

## **SCORCHED BY FIRE, DROWNED BY WATER, NO HEAVEN ON A CRACKED EARTH: 'A LOOK' AT DEEPA MEHTA'S WOMEN<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*This article focuses only on Deepa Mehta's importance as a film-maker of Indian diaspora now indwelling in Canada. This paper shall interlock with the films made between 1996 and 2008, i.e., Fire (1996), Earth (1998), Bollywood/Hollywood (2002), Water (2005), Heaven on Earth (2008). Needless to reiterate, that these five films, too, like the others in her oeuvre, have brought her many awards. Though it is imperative to look at the entire oeuvre of an artist, this selection is hoped to prove adequate for the defining purposes of this work, and would 'throw' glimpses that could enable others to construct the missing elements.*

**Keywords:** Deepa Mehta, cartographies of woman and nation, palimpsest, diaspora

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### **1. Introduction**

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Deepa Mehta was born in India in 1950. She studied philosophy at Delhi University and migrated to Canada in 1973. She was married to Canadian Paul Saltzman and they a daughter Devyani, but is now divorced and lives in Toronto, Canada with her partner David Hamilton. She has to her name other than feature films, many documentary films, web series, television series and she has also starred as an actor in some films. She has won many awards for her work and has been acclaimed as a leading film maker.

As regards other honours, few of them are singled out here and they are, Doctor of Laws, University of Victoria, 2009, Governor General's Performing Arts Awards for Lifetime Artistic Achievement, 2012, Doctor of Laws, Mount Allison University, 2013, Doctor of Letters, Concordia University, 2013, Member of the Order of Ontario, 2013, Officer of the Order of Canada, 2013.

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## 2. *Explicating the entitling*

All of the five films sought to be studied are referred to in the entitling, *Scorched by Fire, Drowned by Water, No Heaven on a Cracked Earth: 'A Look' at Deepa Mehta's Women*, four of them, *Earth, Fire, Water* and *Heaven on Earth* directly and Bollywood /Hollywood indirectly, though I would say this is the film that defines the artist in more ways than one – her cause, her commitment, her location, her forbears to whom she, at times tongue in cheek, pays obeisance, but definitely sings them too in her song. This being for the one, it also talks about her identity, her sense of nations, if you could use such a term to refer to both home and host lands, as well as the worlds which the self has interlocked with and which she has sought to present in her narratives, i.e., the stories she has chosen to tell. These stories she tells are all, of course, counterpointed by the other of the self, the larger world of others. If one were to extend the metaphor, Bollywood/ Hollywood would refer to the condition of hybridity in the colonized that had moved from mimesis to the enabling point of the Empire Writing Back and Beyond<sup>3</sup>, as witnessed in the repossession and re-historicization of several canonical works, by the so many writers and film makers, and this film maker is no exception. In this film particularly we have Shakespeare and Pablo Neruda representing the past and the contemporaneous art/aesthetics, the Modern Colonial Mansion becoming the postmodern postcolonial Om House, Hamlet's Ghost of past arriving in present company of Kimberly and the new Cinderella, Pretty Woman Vivian Ward of Hollywood, becoming Sue Sunita of Bollywood, though here Cinderella is sanitized of the cinders of darkness, sanctified and made an unsullied escort, as opposed to the original Pretty Woman who was a sex worker. This is so as to not offend the sensibilities of a sanctimonious diasporic male's penchant for purity in the woman he is courting, which alone will enable him to legitimize and bind the relationship in that all important religiously sanctioned ceremony of matrimony. Having said this, this film is a fun film and one of the best, and that element in film making should not be missed.

Now to the second part of the entitling, which though self-explanatory, needs one aspect highlighted and that is the need to remember, that the 'look' belongs to a woman director and it is her vision. When you pair the 'look' with Deepa Mehta, the homeland in her stories is inclusive of undivided India and this with reference to her *Earth and Water*, specifically. This, of course, has far reaching implications in the context of her host land Canada, too, as the Komagata Maru<sup>4</sup> incident is anterior to the declaration of India's independence, and the holocaust of partition.

<sup>3</sup> For complete details, refer to any postcolonial reader or for a concise gist of colonial exaction, rule and postcolonial perspectives, refer, Ashcroft, Bill; Griffiths, Gareth and Tiffin, Helen (eds.). 1995. *The post-colonial studies reader*. London and New York: Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> The SS Komagata Maru was a chartered ship featured in a dramatic challenge to Canada's former practice of excluding immigrants from India. This challenge took place in the spring and summer of 1914, on the eve of the First World War. It proved to be a bitter and tragic

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### 3. *The Schema*

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This paper began with an introduction to the film maker and her works which was followed by an attempt at the explication of the entitling and then this schema. These constitute sections 1, 2 and 3. Additionally there shall be five more sections. The fourth shall introduce the storylines, in the conventional dramatic mode of plot and character along with 'inter and intra-personal' interactions/ tensions with their so many 'inter-textual' inferences second order ideologies tease out. An attempt is also made to point out the particular cinematic techniques that have been used and this has been featured as an interlude under subdivision 4.1, which talks about Earth-1947. This too is just a focus on 5 minutes of film time. It is obvious that the same can prove useful in the interpretation of other films. Each of the five films is here introduced in a nutshell, to make it more meaningful to the audience unfamiliar with the work. The narration of the story line is however consistent with the focus of the paper i.e., Deepa Mehta's women. Having said this, there is enough empirical evidence to conclusively state her depiction is factual, not overtly erroneous and is the felt opinion of others too as regards the historical injustices the bodies of these women testify to as bearing witnesses<sup>5</sup>. The Fifth section is an attempt that tries to decode the symbols which are key-words and Key concepts actually in a manner of speaking and this is followed by the Sixth section where they are made available in three tables. The Seventh attempts an interpretation of the work based on the earlier parts and its inferences and this leads to the Eighth section which is an open-ended conclusion that addresses the limitations of this study too.

