



Negotiating Queer Subjectivities in Indian Cinema: A Study of *Fire* and *Margarita with a Straw*

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Abstract

This paper tries to compare and contrast two important and controversial films of that time that dealt with against the current themes, Fire (1996) directed by Deepa Mehta and Margarita with a Straw (2014) directed by Shonali Bose to understand how Queer identities are portrayed in Indian cinema. These films had a shock the social conscience by representing the key milestones of queer representation on screen, each exhibiting different socio-cultural challenges and thematic framework. Fire challenges patriarchal conventions and mandatory heterosexuality as considered normality in a traditional Indian society and households whereas Margarita with a Straw offers a more modern, intersectional viewpoint that inspects disability and bisexual identity. The paper also examines how these films question heteronormativity, talk about rights to woman and broaden the narrative space for LGBTQ+ section in Indian cinema from the perspective of queer and feminist critique. The study demonstrates how these films distinctively address the visibility, resistance, and empowerment, thereby enriching the ongoing discourse about sexuality, identity, and representation in Indian popular culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

Cinema has long been considered as a mirror to society and an effective medium to represent and criticise cultural, social, historical

and political conventions. In India, the representation of Queer in mainstream media has been traditionally restricted, neglected and often mocked and considered as Other and even

abnormal. The select movies have surfaced that challenge the tendency by representing queer in a complex and sympathetic manner. *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) directed by Shonali Bose and *Fire* (1996) by Deepa Mehta are noteworthy for their brave examinations of Queer desire, agency and identity with India's complex socio-cultural fabric. This paper examines the ways in which these movies reflect queer themes emphasising the character's fight for autonomy, self-realization and self-expression in opposition to heteronormativity, traditional gender roles and social norms.

This paper examines how these two films, each with its own distinct viewpoints deep-rooted in different cultural and historical contexts, add to the larger conversation on queer representation in Indian cinema through an in-depth comparative analysis.

II. QUEER CINEMA IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

A critical vantage point for examining the representation of non-normative sexualities and gender identities has been developed by queer theory by thinkers such as Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Michel Foucault. There is a lot of weight behind cinematic depictions of LGBTQ+ lives in India, a country where queerness has been a political and social problem. Queer films from India often occupy a space between acceptance and rejection, challenging patriarchal narratives while fighting cultural taboos and censorship.

A major shift occurred in the legal climate in 2018 when Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was decriminalised. Despite progress in the law, there is still a societal acceptance gap, and the fight for LGBT+ visibility and rights is far from over in Hollywood. In India, gay cinema serves as more than just a form of amusement; it is also a tool for political activism and social change. In the midst of centuries of stagnation, films such as *Margarita with a Straw* and *Fire* present narratives that challenge long-held beliefs and show different perspectives on family, individuality, and romantic desire.

III. FIRE: AN OPPOSITION TO COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY AND PATRIARCHY

When it comes to LGBT cinema in India, many cite to Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* as a watershed moment. Anti-Hindu and anti-family extremists blasted it in 1996, prompting protests and even assaults on theatres. During the emotional and sexual neglect by their husbands, sisters-in-law Radha (Shabana Azmi) and Sita (Nandita Das) create a passionate bond in this film.

A rebellion against patriarchal power and societal conventions, Radha and Sita's bond goes beyond a simple love story. Ashok and Jatin, the husbands, are shown as emotionally distant, domineering, and fixated with religious idealism or adulterous affairs. Being a daughter-in-law and a wife have limited Radha's freedom, but she finds release and friendship in Sita. Because she expects her husband to suffer in silence and because he is dishonest, Sita becomes violent and vocal in retaliation. *Fire* represents fervor, metamorphosis, and destruction throughout the film, both symbolically and physically. Fire symbolises the burning desire to break free from societal expectations and to reclaim one's identity through love and self-confidence. Symbolic of her freedom from patriarchal constraints is Radha's unhurt progress through fire in a pivotal sequence.

A defining feature of *Fire* is its refusal to allow lesbian desire to be exoticized or sensationalised. The portrayal of Radha and Sita's relationship challenges the notion that homosexual love is inherently strange or unnatural to Indian culture by displaying their bond with empathy and profound passion. In her examination of the traditional-modern divide, Mehta uses the story's location in a typical Indian home to suggest that queer identities are not something that people in India find outside of their culture. In addition, employing the home as a setting for rebellion highlights the individual as political, an idea with deep roots in queer and feminist rhetoric.

IV. MARGARITA WITH A STRAW: INTERSECTIONALITY AND QUEER DISABILITY

In *Margarita with a Straw*, Shonali Bose takes us on a journey, exploring the depths of LGBT+ identity, intertwining it with the threads of disability, gender, and the weight of cultural conventions, igniting a powerful conversation that resonates deep within the soul. Laila, a shining spirit, faces the world with courage, navigating the depths of her emotions, chasing her dreams, and embracing the fire of her desires. In a journey that spans from the vibrant streets of Delhi to the dazzling lights of New York, she finds a kindred spirit in Khanum, a courageous blind activist from Pakistan. As their bond deepens, she bravely discovers the truth of her own heart, embracing her identity and the love that knows no boundaries.

