in her community, she adored Krishna when he was a child and later became one of his favorite *gopi* (loosely translates to female cowherder or milkmaid). Radha is known for her endless devotion and in folklore her devotion itself unites her to Krishna, hence it is said that there is no need for their union through marriage. Due to this linkage with religion, Hindu nationalist regional party members of Shiv Sena were outraged by the lesbian relationship between Radha and Sita, more so because it was placed within the confines of Hindu familial domesticity than…. (Gopinath 2005, 157). The party's leader Bal Thackeray

questioned why the characters were named Radha and Sita and not Shabana and Saira (Gopinath 2005, 157), the latter being the name of the actor playing Radha in the film, Shabana Azmi. Saira is the name of the wife of Dilip Kumar, a legendary Bollywood actor who supported the release of the film. The reaction from Hindu right-wing groups in regard to the names of the characters and the content of the film underscores the fragile nature of preserving traditional values. Additionally, by naming the characters after religious consorts, the film inherently challenged traditional conceptions of womanhood and the patriarchal expectations associated with those figures resulting in a threat to the established heteronormative framework that families adhere to.

Takhar (2014) pointed out that *Fire* challenged the construction of the "the good Hindu woman" who was constricted by patriarchal control, resulting in the policing of the female sexuality (234). Mehta's film disrupted this normative framework, not only by showcasing an unconventional relationship between two sisters-in-law, but also by challenging the foundation on which this "good Hindu woman" is created. Since this "woman" is bound to the house, the depictions in *Fire* are controversial due to the act of lesbianism being performed within the confines of an ordinary middle-class household (Vanita and Kidwai 2000, 244-46). Referring to the binaries that Chatterji (2013) formulated of the woman being either a goddess or a chattel, Mehta's women embody the energy of what Chatterji (2013) describes a chattel as given their submissiveness and compliancy within the household. Mehta establishes both Radha and Sita as subaltern women who navigate within the patriarchal codes of a middle class Hindu family. Mehta's women, Radha and Sita, can be as Chincholkar-Mandelia (2005) describes the subaltern Hindu woman's identity being shaped within and by the patriarchal discourse leading to the subordination of her identity and subjectivity within the Hindu society (Chincholkar-Mandelia 2005, 197).

Radha takes care of the mute and paralyzed Biji (mother in law), runs the family's food take-out business, and follows Ashok's command of lying next to him in bed when he wants to test his control over his sexual desires. She does all this, without questioning the need and as a way to make up for the fact that she cannot produce children (Chincholkar-Mandelia 2005, 201). Similarly, exchanging a conversation over tea, Sita says, "Isn't it amazing? We're so bound by customs and rituals. Somebody just has to press my button. This button mark tradition, and I start responding like a trained monkey" (*Fire,* 0:42:04 to 0:42:20). Their actions portray their understanding of the expectations imposed on them. Sita, equating herself to a "trained monkey," reveals her awareness and simultaneous adherence to patriarchal norms and tasks. Throughout the narrative, both Radha and Sita grapple with the constraints of their prescribed roles within the patriarchal society. This dialogue can be understood as the turning point for both women as they begin to critically evaluate their lives in relation to the norms they adhere to, eventually transcending to autonomous beings. Additionally, the progression of their relationship in this sense can be seen as a metaphorical journey from subjugation to emancipation.

Simultaneously, Jatin (Radha's husband) is engrossed in his extramarital affair while Ashok (Sita's husband) is practicing asceticism, leaving their wives in loveless marriages. These contrasting portrayals of the male characters shines light on the expectations and roles assigned to men within the familial context. It serves as a commentary on the nature of patriarchal power dynamics that leads to the confinement of women in lonely domestic spheres. Due to the paths taken by the husbands, Radha and Sita's narratives mirror a broader societal structure where women are relegated to secondary positions in a family and must endure the repercussions of their husbands' actions.