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### 4. *Narration, Cinematic: of Word, of Image*

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#### 4.1. *Earth 1947: Nation Cartographed on the body of a Woman*

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This is the story of a nation (undivided colonial India) that is cartographed on the body of a woman (Shanta). So, actually, there are two stories: one of a nation and one of a woman. The woman is also nation as the nation is feminine (Bharat Mata). The nation gets sliced into two (India and Pakistan) thanks to a hastily drawn colonial

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experience for the passengers, first in an unsuccessful and eventually physical confrontation with officials, police and the military at the port of Vancouver, and then in a deadly encounter with police and troops near Kolkata on the passengers' return to India. Retrieved from <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/komagata-maru>. Accessed in March 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Term borrowed from Afro-American studies. For more details, see Gates, Henry Louis Jr. (ed.). 1991. *Bearing Witness: Selections from African-American Autobiography in the Twentieth Century*, New York: Pantheon Books.

line (Radcliffe<sup>6</sup>) that splits a nation into two at the stroke of the midnight hour on the night of the 14<sup>th</sup> of August 1947.

The dawn of “a new tryst with destiny”<sup>7</sup> on the 15<sup>th</sup> is red in colour, a red rose (Nehru’s freedom at midnight speech), reddened by blood, shed at night. The red rose is also a symbol of Love, of Shakespeare and Romeo and Juliet, and Robert Burns’s idea of “O my Luve is like a red, red rose” just few references singled out to highlight the colonial inheritance. It was also a symbol of love for Nehru who used to pin a fresh red rose to his coat every day in memory of his wife Kamala who had passed away. Further the many aspects of film making are all conjoined together to purport layers of meaning. One finds in the *Mise-en-scène*, colour, dialogue, montage juxtaposition and movement of the frames, and time warping with appropriate editing that cross-cuts fuses the elements/ aspects together in contrapuntal harmonies of subtleties and nuanced ironies. Here one should note the conversation between Hari and Yusuf. Their names are suggestive of the different faith they hail from and this tells a story in itself.

The woman, too, in her person is spliced into two, and is representative of both Madonna and whore or the Devi and the Devadasi and there is also the third, the Dayin<sup>8</sup>. Suddenly it is the story of two nations birthed with the backdrop of death, mayhem, arson, fire, and rape. It is a new world order “broken into fragments by narrow domestic walls, where the clear stream of reason having lost its way, has its head no more held high”<sup>9</sup>, in fact hangs slit at the throat (Hassan’s death), and where truth in a tongue is an infection (Lenny)<sup>10</sup> and so a holy man (Imam Din) swears and

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<sup>6</sup> The Radcliffe Line is named after Cyril Radcliffe, who, as the joint chairman of the two boundary commissions for the two provinces, received the responsibility to equitably divide 175,000 square miles (450,000 km) of territory with 88 million people. The Radcliffe Line was the boundary demarcated between the Indian and Pakistani portions of the Punjab Province and Bengal Presidency of British India. It was published on 17 August 1947 upon the Partition of British India. Today, its western side is part of the India–Pakistan border while its eastern side serves as the Bangladesh–India border.

<sup>7</sup> Nehru, Jawaharlal: “A Tryst with Destiny” Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s Inaugural Address. For full text, refer to [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/125396/1154\\_trystnehru.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/125396/1154_trystnehru.pdf). Accessed in March 2022.

<sup>8</sup> In conversation with Professor Nilufer Bharucha, interview yet to be published, she uses the third category of women in the Dayin, which pejoratively is tagged the transgressive woman by patriarchy. This can be extended to women not understood by heteronormativity. Devi and Devadasi are equivalents of Madonna and whore.

<sup>9</sup> Tagore, Rabindranath: aesthetic deflection, “where-the-mind-is-without-fear”. Retrieved from <https://allpoetry.com/where-the-mind-is-without-fear>. Accessed in March 2022.

<sup>10</sup> “For three days I stand in front of the bathroom mirror staring at my tongue. I hold the vile truth- infected thing between my fingers and try to wrench it out: but slippery and slick as a fish it slips from my fingers and mocks me with its sharp rapier tip darting as poisonous as a snake. I punish it with rigorous scourings from my prickling toothbrush until it is sour and bleeding. I am so conscious of its unwelcome presence (the truth she uttered) at all

lies on the holy book to save a girl from rape (Shanta, the protagonist). A Crippled child is a bearing witness. 'Crippled' is a deliberate use as euphemistic phrases would dilute the impact of reality as it is a metaphor for the nation, too. This is no world but a cracking earth! And has a montage of images in slow and lasting frames punctuated by soulful music and thus there is both visual and auditory effect. The spectral images are of the stilling memories of past holocaust arrived at through symbolic images of guns and bayonets which end in a visual line that stands for the partitioned country as well as its divided peoples, and it is then the title of the film is announced.

The story begins in a neutral Parsi Zoroastrian house that is a trope for the colonial nation, i.e., Undivided India. The household, through domestic helps and through friends and relatives, is representative of all the subjects who indwell in this colonized land. All segments of society, its different strata are represented as are all the religions (Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Parsi and Christian), including the representatives of the colonial Masters (Mr. and Mrs. Rogers).

A plate is broken by Lenny the crippled child, a symbol of the nation to be and a map which she was colouring bears witness to the impending fragmentation of the nation.

Interlude: Sequence i takes approximately 5 minutes of film time and this is inclusive of the entitling. Begins with darkness and then there is a barrage of collages as well as the cutting of the rose and Lenny's breaking of the plate. They foreground what is contained in the darkness, that brief moment in History with ramifications, undertones and also the word of caution for posterity. It is natural then that the blackness that begins the flashback testifies to a landscape from memory that had a large number of events, spread over expansive time. The moment also is a chronotope,<sup>11</sup> intimating past, present and future, i.e., the lull before the

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times that it swells uncomfortably in my mouth and gags and chokes me... I throw up constantly." (Sidhwa, Bapsi. 1988. *Ice-Candy-Man*, London: Penguin:184).

