

Rebel with a Cause: Realism and Resistance in Deepa Mehta's Cinematic World

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ABSTRACT

The filmography of Deepa Mehta stands out as a unique niche in the discourse of Indian and world cinema. Her work as a diasporic auteur cuts across the sidelines of nation, gender and identity and critiques the orthodox of patriarchy and culture at the same time. The paper questions the main movies of Mehta, *Fire* (1996), *Earth* (1998) and *Water* (2005) to shed some light on how she balances insurgency with realism. It suggests that Mehta realism is not only a formal aesthetic tool but rather a tool that is political in essence an act of resistance against the silence, censorship and ingrained hierarchies. The paper, therefore, arrives at a conclusion that the films of Mehta are a revision of the concept of realism as rebellion, which gives voice to the oppressed and discloses the gaps in the traditional understanding of Indian modernity.

Keywords: Deepa Mehta, realism, rebellion, feminism, postcolonial cinema, gender, patriarchy.

Introduction

Deepa Mehta has become one of the most piercing critics of modern Indian cinema and its diaspora, a position that has been reaffirmed by the fact that her work has frequently been censored and widely subject to popular critique in India, despite the fact that it has also gained great international acclaim in the bold manner in which it has challenged gender, sexuality and religious orthodoxy. Mehta was born in Amritsar and studied philosophy at the University of Delhi, which, in turn, allowed her to become a critically intimate and objectively detached observer of Indian society who possesses a diasporic viewpoint (Grewal, 2013). Such dual positioning allows her to question cultural tradition without lapsing into default romanticism and also to question social norms without lapsing into exoticism.

It is on this basis that Mehta leads her stories which embody emotional truthfulness and intentional rebellion, challenging neither established stereotypes of Indian womanhood nor the conflict of contradiction within a patriarchal nation. Her Elements Trilogy, which includes *Fire* (1996), *Earth* (1998) and *Water* (2005) forms the basic framework of her cinematic philosophy.

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Both movies focus on examining a different aspect of Indian identity of passion, division, and purification, leading to a collective expression of how Mehta fears silence and her dedication to social realism as an artistic expression and a political action.

Realism and Resistance in Context

To the escapist nature that has prevailed in the mainstream of Bollywood cinema, the use of realism that Mehta introduces has been explained as not simply derivative of a reflective miming of the quotidian but in fact as a critical challenge to it. The realism she embraces cannot be a neutral or decorative form of aesthetics; it works as a critical apparatus which makes the otherwise invisible forms of oppression visible. The fact that Mehta frames her stories in the recognizable space of kitchens, courtyards, alleys, ashrams, allows her to perform a systematic dismantling of the current mythical thinking that violence and resistance only occur in bold and dramatic scenes. With the ordinary being revealed by Narula (2006) as a location of extraordinary crusading in the quest of freedom by Mehta, the unremarkable thus becomes a place of an intense contestation.

The realistic frame which Mehta puts forward in his work seeks to continue its criticism into the gendered politics of film. Appealing to the prototypical notion of the female gaze introduced by Mulvey (1975), Mehta inverts the classic patriarchal spectatorship, shifting the attention away at women as passive objects and moving it to women as active, agency-holding subjects. Her heroes, Radha, Sita, Shanta, and Kalyani, are purposely created and presented as rational, passion-focused women, the emotional terrain of which is pushed to the boundaries that society sets against them. These characters do not follow the traditional parameters of purity and obedience, and their opposition is expressed in gestures of desire, denial, solidarity, which the Indian cinema has traditionally denied women.

The forcefulness of Mehta realism can be found in the fact it consciously cuts off any melodramatic extravagance to reveal the structural aspects of oppression. Rituals, daily routines, and silences, which tend to be glossed over, are brought out as processes that perpetuate patriarchy. Her strict film vocabulary, full of hand-held shots, documentary lighting, and in-the-raw settings, results in an authenticity that engulfs the viewer and makes him/her face the unpleasant realities. Rebellion is not expressed in outbursts and explosions but in smouldering resistance: refusal to smile, sharing a glance, not turning one's head.