Gopinath (2005) writes, "I would argue that, at least in the middle-class urban Indian context that Mehta details, it is precisely within the cracks and fissures of rigidly

heteronormative arrangements that queer female desire can emerge" (Gopinath 2005, 153). However, I argue, that this female desire is homosocial initially, due to the influence of patriarchy and heteronormativity, and later turns into homosexuality. Homosocial desire in *Fire* would be defined through the sisterhood and social bond that the sisters-in-law share, which evolves into the homosexual love. Radha and Sita's homosocial behavior is overlooked by family members since it is under the disguise of sisterhood. In one scene, for example, the two sisters-in-law are out with their husbands on a picnic, and Sita starts massaging Radha's feet. The act of massaging your elders' feet is a sign of respect, however this tradition is reinterpreted by Sita in a sensual erotic manner. By doing so in a public sphere, Sita acts in a defiant manner to regain her agency and express her desire. This subversion of a traditional heterosexual act turned into a homoerotic one between the sisters-in-law challenges the conventional, heteronormative understanding of family relation. While massaging elders is an act of respect and is common practice between sexes, the sensuality with which Sita does it, is not common. Similarly, during *Karva Chauth*- patriarchal festival where the wife fasts without food and water for her husband's long life- both Radha and Sita are fasting for their men despite their loveless marriages, and thirsty Sita informs Radha her husband is not home yet. Radha offers a glass of water to Sita and suggests she breaks her fast without seeing her husband—by simply looking at Radha. In this scene, Radha takes on the role of her husband by blurring the boundaries of a traditional heterosexual marital ritual, subtly converting it into an intimate homosocial moment between the two sisters-in-law. Scenes such as these that are embedded within familial gestures become acts of defiance against heteronormative paradigms for Radha and Sita (Gopinath 2005, 153).

In the penultimate scene of the film, Ashok finds Radha and Sita in bed together, he condemns their actions, deems it as a sin, and suggests that only his Swami ji can help them now. In response to this, Sita suggested that they immediately leave when their secret was

discovered, however, Radha wants to speak to her husband before she leaves. In an exchange of dialogues, Sita says, "Now listen Radha, there is no word in our language that can describe what we are, how we feel about each other" (*Fire*, 1:33:11 to 1:33:17). While there are words in the Hindi language to describe same-sex relationships, i.e., *samlaingik*, Sita's assertion derives from the fact that their articulation of queer love is not accepted within the cultural context that will accept and validate it. The lack of understanding towards queer love speaks about the broader theme of invisibility and the erasure of queer experiences particularly within traditional settings such as those that constitute as the 'home'. In this sense, when Radha faces Ashok and informs him about her desire to live, he questions her allegiance to him and doubts her womanhood which he sees only from a heterosexual lens. In his view, it is him who will forgive Radha for her sins (Chincholkar-Mandelia 2005, 203) and re-establish his authority through patriarchal codes. He realizes that as Radha no longer desires him, she has moved away from her duties as a wife which in turn threatens his manhood as a husband, a role, he believes is, now occupied by Sita, her lover.

As Ashok comes to the realization that Radha is no longer interested in him, he forcefully grabs and kisses her as an attempt to ignite passion within her, but he soon realizes that Radha is detached from him. In anger, he pushes her back and her sari catches fire on the stove. Despite knowing this, he stares at her and walks away. This scene is an allusion to the *Agni Pariksha* (translates to trial by fire) in the Ramayana. In the Hindu epic, after Sita is rescued from Lanka, now present day Sri Lanka, her husband Ram demands that she proves her chastity and devotion to him by immersing herself in fire. In Mehta's film, while Sita is not the one taking part in the *Agni Pariksha*, Radha is, but the message is the same. The confrontation followed by the *Agni Pariksha* or trial by fire sheds light on the motif of a woman's purity and how that outweighs happiness and other needs in life. Ironically enough, Gayatri Gopinath (2005) mentions that background noise in the family's daily lives, in the