<sup>11</sup> See Bakhtin, M.M. 1984. *The Dialogical Principle*, Tzvetan Todorov (Tr.), Manchester University Press, Manchester, for the explication of this term. For a deflection in the context of postcolonial strategies, refer to Edward Said who explicitly shifts his critique from a concern with the historical logic of colonialism to its geographical logic, effects a movement from *chronos* to *topos*, producing as it were, through his arguments a 'chronotope' which is roughly equivalent to, is in fact the coeval of, Benjamin's 'monad'. The objective correlative which aptly symbolises the chronotope is a critical entity that Said prises out of Gramsci's essay, 'Some Aspects of the Southern Question' (a study of how Italian nationalism systematically underdeveloped the South of Italy and derived its discursive power from such a process, that was political, economic and cultural). Said takes up Gramsci's argument that the Italian south testified against itself - so evident in the philosopher Benedetto Croce's alignment with cosmopolitan European 'high' culture and the disparagement of local life - and notes that such testimony which "supported and occluded the north-south discrepancy for so long in Italian history" was interrupted only when a fissure opened up within the cultural structures to put forth a new class of 'organic' intellectuals. These intellectuals served to delineate the inscription of power within culture

storm, the actual storm and the calm after it. The point is History has already written the story and narration inclusive of personal biographies is carving out a piece from the debris.

Sequence i begins around 1.40 minutes after the initial exposition of the entitling with the prologue, and the entire film is rolled reverse in flashback, a re-memory narrative, the author locking horns with the 'trauma' that has political double-speak suffering feigned amnesia and the tribe that suffered lost in 'tongues' aphasic. The beginning prior to sequence 'i' ruptures the landscape of memory, and the film maker relives her moments of despair. The title shots that start with the parched earth, an earth, so evocative of the great Bimal Roy and his greater classic *Do Bigha Zameen* imagistically, the fractures and cracks, and the bizarre black shadow lines made manifest as a collage, alongside the parched earth intimate violence and mayhem graphically. This runs up to 1.40 seconds on the silver screen and is the exposition, whence fissures and border line of partitions, the trauma creators are introduced. The initial action then begins with a map which is being coloured, its edges will be burnt as in Borges's map<sup>12</sup> soon, and the protagonist Lenny breaks a plate, with the question can one break a country? Past Present and future ably constellate in the eternal instant of a moment of the plate breaking, cracking the silence of also the viewer if s/he was either feigning amnesia or suffering an aphasic self, cathartic and cleansing definitely for the latter. Sudden and abrupt but effective, the story of partition is unravelled through the words of Shanta, to the glib, feigned look of disbelief all around. I would like to break the sequence with the rose, especially as the response Hari, later Himmat Ali, gets, is good foregrounding. The colour codes are already arrived at and they are the symbolic amber and green and of course the red of rose, red blood, a soon to be bloodied rose of love. The other characters of the story are introduced around 2.40 and the sequence ends with the rose being cut to be put in a flower vase. The film has recorded 5 minutes on the clock.

Actually, this first scene including the initial montage before the entitling more or less completes the story in a nutshell and the rest of the film is just the detailing. Other than the predominant color codes of the film in addition do get introduced the so many tropes that tell the story of partition. The last scene, of course, is so reminiscent of De Sica's *A'la, La Ciociara*,<sup>13</sup> where even Madonna cannot prevent a rape during war – an example of cinematic intertextuality.

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and also represented, in their work, the possibilities of cultural re-inscription. Refer to Rajeswaran, Sridhar. 2015. "India and Europe in the past and the present: Images and representations, *Synergy*, Vol. 11, No. 1/2015: 7-40.

<sup>12</sup> Reference to the map in Jorge Luis Borges, "Of Exactitude in Science", *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley. [https://posthegemony.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/borges\\_collected-fictions.pdf](https://posthegemony.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/borges_collected-fictions.pdf). Accessed in March 2022. Also refer to Baudrillard, Jean. 1984. "The Precession of Simulacra", in Willis, Brian (ed.). 1984. *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art.

<sup>13</sup> Alberto Moravia's *Two Women*, Director Vittorio De Sica. Retrieved from <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0054749/> Accessed in March 2022.

Friends turn foes, and the reasons for the same is also embedded in embittered love, a classic inter-religious, Hindu Muslim love story, where the slighted lover Dil Navaz, initiates the rape of his beloved Shanta and the killing of his former friend, her lover Hassan. These men represent of course unified India and partitioned India in the context of the slain and the living dead. There is carnage everywhere and all this is in the presence of a child who sees the horror! The horror! of it all in the Wasteland that was soon to be<sup>14</sup>. The point is, both Shanta and Lenny are symbols of the nation, one before partition and the other, its aftermath. If Lenny is the child in history and the nation in the future, the doll that is torn to shreds is the art representation, so very similar to the architectonics of W.B. Yeats in the context of Ireland<sup>15</sup>.

One more aspect of film making that needs stressing at this juncture are the songs of Runa Laila and the sheer beauty of poetry of Iqbal that world Sidhwa's work and which are aptly captured in the cinematic work true to that original sensitivity and sensibility.

One more point is in order here. There is a slight difference in the way both Bapsi Sidhwa and Deepa Mehta needed to be located. Sidhwa is a Bearing Witness herself and so it is actual memory, a Real Landscape of Memory, which she, as writer, re-possesses and writes in words that freeze, where each word is worth a thousand images. With Mehta, it is history, narrated history, Re-told Memory and Post Memory<sup>16</sup>. So, it is re-envisioned, re-imaged 'Landscape of Memory'<sup>17</sup>, narrated in frames that 'still' through Paintings with light where each picture in it is worth a thousand words.

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#### *4.2 Water: the tragedy of being a widow/ child widow in God's own country*

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Water is the story of Kalyani and Chuyia along with the other widows most of them brought in as child widows to indwell in a place called the ashram. The women in

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<sup>14</sup> Aesthetic deflections Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Eliot's *The Wasteland*. In this context, it directly links the terrain to Europe after the genocide of holocaust.

<sup>15</sup> Refer to Rajeswaran, Sridhar. 2009. *The English Cup, Irish Coffee and Black Sugar- Postcolonial perspectives on the poetry of William Butler Yeats*, Delhi: National Publishers: 38-39 and 150.