It is probably the most radical of Mehta democratizing rebellion. Combining the political commentary with the pattern of daily living, she embodies the idea of everyday resistance introduced by bell hooks (1992) whereby survival, intimacy, and choice are forms of resistance to the system of oppression. Instead of presenting resistance as a sequence of grand gestures, Mehta shows it as one that has been experienced in life and thus making political understandable and achievable to her audiences.

After all, the realism of Mehta is an anti-nationalistic mythology. It reveals the processes of patriarchal control of families, religions and nations, and by setting her rebellion into the context of everyday life, she places her criticism within the very culture she is questioning. The outcome is a set of works that are not only entrenched in Indian backgrounds and contexts but are also massively transgressive in the way they present challenges to dominant hegemonic histories.

The Elements Trilogy: Fire, Earth, Water

Fire (1996): Desire as Defiance

Fire is a milestone of Indian cinema in the mainstream where the love between two women of the same sex is depicted in advance in a conservative Hindu family. Turning mundane domestic environments into a place of disobedience, the story of Radha (Shabana Azmi) and Sita (Nandita Das) unfolds and the two women rebels against the absence of emotion that arranged marriage brings, instead making their relationship one of understanding and love.

Mehta also adheres to realism with his meticulously created *mise-en-scene* including the low-key lighting, the cramped rooms, and the tediousness of homework, all of which reflect the repressive ethical atmosphere that encloses the characters. As Radha and Sita enter into a sexual relationship, the kitchen as an ordeal of the domestic is turned into a subversive place where desire disturbs the traditional account of the heterosexual domestic happiness without the melodramatic exuberance.

The controversial nature of the film with its protests and the specific target attacks on cinema theaters resulted in the demonstration of the discomfort that India experienced with female autonomy (Gopinath, 2005). It is, however, just because of its stark realism that Fire can attain its dialectical force: because the revolution is built on the real-life experience and it is not on the spectacle, the piece speaks directly to the cultural orthodoxy of the time and provides a moving tribute to the strength of personal story.

Earth (1998): Partition and the Politics of Innocence

Based on the book of the same title, *Cracking India* by Bapsi Sidhwa, *Earth* is a re-telling of the Partition of 1947 through the eyes of one of the characters, Lenny, a Parsi boy. The detached voice of the narrator in the film gives Mehta a chance to portray violence with a rhythmic sense of tragic restraint, consciously not indulging in the apparatus of nationalistic heroism but focusing on crevices in the relationships of every-day life.

The Partition has been framed in a documentary key, is shot in a hand-held manner, and uses a muted palette; this makes it a historical trauma that is lived and not impersonalised. In this respect, Mehta questions existing forms of nationalistic discourse by showing victims as well as perpetrators among religious groups, thus disclosing the way patriarchy and nationalism unite in the violence committed against women (Shohat & Stam, 1994).

Finally, her realist style highlights the idea that the events of Partition were not one-off events but rather they were entrenched in the terms of misogyny, mistrust, and political manipulation.

Water (2005): The Politics of Purity

The last part of the trilogy, *Water*, addresses the fate of Hindu widows in colonial India and presents a cinematic provocation that will be revealed only after several years of censorship and bloody riots during the filming in Varanasi. By placing the film in a wider context of state repression and negotiating capabilities of visual culture to practice oppressive hegemony, it is an example of artistic endurance and political resistance.

The story revolves around a child widow, Chuyia and a young woman, Kalyani who are abandoned due to religious ritual asceticism and hence the hypocrisy within ritual purity is shown. The river Ganges serves as a metaphorical embodiment of two things: it is calm and it is a witness while enforces the repressive moral codes of conduct that limit the power of widows.