film, was the popular serialization of the Ramayana (Gopinath 2005, 141), reiterating the complex ways in which traditional religious narratives permeate the lives of the characters. The reference to the *Agni Pariksha* and the serialization of the Ramayana serves as a symbolic reminder of the ubiquity of religion in the everyday lives of Radha and Sita which they cannot escape and juxtaposes the traditional religious and societal values with contemporary issues such as freedom of expression, identity politics, and social justice. Additionally, the *Agni Pariksha* scene in *Fire* also hints at the historical practice of widow burning, known as *Sati,* wherein a widow would jump into the funeral pyre along with her husband's dead body. In the film, Ashok loses his husband status when Radha chooses Sita to pursue her desire, making Radha a metaphorical widow. Radha becomes a widow in the sense of her refusal to adhere to the conventional marital duties and expectations that her husband Ashok has imposed on her. Moreover, as she moves away from her marriage, she loses her 'wife' status that is created within the patriarchal system, rendering her a widow in a metaphorical sense.

The film culminates in a scene when the two women meet at the Sufi shrine, and they are no longer subaltern women as Radha discards her passivity when she expresses her "desire to live" to Ashok and breaks her silence and invisibility by saying "no" to Ashok (Chincholkar-Mandelia 2005, 205) and his hegemonic patriarchy, finally accepting and embracing her new partner, Sita. This moment can be analyzed as a moment of epiphany for Radha where her desire to live is a declaration of her autonomy and selfhood by removing herself from an environment that oppressed her identity. Thus, this cinematic representation serves as a powerful critique of heteronormative structures by offering a reimagination of female agency and queer kinship. Moreover, using the evocative setting of the Sufi shrine, a space often associated with spiritual transcendence, *Fire* metaphorically places Radha and Sita's union in a space that challenges normative discourses around gender and sexuality.

In conclusion, *Fire* is considered a queer cinematic milestone that defies societal norms and confronts heteronormativity by showing Radha and Sita's love for each other. Mehta challenges traditional notions of womanhood and offers an alternate love story against the cultural backdrop of a middle class Hindu joint family by navigating between duty and desire (Tiwari 2021, 51). Both women move away from their prescribed traditional duties, expectations, and compulsory heterosexuality (Ghosh 1998) while exercising their agency and choice (Tiwari 2021, 51-52), which eventually leads to the disruption of the existing familial, sexual, and cultural arrangements (Kapur 2000, 60). Radha and Sita's union at the end of the film, affirms the existence of the lesbian identity within the Hindu society thanks to the arrival of homosocial and homoerotic discourses on the big screen by reinterpreting a Hindu woman's identity and agency within the realm of the patriarchy. In synthesizing a potent critique of gender dynamics within family politics, *Fire* also urges a broader discussion on the intersections of class, caste, and religion in the restricting the emergence and acceptance of female sexuality, female autonomy, and in the formation of queer identities.

**SECTION C: MAJA MA (2022)**

*Maja Ma,* directed by Anand Tiwari, much like *Fire* depicts a married family-oriented woman, embracing her sexuality and breaking the confines of heteronormativity. The film explores a variation of queerness that is not often named in Hindi cinema—the queer desires of a married, middle-aged, religious, wife and mother who explicitly identifies as a lesbian (Chatterjee 2023). Pallavi, a married woman with two kids, is confronted by her daughter Tara with the hypothetical question: what if she was a lesbian, would her mother accept her? She fails to evade her repetitive hypothetical questioning, and in a fit of frustration, Pallavi claims the identity for herself, leaving her daughter and family flabbergasted. After Pallavi's private disclosure to her daughter Tara, a video recording of their conversation is leaked to

the community at a cultural gathering which leads to social shaming and exclusion. When her son Tejas finds out, he is convinced that his mother is unaware of what the term means. He associates this to her seemingly normative positionality as a Hindu wife-mother-aunty and her active participation in the institution of marriage, i.e., her faithfulness and fidelity. (Chatterjee 2023, 4). Hence this figuration of the wife-mother-aunty as a lesbian was ostracized by Pallavi's family and their community because of the unusual intersection of the two identities. The dismissal of Pallavi's queerness is related to not only her married status but also her stereotypical heterosexual femininity. In this sense, Chatterjee (2021) writes