<sup>16</sup> Marianne Hirsch's "Postmemory" describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before - to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively so as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" Source: "An interview with Marianne Hirsch". Retrieved from <https://cup.columbia.edu/author-interviews/hirsch-generation-postmemory>. Accessed in March 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Schama, Simon. 1996. *Landscape and Memory*, New York: Vintage.

the ashram are the living dead, marked and ill-treated by the society. The person who is the matron of the ashram, a victim herself, due to the paucity of funds, and having to live on the largesse of a malevolent patriarchy, is depicted as a person who has no scruples and pleases her patrons with a supply of widows for their carnal purposes. The beautiful Kalyani is one such victim, but unfortunately and, contrary to her status, succumbs to a ray of hope due to the overwhelming endearment, an incurable love showered on her by a Gandhian student, Narayan, and she accedes to his request, to go away with him and informs Manorama, the one who runs the ashram. Manorama locks Kalyani in a room and cuts her hair, mutilates it, to prevent her running away as she is the ashram's source of income. Hair will grow, but the moment of release for her may not occur if that moment is missed. Hair, of course is a ubiquitous symbol of sexuality which has its own undertones as inspiring and signifying lust<sup>18</sup> objectionable in a widow, already corporeally dead as regards bodily wants and needs, but even such defacing does not deter the mutual love and sensitive affection between Narayan and Kalyani.

Manorama is only frightened of Shakuntala, a good soul – the use of the word here is consistent with the need not to privilege the body which is taboo – the one who actually manages the ashram and it is easily deducible that she, too, was exploited when young. There is a scriptures scholar, Sadananda, well versed with Manusmriti and the laws of the land, and this scholar actually is the only source of solace for Shakuntala.

This role is played by Kulbhushan Karbanda who features prominently in *Earth, Fire, Water*, as well as *Bollywood/ Hollywood* and artistically it is a master piece in casting and characterization, as he serves an important purpose as a counterpoint maybe to the Gandhian idea of truth and God and further serves as the string through which all four films and by extension the fifth film *Heaven on Earth* are beaded together.

Meanwhile, the nefarious pandering to male lust is handled through Gulabi, who belongs to the third sex, and Chuyia is carted off to quench the lust of pedophile Seth Dwarakanath who has frequently raped and abused Kalyani, too. Gulabi, too, is a victim, as in many instances, persons like Gulabi were made to protect kings' harems, zenana/ jenanas and places where women indwelled. To return to Seth Dwarakanath, he spouts karma and moksha and says this act of his is actually noble work as it liberates the fallen, fallen as in widows, and this instruction to him is from the scriptures.

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<sup>18</sup> Though hair as sexuality in women has been present throughout history, beginning with the myth of medusa, hair in the context of the Punjabi, Sikh male has a significance too. In Sikhism, the Five Ks are five items that Guru Gobind Singh Ji, in 1699, commanded Khalsa Sikhs to wear at all times. They are, kesh, unshorn hair and beard, kangha, a comb for the kesh, usually wooden, kara a bracelet, usually made of iron or steel, kachera, a white undergarment, and kirpan, a small curved sword of any size, shape or metal.



The cruel twist in the story is Seth Dwarakanath is Narayan's father and when Kalyani decides to meet Narayan and leaves the ashram, knowing that there is no return to the place, she finds out the relationship of father and son and drowns herself.

Narayan who is crest fallen is approached by Shakuntala to save the young Chuyia, raped by Seth Dwarakanath, ferried by Gulabi on the instruction of Manorama for say the tainted new 30 pieces of silver. The train carrying Gandhi which had arrived, while leaving takes Chuyia, too, as Shakuntala manages to hand over the raped child widow to Narayan. One must recall that a train arrives with mutilated bodies in *Earth 1947* and here it serves to ferry across land the wounded child who is the other of the crippled Lenny from that film and one should also remember that there is no child in *Fire* for Radha. There is another child though in *Earth 1947*, the other of Lenny from a poor Hindu family who is married off to an old dwarf – all three children symbolic of the nation of the future. Boats, trains and planes of course are all tropes of also travel and of absolute significance in diasporic studies. On the larger scale the train also refers to holocaust victims and the original use of the word diaspora in the Jewish context. Gandhi had arrived to talk about truth as God and it is something that has been violated.

This is a loaded scene and has ramifications in the context of Gandhian principles. The point is there is ambivalence shrouding the idea of truth as god which is a signature tune in four of the five films to say the least but it may be useful to look at it in a positive note stating how the tenets of the "half naked fakir"<sup>19</sup> were not followed as opposed to making the film maker's voice as one which questions the validity of the Gandhian idea of truth.

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#### *4.3 Fire: heteronormative fear of women's agency and autonomy*

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The opening scene of *Fire* needs to be noted and read along with the opening shots of *Earth 1947* that draws a definite line, to indicate partition, as well as there is a montage of images that depict impending violence and mayhem. It needs to be equally read in the backdrop of the opening scene of *Water* for its colour code and other symbols. *Fire* begins in a mustard field (and mustard fields intimate the Punjab, too, another link to the partition line), where her mother tells Radha about a person who wants to see the ocean. Of course, the intimations of travel which is inclusive

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<sup>19</sup> Churchill said: "It is [...] alarming and also nauseating to see Mr. Gandhi, a seditious middle temple lawyer, now posing as a fakir of a type well known in the East, striding half-naked up the steps of the Vice-regal palace, while he is still organizing and conducting a defiant campaign of civil disobedience, to parley on equal terms with the representative of the King-Emperor." R. R. James (ed.). 1974. *Winston S. Churchill: His complete speeches, 1897-1963*, vol. 5, New York: Chelsea House: p. 4985. Retrieved from <https://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/half-naked-fakir.html>. Accessed in March 2022.

of a travel from the present to the future as also leaving the past behind is informed in this foregrounding.

Radha is married to Ashok and Sita is married to Jatin, both brothers. Jatin was in a physical relationship with his Chinese girlfriend Julie and this continues even after his marriage to Sita. This introduces the border with China and is also a reference to the now forgotten Chinese migrant emigration to India from 1770's for different reasons beginning with the British rule that needed them as dock labour to begin with.

Ashok for his part, following his Guru's /Swamiji's instruction that sex is only for procreation and his wife being infertile, practices celibacy. But his need for the touch of sensuality makes him paw her and then stop and he does not care much for the negative impact it has on his wife, and of course it leaves her disenchanted with the physical aspect of his touch. She is tormented by her guilt of being infertile as well as frustrated by Ashok's aborted physical advances.

The brothers run a video shop (erotic videos specifically and Jatin manages this shop) as well as a food stall and the paltry income, too, goes to the upkeep of Swamiji's hydrocele and this is tongue in cheek!