Mehta actively avoids exoticization, but instead he develops an archival register, which proposes shaved heads, limited diets and prohibited silence. This non-hypocritical realism reveals the hypocrisy that lurks in Brahmanical patriarchy where widows are refused desire but commodified to fulfil upper-caste men (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, 1999).

Using this nakedness, Mehta transforms the religious into the profane as he makes the viewers confront the hypocrisy of religion that permeates the practice of widowhood.

Feminist Realism and Diasporic Vision

The feminist postulation that the personal is political agrees with Deepa Mehta and her realist style of filmmaking. The home dissent of her protagonists sheds some light on the interplay between patriarchy and religious, national, and communal systems. The camera work of the director hangs on the silence and body language that are often relegated in mass commercial films, thus making resistance an experiential and embodied process (Grewal, 2013).

Being a diasporic filmmaker, Mehta is negotiating between two audiences:

An oriental gaze aiming at exoticizing suffering, and

- the Indian audience, which is adamant to cultural critique.

Mehta can convert this tension into a reservoir of creative energy. Her realism is more sympathetic than strictly ethnographic; it is brought about by a close familiarity with the facts of culture and a deeper sense of moral urgency. Banerjee (2006) notes that Mehta makes India not a spectacle but a conscience, thus provoking the Western liberal assumptions as well as the Indian traditionalist paradigm.

Therefore, her diasporic view gives her the freedom to criticize externally the same cultural institutions that impose silence.

Themes of Rebellion

The dominant themes in the oeuvre by Deepa Mehta help to understand how dissenting acts work together in small cases of realism and not drama; in *Fire*, the director challenges the theory of sexuality and silence and dismantles the taboos on female desire transforming the domestic realm into a place of subtle resistance. *Earth* questions violence and memory and makes the human cost of nationalism a very personal viewpoint that does not resort to nationalism and rhetoric. In *Water*, Mehta brings out faith and hypocrisy and reveals how religious patriarchy conceals exploitation in the name of innocence and righteousness. Through her corpus, she praises female solidarity where interwoman bonds are portrayed as the only survival strategy in a system that is oppressive. The truth behind these accounts is the idea of realism as an ethical position something that is a deliberate denial of melodrama in favour of honesty and emotional truth. All these overlapping themes reveal that in the films of Mehta rebellion is neither blatant nor melodramatic but tiered, and strongly consistent in realism, moral uprightness, and compassion.

Reception and Controversy

The filmography of Mehta has been praised in the international circles and at the same time criticized in the home country. The incendiary scandal of *Fire* has elicited vociferous opposition by the right-wing groups, and that *Water* has received regulatory bans, which eventually led to its production being in Sri Lanka. These contrasting readings serve to enlighten one on how feminist realism, when facing up very ingrained cultural assumptions, in practice scorches a kind of political scoundrelly.

There have been scholarly criticisms that sometimes Mehta caters to Western perceptions about the Indian subjugation (Naficy, 2001). Still, her practice of art carries on a long history of social reform in India reflecting in leaders like Ambedkar, Phule, and even feminist trends. Her criticism is not foreign but domestic; the rebel aspect of her work is part and parcel of the long-standing efforts of India to deal with systemic social injustices.

Conclusion

Deepa Mehta is the perfect definition of the so-called rebel with a realistic purpose, making a name as a filmmaker who manages to transform the idea of the film into a means of social conscience. Her works are the embodiment of the dialectical opposition of conformity and autonomy, faith and individuality, silence and voice. Through a kind of low-key, morally based realism, she explains how the so-called mundane existence hides thereby some extraordinary forms of resistance.

The protest of Deepa Mehta is not a protest of cultural repudiatory actions but of the recovery of mankind in the cultural realm. Not only is Indian feminist cinema redefined in her hands, but it is also granted a global reverberation of its retention of the ethical nucleus. Her work also stands as a constant reminder that realism is not merely a refractive mirror of the society but a hammer that can define the most fundamental principles of the society.

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