> While femme lesbians and feminine queer women are either invisibilized in popular culture – which could challenge the idea of femininity as essentially heterosexual – or are hypersexualized, the representation of feminine women here also conforms to consumerism, the politics of respectability, and the centrality of culture and family in the narrative structure of the film. (185)

Chatterjee (2021) challenges the idea of femininity being inherently heterosexual and the performance of hyper-femininity may not always equate to heterosexuality. In this case, the Hindu woman, Pallavi, is made to identify her internal and social agency in relation to the patriarchal gaze of the Hindu man. Then, the Hindu man's religious and societal ideals of what it means to be a family-oriented woman are projected on to Pallavi resulting in her conforming to heteronormativity. A deviation from heterosexuality then creates the "deviant" *Bharat Nari* (ideal Indian woman) who confronts the monolithic understandings of femininity, which is traditionally understood from a heterosexual patriarchal point of view, and instead brings forth a multifaceted understanding of femininity. Karthika (2023) in her review of the film suggests that Pallavi is the epitome of the concept of the *Bharati Nari*; she is a happy housewife, a traditional dancer, and a culinary expert in her community, but above all, a mother and a wife (Karthika 2023, 2). Therefore, once a woman accepts the role of a wife and mother, her sexuality is suppressed. In embracing her sexuality, a wife-mother-aunty would be deviating from her prescribed role (Chatterji 2013, 183). In this sense, we do not

see this deviation in *Maja Ma*, since Pallavi does not embrace her "deviant" form of femininity at the end and instead resorts to her familiar heterosexual family structure at the end.

Indian society is constructed to think within the realms of the existing binaries of male/female, masculine/feminine, and heterosexual/homosexual (Karthika 2023), which results in the hailing? of "compulsory heterosexuality," which imagines heterosexuality as the norm (Rich 1980). As Adrienne Rich (1980) points out in her seminal work, "one of the many reasons of heterosexual enforcement is, of course, the rendering invisible of the lesbian possibility, as engulfed continent which rises fragmentedly into view from time to time only to become submerged again" (620). Thus, Tejas' dismissal of his mother's sexuality reflects on the social consciousness that is unable to imagine the plausibility of a change in heterosexual status due to the culturally acceptable concept of the idealized perfect *Bharat Nari* (Karthika 2023). As for the *Bharat Nari,* her sexuality is suppressed because once she becomes a mother, she cannot have sexual desires or even a sexual identity (Chatterji 2013, 183). After the public outing of Pallavi, Tejas' visits his fiancé and her parents and explains to them that "There's no chance she's lesbian." (*Maja Ma,* 0:39:45 to 0:39:48), suggesting that complexity and non-heteronormative sexual identities are mutually exclusive when it comes to a mother. His comments reflect the pervasive understanding of aligning motherhood with purity, self-sacrifice, and an absence of sexual autonomy. Hence, the identity created of the lesbian mother is seen in the light of deviance within the domestic sphere.

Additionally, Pallavi's non-heterosexual identity also impacts her husband who was labelled as a *namard* (meaning impotent or not manly) because of his wife's sexual identity. It also reflects on the strict standards of what it means to be a man and to be able to hold and control your wife and her pleasures. Pallavi's husband also receives emasculating comments from his community, like "If someone's wife starts like women instead of her husband, will

that man be called impotent or He-Man" (*Maja Ma*, 0:49:49 to 0:49:54). Hence, apart from Pallavi, her non-heterosexuality challenges her husband too which exposes the entanglement of gender norms and sexual orientation within a patriarchal framework. The labelling of her husband as a *namard* depicts the anxiety around male potency and capabilities to control a woman's sexual agency.