There are two other characters in the household, Biji an invalid who needs constant care, and Mundu, a frustrated and repressed servant of a long time who secretly fantasizes about Radha and self-titillates himself in the presence of Biji when the serial Ramayana is happening on the Doordarshan Channel. The Ramayana has Sita in it and he keeps fantasizing about Radha, thus to him she becomes the real-life affiliate of the deemed goddess.

Radha and Sita fall in love and this physical proximity is noticed by Biji who rings a bell (literally) and Mundu who ultimately, when caught in the act of titillating himself in front of Biji by Radha, tells on her relationship with Sita. The servant is forgiven and Radha burns and a spurned Ashok her husband does nothing to save her - this is the Agni Pariksha (When Rama doubts Sita's chastity, she undergoes a trial by fire Agni Pariksha - agni is sacred fire and pariksha is test. In the original epic, Sita enters a burning pyre, she comes out unscathed with the fire-god Agni not harming her and this is proof of her purity) and the connotations of Sita of the epic is brought into play, though the fate that befalls the real life affiliate Radha is contrary to that of what happened to the epical Sita. It is assumed that Radha gets her ocean journey as she goes to meet Sita who is waiting for her in the temple.

This movie, like *Water*, which was not given permission to be shot at the location on the banks of the river Ganga, suffered a lot of protests for obvious reasons of lesbian relationships, which feminists, too, have gone hammer and tongs against the film maker for its depiction, but there is also deep underlying disgruntled resistance to

the very narrative content depiction similar to the resistance to *Water* from certain quarters of consequence.

One thing worthy of never forgetting is Agni is sacred fire that permeates and sustains the cosmic structure and has a lot of significance for followers of Hindu faith.

ॐ अग्निमीले पुरोहितं यज्ञस्य देवमृत्विजम्।

होतारं रत्नधातमम्। ॥१॥

**“Om ‘Agni’meele purohitam. Yagyasya devamritwijam.  
Hotaram ratnadhaatmam.”**

It is the very first *sūkta* (संस्कृत hymn) in the *rc sruti* the (ऋग्वेद *rgveda* Rig Veda). The import of the hymn is that, of the five ‘tattvas’ (तत्त्व) of creation - ‘Agni’ अग्नि, Water आपः, Air वायु Air, Earth पृथ्वी and Aakash आकाश. This perhaps could also be responsible for the ire and rancor, which was further aggrandized by the concept of agni pariksha as regards Sita of Ramayana undergoing it.

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#### *4.4 Heaven on Earth, where there is no place for a wife and daughter in law*

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A vivacious, exuberant young bride, Chand gets married into a traditional conservative, in fact a horrible family living in a ghetto and reeling from financial strain, in the host land of Canada, ironically called the Heaven on Earth, only to suffer many a travesty, and is victimized and violence plotted and pieced on her body. The Heaven on Earth reference is to the Punjabi Indian diaspora’s fascination with Canada and their obsession to migrate there. This goes back to colonial India and unfortunately lives on even in independent India where the Punjab itself thanks to the Green Revolution of the 1960s, is now a relatively prosperous space and can in itself be called heaven on earth.

Chand meets her husband Rocky for the first time on arrival at Pearson Airport, Canada. A point is in order, the diasporic trope here for travel is the plane as it is in *Bollywood/ Hollywood*. Chand (a neutral name tag standing for the moon, mildness, temperate sensitivity and above all beauty) is hopeful, despite the status accorded to her which was nothing akin to her expectations. Her marked face makes her friend Rosa, a Jamaican from her work place (another space introduced), give her a root which results in a spectral double for her husband and she continues living until the reality of her fantastic (Surreal) life discloses itself and she decides to return to India, move away from her husband and her new family of useless tormentors, infected with stereotypes of a Maji, Pappaji, et al.

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#### 4.4 Bollywood Hollywood: Reel life and Real life

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There is a mansion called Om House inhabited by the protagonist, a rich computer geek, Rahul Seth, who lives with his mother (mummyji), Grandmother (Grandmaji), Sister (Twinky) and younger brother (Go/Govind). They also have a Housekeeper/cook (Lucy) and a Chauffeur who also dances as a drag queen (Rocky/Rukini). The mother is melodramatic, the brother, who is in school, has a crush on a girl, but there is also a boy villain who is a bully who douses his hopes. Lucy is in love with Rocky and entices him with songs from Raj Kapoor's *Awara* without knowing it is not a love song.

Rahul is in love with Kimberly, a pop-star, actually his fiancé, but she dies in a freak levitation accident, a pot shot at Yogi charlatans and so does a Devadas and life suddenly turns 'sooni' (hopeless) which is the background song. The mother wants him to marry a proper Indian girl, which he refuses initially, but, as his sister Twinky is pregnant with her boyfriend Bobby's child, he accedes to the parading of Indian girls and this is reminiscent of an Indian groom's girl seeing, but with a twist, as here he gets to be made fun of by some of the self-affrighting, self-delighting autonomy celebrating women. He has to either face them, which he is not able to bring himself to do or be with the disappointing overtly pretentious conventional stereotypes paraded, who hold no charm for him. He also succumbs to a kind of emotional blackmail where mummy ji emphatically makes him recollect his promise to his dying father daddy Ji on his death bed, when he was 10 years old, that he would marry an Indian girl only and would always take care of his family.

He meets a Pablo Neruda love sonnet (sonnet xii Cien Sonetos de Amor) aficionado in a bar and, assuming she is Spanish, wants her to play the role of his beloved. Her name is Sue and she is an escort. Here is where the story of *Pretty Woman* comes in, but Sue is only an escort and not a prostitute, of course a relief to the Indian Psyche, a point already highlighted. Sue turns out to be Sunita Singh who is quite comfortable with Rahul's people, in fact becomes the younger brother's 'Go' Govind's crush, pleases mummy ji and grandma ji and slowly, even as she becomes the dear one of the family, Rahul, too, looks at her differently. She excels in 'sing song' and all festivities especially when the celebrity actor Akshay Khanna comes in and does a Bollywood number and that is the event that discloses her lineage to Rahul. All is hunky dory but the celluloid world breaks when during the bachelor's party of Bobby, the sister's groom, a drunk refused sexual favours by Sue, maligns her and calls her a street walker who had slept with him before. The traditional patriarchal heart of Rahul breaks because she lied to him and Sue is no more his beloved, but a girl who was not inviolate and also a liar.