Margarita with a Straw soars with a global and independent spirit, while *Fire* stands firm, grounding LGBT identity in the rich tapestry of local culture. Yet, it stands tall on a powerful Indian foundation, as Laila's bond with her devoted but traditional mother (Revathi) fuels her fierce battle for individuality in a world that often casts aside those with disabilities.

The most impressive aspect of the video is the way it incorporates several disciplines. Rather than seeing Laila's disability as an obstacle to her sexuality, it is seen as an integral part of her personality and life experiences. In a culture that often views people with disabilities as reliant or asexual, she must not only accept her bisexuality but also demonstrate her ability to live independently. The film challenges discriminatory and heteronormative assumptions in this way.

The nuanced and honest connection between Khanum and Laila is depicted without making fun of either character's disability or sexual orientation. They build a caring, complex, and ultimately life-altering bond that helps Laila embrace her fluid sexuality. The film deviates from the usual conclusion by having Laila prioritise self-love over romantic happiness, suggesting that the freedom to be one's own self, rather than romantic fulfilment, is what defines LGBT identity. Going on a date by herself at the end of the film is a powerful symbol of

empowerment and self-acceptance in a culture that often promotes uniformity.

V. COMPARATIVE STUDY: IDENTITY, LIBERATION, AND RESISTANCE

The central themes of both *Fire* and *Margarita with a Straw* are around LGBTQ relationships and the empowerment of women who challenge societal norms. Their narrative, representation, and location approaches are very different, though, and this shows the development of LGBT cinema in India.

As a result of the breakdown of heterosexual marriage and the burden of familial responsibilities, queerness emerges in *Fire*. Radha and Sita's love is seen as a form of defiance against patriarchy and a coming-of-age story for each of them. This politically charged film uses the family unit as a metaphor for societal dictatorship. In contrast, *Margarita with a Straw* places an emphasis on intersectionality and individual growth. Rather of being a defence mechanism against abuse or neglect, Laila's queerness is a part of her complex personality.

Another key difference is the interpretation and context of these. The film *Fire*, which was released in the 1990s and sparked widespread outrage due to its LGBT+ portrayal in Indian culture, was severely restricted and met with strong public opposition. Nearly twenty years later, *Margarita with a Straw* was critically acclaimed and much enjoyed, showing that different viewpoints are being more tolerated despite the continuance of bigotry.

Cinematically speaking, both films convey profound emotional depth via symbolic imagery and close-up camerawork. While Mehta stresses the tension between obligation and desire through the use of confined spaces and traditional rituals, Bose uses handheld cameras and genuine dialogues to depict Laila's personal journey and sensory experiences. An integral part of both films is the score. While *Margarita with a Straw* depicts Laila's bilingualism via the combination of Western and Indian music, *Fire* exposes religious hypocrisy through the use of devotional sounds.

VI. THEORETICAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS

Using a queer theoretical lens, both films investigate the heteronormative systems that control Indian society. Here, Judith Butler's performativity comes into play, which posits that Radha and Sita reject the imposed roles by adopting different, more queer selves. As a disabled woman, Laila confronts societal norms by being open about her desires and sexual mobility.

Along with Foucault's theories of power and discourse, the films also touch on these topics. The house becomes a regulatory hub in *Fire*, where rule breaking is severely punished. Despite the fact that Laila's family, school, and healthcare systems control her body and identity during *Margarita with a Straw*, she is able to reclaim her autonomy via creative expression.

The importance of representation is also highlighted in both films. These films offer a more nuanced and expansive look at LGBTQ+ characters in a media landscape that often ignores or stereotypes them. Instead of seeing LGBT people as anomalies, marginalised, or other, they encourage viewers to see them as vital members of society who face difficulties, have aspirations, and deserve dignity. The power to alter public perception, eradicate bigotry, and promote inclusion, in addition to the story itself, is what gives these depictions their transformative potential.

VII. CONCLUSION

Some of the seminal works that have significantly advanced the conversation around queer identity in Indian cinema include *Fire* and *Margarita with a Straw*. Their unique stories and creative choices expose ableism, heteronormativity, and patriarchy in a harsh light. While *Fire* celebrates collective resistance and challenges traditional family structures, *Margarita with a Straw* celebrates autonomy and intersectional identity. These films, taken together, demonstrate the power of gay cinema to bring about societal change, awareness, and empathy.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of these films in a world where

LGBTQ+ individuals continue to face discrimination and exclusion. They validate LGBTQ+ experiences and promote more in-depth conversations about love, freedom, and identity. As the history of Indian cinema continues, we may anticipate the emergence of more stories like these, which will hopefully help to foster a more inclusive and equitable cultural landscape. The fearless storytelling in *Fire* and *Margarita with a Straw* lays the groundwork for future cinematic examinations of queer life; these are stories that need more than just telling; they deserve recognition and celebration.

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