Contrastingly, Tejas' fiancé and her family are Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) who embody a diasporic heteropatriarchal Hindu presence against the backdrop of the 'lesbian' wife-mother-aunty. After falling in love in the United States, Tejas' returns to India with her fiancé and her family to introduce his parents to hers. Bob, the father of Tejas' fiancé, is repulsed by "Indian Indians" but portrays himself as the flagbearer of Indian culture and values nevertheless (Chatterjee 2023, 7). Bob holds strong views about the role of a "good woman" in a family and society and believes Pallavi to be one until he hears about her lesbian identity. However, Pallavi does embody this "good woman" through her virtuous, demure, puritanical, and traditional Indian femininity (Chatterjee 2021, 180-81). Thus, the presentation of Pallavi, a Hindu wife-mother-aunty as a lesbian disrupts the stable Hindu family unit that is integral within the Hindu familial culture. As an extension, a woman who does not conform to middle-class patterns of the "self-sacrificing wife" may symbolize a constant threat to the conservative middle-class norms (Young 1995).

To verify Pallavi's "good woman" attributes and her heterosexuality, Bob sets up a lie detection test for her, much like the *Agni Pariksha* (trial by fire) in Deepa Mehta's *Fire,* ideated from the Indian epic *Ramayana*. While her queer activist daughter Tara feels her mother does not need to prove her sexuality, her son Tejas feels she needs to clear the air and gain back the family name and respect that was lost while her sexuality was in question. Bob's questions revolve around the abstract ideals of dignity, chastity, and sexual purity and is similar to the puranic one that Ram demanded from Sita to prove her chastity and

faithfulness after she was rescued from Lanka, in the *Ramayana* (Karthika 2023, 3-4). Hence, paradoxically, Pallavi is able to challenge Hindu conservatism by pandering and upholding to their norms (Chatterjee 2023, 6) and is able to counter Bob's miniscule understanding of being a lesbian. Gopinath (2005) argues that the universalized identificatory terms such as "gay" and "lesbian" are inadequate when capturing the essence of queer desire when it is in a non-Western settings. In reference to this, Bachetta notes that lesbians and gays "are too historically located in Western culture to provide models that are trans-historically or transnationally viable" (Bachetta 1999, 144). Hence, Bob's understanding of Pallavi's identity is inherently limited, despite his exposure to Western attitudes of queer identities.

## SECTION D: COEXISTENCE OF THE "GOOD" WOMAN & THE QUEER WOMAN

There is a sharp contrast between *Fire* and *Maja Ma* in the ways they invoke rituals to affirm and re-configure patriarchy so that there are inclusive options for subaltern women (Chatterjee 2023; Gairola 2002). In *Fire*, there is a deviation from religious and cultural expectations against the backdrop of the hegemonic West that is embodied through Jatin's Indo-Chinese lover Julie, who attends school to talk with an American accent, refuses to marry into his traditional joint family, and disassociates herself from Indian culture (Gairola 2002, 317; Gopinath 1998, 632). Julie, being from Hong Kong, her identity and behaviors show a western influence, embodying a form of resistance towards Indo-centric culture. It should be noted that while Hong Kong's geographical location is in the continent of Asia, however, it was a under the British rule until July 1, 1977, after which the authority was transferred to China (The National Archives). Given that *Fire'*s original release was in 1996 in Canada, prior to the handover of Hong Kong from the British to the Chinese, Julie's narrative in this context becomes one of being from the West. Her quasi-Western identity is

contrasting to the of Radha and Sita's who fall into a familial and societal structure in the film, whereas Julie disassociation from Indian culture denotes a sort of resistance that the sisters-in-law have to adhere to. On the contrary, *Maja Ma* contains the theme of queer desire by surrendering to the religious and cultural expectations that are embodied by a Hindu wife-mother-aunty against the backdrop of the diasporic heteropatriarchal Hindu figure of Bob (Chatterjee 2023, 6-7).