Sue's father, a typical Bollywood fan living reel life in real life, sets up a suitor for Sue Singh, his daughter, and he is Killer Khalsa a WWF wrestler, huge and who wears size 21 or something shoes and he promises Sue's father a BMW dealership

which soothes the mechanic (a diasporic stereotype) in him. Sue calls her suitor a dinosaur brain. Sue's mother is the ideal woman, caught between a Batinda 'gilli danda' sportsman and a well-read sensitive and sensuous daughter who enters her house through windows and who is quite able in her own right of asserting herself with her patriarchal filmy father. Rocky/ Rukini and Sue have a secret pact and Rocky the negotiator and initiator of the contract of her playing the role, plays cupid now. He prods, and says, "Sue maam is special". This is followed by the Shakespeare spouting (colonial influence) Grandma ji who puts sense into Rahul's head and Sue's Cinderella dreams are fructified.

Finally, so like in *Pretty Woman*, the knight arrives to claim his lady, and Romeo and Juliet are united and is roses all around – the rose of love that symbol returns this time in a positive vein. The picturisation is quite pleasant to the heart. Sonnet xii Cien Sonetos de Amor is recited now by Rahul. The balcony scene is orchestrated by both the Singhs – father and mother – and Sue, privy to the love Rahul vehemently proclaims, moves away, leaving him outside, but then she is the Chauffeur of the car now and poor Rocky is left behind to thumb a lift and Rahul is elated that he has found his Sue, to chauffeur him through life.

They are blessed by the pleasant ghosts of Kimberly and Dadaji from the heavens above.

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### ***5. Decoding the symbols***

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Tracing the progress of the film-maker's path, it is seen that Mehta essays two different strains, the one that seeks to root her film in those mysteries of the heart and in attempting this, seeks out her muse, object of love and desire and recalls her through a series of iconic feminine images. The term "iconic feminine images" is arrived at through the very names that are all part of India's religious iconography and by extension Cultural India, as are their masculine counters, the names of the film maker's male protagonists. These iconic feminine images as symbols also represent the world of nation and history.

The iconic feminine is at once a reverential object, but the film-maker showcases that in practice it is not. The images are composite and basically contain their selves, the other of their selves, their others, their foils, their doubles and their counters, including spectral doubles. All her protagonists feed into each other, either as images of what she should be as regards the ideal status accorded to her or as what she is not thanks to patriarchal practices of oppression and exploitation. These iconic images also suffer the travesties of the politics of imperialist ideologies, suffer due to the concomitant strategies of resistance and, as well, suffer due to the emergence of policies of modern nation states.

The second complex of images, which register the progress of the nation in the filmmaker's consciousness, comprises historical spaces, figures, events, structures that underpin the political/ social/economic identity of the nation and its peoples. To this group belong people like Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah and structures like the Taj Mahal the Great Colonial mansions, Ashrams and ghettos, parks and dhabas (roadside food stalls), statues, prisons, temples and the like, in short, it is that which constitutes private and public spaces of the nation and nation state as well as the heterotopias<sup>20</sup>. Being an artist with an art that bears witness and monitors history, there are art objects which are concrete and material others of abstract/ spiritual ideas. Love lie and truth, if abstract in their non-material sense, have equivalents in the texts of Shakespeare, Neruda, the Ramayana and the scriptures which are cited here as examples.

There are entire arrays of objects and equipment which have a symbolic value adduced to them and these are scattered throughout her films. Black umbrella, red rose, maps, colour pencils, plates that break, kites that are cut, doll that is disfigured, sweets, flowers, an entire array of objects that resonate with a purpose. The word "resonate" here is used as a loaded term. "By "resonance" I mean the power of the object displayed to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which – as metaphor or, more simply, as metonymy – it may be taken by a viewer to stand."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> This knowledge is from Michel Foucault where heterotopias are places and spaces that function in non-hegemonic conditions and this includes physical and mental and, by extension, spiritual and soulful spaces of otherness or nonmaterial spaces of otherness, too. In general, a heterotopia is a physical representation or approximation of a utopia, or a parallel space that contains undesirable bodies to make a real utopian space possible. Foucault articulates several possible types of heterotopia or spaces that exhibit dual meanings: such as, a 'crisis heterotopia' (boarding school or a motel room), heterotopias of deviation'(hospitals, asylums, prisons, rest homes, cemetery), 'heterotopias of time'{museums from which you get resonance and wonder ( this interjection mine)} 'heterotopias of ritual or purification' (sauna or a hammin), heterotopia of illusion (created a real space, a space that is other. Refer to Michel Foucault, Michel. 1967. *Des espaces autres*, translated from the French by Jay Miskowiec, *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*, Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité, October,1984; Retrieved from <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>. Accessed in March 2022. David Harvey could also prove more useful in this context as he interlocks with such ideas. Harvey, David. 1987. *The Condition of PostModernity*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell. One should also refer to Dews, Peter. 1987. *Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory*, London. New York: Verso.

<sup>21</sup> Greenblatt Stephen. 1990. "Resonance and Wonder", *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, American Academy of Arts & Sciences, Stable, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Jan.,1990): 11-34, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3824277>. Accessed in March 2022.

Love, Lie and a kind of woman hating, in spite of Gandhi, his principles and his ideological stand seem to be the string that binds strains and streams together, for after all, whatever be the source of gendering, Gandhi was one person who stood against all such practices and the saddest part is the prevalence of those despite himself, then and in the India after him.