During the *Agni Pariksha* of Pallavi in *Maja Ma*, Bob actively tries to challenge her 'perfect' Hindu wife-mother-aunty façade through the lie detection test. But she is able to retain her status of 'purity' by the fact that she continued to have sex with her husband and produce two children. In this sense, she puts duty, loyalty, sacrifice, and piety over love and pleasure which once again helps to position her as an ideal *Bharat Nari*. Chatterjee (2023) writes that as a wife-mother-aunty, Pallavi does not demand the right to pleasure and for this reason that is instrumentalized to evidence her chastity and loyalty as a Hindu wife, as well as her "peripheralized aunty desire" (Zaman 2023, 2) that cannot be brought to fulfilment. Abhinash Chandra Ghose, an Indian philologist who contributed to the "Hindu sexual science" by offering to define the sexual menacing woman, *Hastini*, writes, she is the "elephant kind of woman" who "negates good femininity" and embodies "indelicacy and perversity" (Chatterjee 2023, 7). Her sexual desires and "carnal appetites" result in her departing from the institutions of marriage, disorganizing myriad social worlds in her wake (Chatterjee 2023, 7). The only way to tame a *Hastini* woman's desires is through reproductive marital sex that would ensure socio-political authority of the Hindu men (Mitra 2020, 24; Chatterjee 2023, 7).

Thus, Pallavi is the antithesis of what constitutes a *Hastini* woman, yet she needs to be tamed. Prateek (2022) writes that she is not permitted to challenge the "trope of the sacrificial wife, who gives up her freedom for her husband" (Prateek 2022, 257).

Contrastingly, Radha and Sita from *Fire* are the perfect embodiment of the *Hastini* woman as they accept their "carnal appetites" towards one another and depart from the institution of marriage all together after Radha's failed *Agni Pariksha*. This juxtaposition of Pallavi against Sita and Radha is also due to the economic dependence and lack of economic and social security. Pallavi is not employed in the neoliberal economy which requires her to trade pleasure for economic and social security (Chatterjee 2023, 7). Sita and Radha on the other hand, handle the family food business and talk about venturing out themselves, thanks to their husbands' departure for leisurely activities. *Maja Ma*'s queer potential lies in the fact that Pallavi's familial associations with heteronormativity can no longer be sustained even after her sexual sacrifices have been validated, causing her not to be a worthy recipient of pleasure (Chatterjee 2023, 8). Due to resorting back to heteronormativity at the end, film critics argue that the film lacks potential to bring social change (Chatterjee 2022). Karthika (2023) writes, "The ambitious theme that should have shaken the audience to generate some healthy discussion about sexuality and arranged marriage ends up as a mediocre attempt to balance between progressive outlook of modern society and conservative value system" (Karthika 2023, 4). However, thematically, *Maja Ma*, portrays the plight of queer women who are unable to leave their heterosexual patriarchal familial structures and must navigate societal expectations, familial obligations, and personal desires. While the ending of the film suggests Pallavi's failed attempt to 'escape' heteronormativity and embrace her sexuality, it shows a realistic portrayal of the constraints that queer women face when they deviate from, what is understood as, normal desires and what its social implications are.