A point is in order here, how does one repossess spaces lost as an artist narrating it? The following section could work perhaps in understanding the process of re-possession of that which is lost. The purpose lies in the reclaiming of public and private spaces for a redefinition of nation spaces and that is translatable into a problem of negotiation and inter-action: Between an emergent ('private') moment and a dominant ('public') one; Between a cultural national moment - homologous to the 'private' and a modern national one – the moment of the 'public'. The point is the emergent as well as the cultural-national gets inscribed into/onto sexual and social relationships while the dominant and the modern-national are crystallised into political and economic institutions.<sup>22</sup>

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**6. *Breaking the symbols into tables (not comprehensive, but a pointer only)***

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**Table A**

SYMBOLS (HETEROTOPIAS CONTAINED IN SPACES AND ARE NOT SINGLED OUT)				
MOVIE	LOCATION	PRIVATE SPACE	PUBLIC SPACE	NATIONAL SPACE
<b>EARTH 1947</b>	COLONIAL/ INDEPENDENT INDIA	COLONIAL HOUSE/ GHETTO	PARK DHABA	PARTITIONED INDIA
<b>WATER</b>	PRE/COLONIAL INDIA	ASHRAM/ SETH HOUSE	GANGA/ TEMPLE	RELIGIOUS INDIA
<b>FIRE</b>	POSTCOLONIAL INDIA	GHETTO/SWEET SHOP	SWEET SHOP/VIDEO SHOP	HYBRID INDIA (ANGLO INDIAN)
<b>BOLLYWOOD HOLLYWOOD</b>	POSTCOLONIAL POSTMODERN DIASPORIC AND TRANSNATIONAL	OM HOUSE/ GHETTO/ NEST	SCHOOL/ RESTAURANT/ GAY BAR	DIASPORIC AND TRANSNATIONAL CANADA FOREST/ WOODS NESTS /OM HOUSE

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<sup>22</sup> Rajeswaran, Sridhar. 2003. "Historicising Critical Forays: Twentieth Century isms and Theories", in Srinivasan, C.N. (Ed.) *Old Borders, Fresh Crossings Thinking-Rethinking ELT in Arabia Felix*, Yemen Hodeidah University: 65-94.

SYMBOLS (HETEROTOPIAS CONTAINED IN SPACES AND ARE NOT SINGLED OUT)				
MOVIE	LOCATION	PRIVATE SPACE	PUBLIC SPACE	NATIONAL SPACE
HEAVEN ON EARTH	POSTCOLONIAL DIASPORA	GHETTO	WORK SPACE	DIASPORIC CANADA

**Table B:**

SYMBOLS				
MOVIE	ICONIC FEMININE	CHILD	PATRIARCHAL MASCULINE	THIRD SEX
EARTH 1947	SHANTA BUNTY	LENNY PAPOO	DILNAVAZ HASSAN HARIYA / HIMMAT ALI BUTCHER + SINGHIMAM DIN RUSTOM + ROGERS	
WATER	KALYANI + SHAKUNTALA KUNTI + SNEHALATA +MANORAMA MOTHER OF CHUYIA AND BHAGVATI	CHUYIA	NARAYAN SETH DWARAKANATH	GULABI
FIRE	RADHA + SITA BIJI, JULIE	YOUNG RADHA	ASHOK, SWAAMIJI JATIN	
BOLLYWOOD HOLLYWOOD	SUE/ SUNITA DEAD GIRLFRIEND GRANDMOTHER OTHER SUITORS MUMMIJI/TWINKY MRS SINGH/LUCY	GO GOVID GO'S FRIEND	RAHUL SINGH KILLER KHALSA DEAD FATHER	ROCKY/RUKINI (HOMOPHONE OF RUKMINI)
HEAVEN ON EARTH	CHAND +ROSE MAJI		ROCKY PAPAJI BALDEV	



Table C:

SYMBOLS				
MOVIE	COLOUR	NATION	LOVE/ ART	STRAINS/STREAMS
<b>EARTH 1947</b>	ORANGE GREEN	GANDHI JINNAH NEHRU QUEEN VICTORIA HINDU/ SIKH MUSLIM/ CHRISTIAN/ ZOROASTRIAN	KITE PARROT ROSE PHILOMEL PEACOCK MAPS (NATION) DOLL, KITE CUT THREAD ROSE (NEHRU/ ROMEO AND JULIET) TRAIN	TRUTH AND GANDHI NATION STATE POLITICS VOICELESS TRUTH LIES WITH VOICES COLONIAL EXACTION AND RULE
<b>WATER</b>	WHITE AND BLUE	GANDHI KRISHNA SHAKESPEARE	SCRIPTURES CAGED PARROT UMBRELLA SWEETS TRAIN	TRUTH AND GANDHI NATION VOICELESS TRUTH LIES WITH VOICES COLONIAL EXACTION AND RULE
<b>FIRE</b>	ORANGE AND DARK TONES	TAJ MAHAL GANDHI AND RAM	HYDROCEL RAMAYANA EROTIC VIDEOS SWEETS TRAIN	TRUTH GANDHI AND RAM AND CHINA! AND VOICELESS TRUTH LIES WITH VOICES POST COLONIAL EXACTION AND RULE
<b>BOLLYWOOD /HOLLYWOOD</b>	EASTMAN COLOUR VIBRANT	GANDHI SHAKESPEARE KRISHNA RAM	PABLO NERUDA URMILA MATONDKAR HAMLET(GHOST) YOGA LEVITATION AEROPLANE	TRUTH GANDHI AND VOICELESS TRUTH LIES WITH VOICES POST COLONIAL POST MODERN, RICH GREAT HOUSE GHETTO
<b>HEAVEN ON EARTH</b>	EASTMAN COLOUR DARK	GANDHI SPECTRAL DOUBLE	ROOT AEROPLANE	TRUTH GANDHI AND VOICELESS TRUTH. LIES WITH VOICES, POSTCOLONIAL DIASPORIC GHETTOS

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### *7. The web: tales of lies and silencing of truth*

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In the three films located in the Indian space too many silences punctuate Mehta's cinematic discourse. Needless to reiterate that her thematic concerns, the world of symbols she delves into, the icons she uses to make arrive her work, the terrain and location that juts them, are all whorled into each other with a lot 'unsaid' behind

what presences itself as a 'said', making it hard to glimpse, let alone disinter the complexity at its multivalent core.

*Earth 1947* is central to Deepa Mehta's work and it is on earth that her protagonists' love driven voiceless truth get scorched by fire, doused by petrol, and consumed by a cracking Earth. There is also the tangential reference to the birth and 'release' of Sita, born of earth and to earth returned, consumed by a cracking earth (original entitling of earth 1947), the reference here is to the story of Sita as told in the *Ramayana*. The Earth parts, to take Sita back in her womb and thus Mehta's Shanta of *Earth 1947* refers to the cycle of birth and death and by extension, as she is also the nation, to the old and new worlds, before and after partition.

Shanta, Deepa Mehta's protagonist in *Earth 1947*, contrary to what her name and she as a character stand for, that is as a 'peace that surpasseth understanding', is actually a subject and an object of violence which is cartographed on her body and, by extension, the violence the land suffers, by virtue of the nation being feminine.