While the endings of both films are different, with Radha and Sita leaving behind their husbands in *Fire*, Pallavi in *Maja Ma* stays and leaves the audience in ambiguity as she does not definitively leave or stay. Hence, the promise of queer possibility is not entirely lost even as her husband seeks her companionship and tells her it is time, she does what brings

*her* joy. Chatterjee (2023) writes that, "it leaves us with a fleeting glimpse of queer possibilities between "lesbian" Hindu mother-wives-aunties" (8). Although, imagining such possibilities within the realm of heteronormative marriage can only be hinted at and not visualized due to the non-prevalence of imagining 'aunties' queer erotically (Chatterjee 2023, 8; Khubchandani 2022, 351). Nevertheless, Pallavi hints at an inconceivable queer future with her love Kanchan and tells her she would want her as a woman in her next life as well, despite the limitations of space and time (Chattaerjee 2023, 14). In essence, the idea of a lesbian as a Hindu wife-mother-aunty is imagined vis-à-vis the institution of marriage despite a lesbian woman's lack of interest in sexual or romantic activities within the realm of marriage (Chatterjee 2023, 14; Gopinath 2002, 310).

## SECTION E: CONCLUSION

As Deakin and Bhugra (2012) state, the portrayals of female sexuality have gone through significant transformations in terms of changes in family values towards sexuality, sexual behavior, and alternative sexualities. Female sexuality has shifted from being repressed to extroverted and demanding (Deakin and Bhugra 2012, 37). Both films, *Fire* and *Maja Ma* are a testament to this transformation that is defying traditional understandings of Hindu womanhood. *Fire* was the catalyst for this queer Indian cinema and served as a groundbreaking example that challenged prevailing notions of femininity and heteronormativity that were engraved in Indian Hindu culture (Manda 2021). Nearly thirty years later, *Maja Ma* further extends this exploration and delves into the complexities of what is understood as the "good" Hindu woman within societal and cultural expectations. All women in this paper, Radha, Sita, and Pallavi are torn between their queer identities and the demands of a heteronormative patriarchal roles, while balancing age old, gendered duties that define a wife-mother-aunty. The Feminist Critical Hindu Studies Collective (2022) writes,

"Aunty exists in a dialectic relationship between gatekeeper and groundbreaker" (Feminist Critical Hindu Studies Collective 2022, 349). They function as "gatekeepers" as they are custodians of traditional norms, values, and expectations, and are complicit in enforcing gender roles and heteronormativity. However, an aunty can also be characterized as a "groundbreaker" who may challenge norms and defy traditional expectations and may even serve as an agent of change. In this sense, Radha, Sita, and Pallavi assume the position of ground breakers who also gate keep (Chatterjee 2023, 12). All three women carry the weight of culture and tradition while preserving family honor, thereby serving as gatekeeps in their respective familial contexts. Yet, they simultaneously penetrate the system and act as groundbreakers who embrace their queer identity. This duality is more so evident in Pallavi who is a traditional woman and serves as a gatekeeper, following rituals, taking part in cultural events, and putting her family first. However, Pallavi also subverts these traditional duties by confronting her own queer identity in a heteronormative society, thereby acting as a groundbreaker. In doing so, she negotiates the meaning of a "good" Hindu woman, by preserving her communal identity along with her private identity of being a married, non-heterosexual good woman.

Additionally, *Maja Ma* defies common representations of queer women in Hindi cinema- who are largely represented as young unmarried women- and instead offers a new kind of lesbian who is a Hindu wife-mother-aunty (Chatterjee 2023, 13). Pallavi is embedded in the institution of marriage, while simultaneously having queer desires. Her queer identity, however, does not threaten the traditional family setting, Hinduism, and the duties of a "sacrificial mother, dutiful wife, and agreeable aunty" (Chatterjee 2023, 13). By making the conscious choice to not hamper Pallavi's duties after her coming out, *Maja Ma*, allows for the possibility and existence of a queer mother-wife-aunty dynamic. Moreover, through *Maja Ma*, we are exposed to the reality of queer women "desiring relationalities" (Gopinath 2002,

310). However, they may not experience independence from their families, marriage relations, religion, and/or the heteropatriarchal settings they exist in, which demand women's emotional and physical labor. Hence, both *Fire* and *Maja Ma* expand on the vision of Hindu femininity that is commonly understood in heterosexual light and recontextualize it through a queer lens.

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