This indicts the peoples of the Earth in actuality. Peace is the need for Prithvi (Earth), and it gets violated by a truth infected tongue in the instance of Lenny, and lacks agency in Imam Din, precisely because he is a pious and decent male. Hence by deflection Shanta and Sita are both of the Earth and the Earth per se, with "sufferance being the badge of their (our) tribe"<sup>23</sup>, the cracked terra firma their other.

Sita is a palimpsest in *Fire* made both of Radha and Sita and, of course, this Sita stands for Ram as regards the passion she shares with Radha and the other Ram, the husband who had taken a vow of celibacy. It is complicated. If one were to look at the other denotations of Radha as regards her being a consort of Krisna, the next avatar in the Das Avatar (Ten Manifestations) of Vishnu after Ram, complications confuse and confound further and it is best left unexplored. There are too many strains and streams as regards this. However, the sources for interpretation there would be the Bhakti Movement and Vedantic thought and those are different worlds in themselves. Suffice to state at this juncture they both do suffer.

Sita arrives in her manifestation of Kalyani (name associated with the Goddess Lakshmi, Consort of Vishnu) in *Water* and as peace (Shanta) in *Earth*, as Radha, a palimpsest in *Fire* which makes us conclude that her women are all composite but the pity is that they indwell in a land that is now a place perfect for 'the burial of not the dead but the living and the living dead'. If one were to take a closer look at the other women characters of her stories, explore the verisimilitude in meanings which their names signify, they too are linked to her main protagonists. A point needs to be mentioned that one should also be aware of the dramatic and its interplay, which such lines of analysis at times negate.

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<sup>23</sup> Shakespeare, W. 1993. *The Merchant of Venice*, Act I Scene 3, line 111, as found in Shakespeare, W. Vol. 24, *The Britannica Great Books, Encyclopaedia Britannica*: 585.

In *Water* she is paired with Narayan (another name for Vishnu) suffers unrequited love, resists moral expediency though desperate, as she knows a truth that cannot be voiced. Her name means 'auspicious', an aspect of Goddess Lakshmi, but ironically Deepa Mehta's Kalyani is inauspicious, a widow condemned by societal norms and yet conveniently exploited by a sinister moral code, scriptural code sanctioned, physically, sexually. So, menacing is the apathy and poverty, in itself designed for male convenience, that there are no alternatives offered to the widows who have to stay in the ashram. This ashram in which they live, sorry exist, has nothing common to what an ashram is supposed to be or what Gandhi's understanding of the same was.

As for her *Fire*, it is that untranslatable Agni, and the sacred is rendered profane by patriarchy, in vain torching Radha for being in love and moving away from an impotent husband. There are also undertones to the husband's practice of celibacy as that was part of the practice advocated by none less than Gandhi, which makes us wonder if it is a pot shot at his ideas, too. This heinous act of burning by fire takes place with the back-drops of Ramayana and the Taj Mahal, both of which celebrate Love. Love is replaced by questionable erotic videos, and extra marital affairs in the film thanks to Ram's brother Jatin in the film. The name Jatin means 'the auspicious one', another name for the Destroyer in the Hindu trinity – Mahadev Shiva, the matted one (Jatin). All the characters in this film seem to be engaged in hiding truth and living lies in the steaming cauldron of tepid life in contrast to the tasty sweets made by Radha and Sita.

Mehta's films set outside of India are also intrinsically linked to the Indian space. To reiterate *Bollywood/ Hollywood* has 'Om' the primordial sound, (it begins the very first *sūkta* (संस्कृत hymn) in the *rc sruti* the (ऋग्वेद *rgveda* Rig Veda, already pointed out) as the name of its colonial mansion, 'the great house', a symbol of the nation-space, a trope in colonial studies, a product of colonial exaction and rule and which continues to serve as a metaphor in the postcolonial. It exists in Isabel Allende's *The House of Spirits* as Tres Marias, in Yeats's poetry as Coole, and in *Earth 1947* it is simply the house Lenny, Bunty and Shanta live in – nation-space shared by all the other characters central to her work.

The park in *Earth 1947*, for its turn as a public space, is also outstanding under the watchful eyes of the statue of Queen Victoria, the colonial quotient yet again. The Great House is of course not a house that needs to be celebrated or valorized, as almost all the great houses in recorded history stand testimony to ideological bankruptcies, as within their walls there is the resonance of pain and outside of the walls literally tears, hunger and poverty. The only thing common within the interior and exterior spaces apparently is oppression and exploitation. Tres Marias, Coole,

and the colonial house in *Earth 1947* are no exceptions to the rule.<sup>24</sup> Om house, being in a postmodern hostland, carries the tag but is not representative of the holistic nation, but only of the diasporic space. Having said this though, there is an aspect of the Parsi/Zoroastrian house in *Earth 1947*, which has been eschewed in the film but available in Sidhwa's book, i.e., the aspect of healing, the catharsis and the active participation of the Parsis in the amelioration of all suffering for women on both sides of the new border as well as rescuing Shanta from the shackles of prostitution. This is a notable omission in the film maker and has far reaching complications both for the Parsi community as well as what the house stood for.

'Om' the primordial sound, is the house in *Bollywood/Hollywood*, and is linked to Prithvi/earth as an inextricable, as an irreducible construct and hence the direct link between *Earth, 1947* that had suffered the effects of partition and the space of the diaspora in Canada.

The irony is the spaces within India proved to be almost terminal in all three instances and in dramatic terms pathetic and or tragic, as opposed to peripeteia resolving rather favourably in the stories emanating from the 'outsider' space. The reference here is to Sue who had friends in Rocky/ Rukini and the inimitable Shakespeare spouting also lie-ignoring Grandmaji, who is the other of Lenny's truth infected tongue and is in contrast to the ineffectual appreciator of truth, Bunty and the melodramatic Mummyji. The ghost of Hamlet – the father, as well as the girlfriend lost to levitation – is, of course, Shakespeare. By extension, Shakespeare is the spectral secret sharer, the hybrid strain ever present.

Chand of *Heaven on Earth* who, for support, had the tough Jamaican Rosa, gives a voice to a lie, her magic by extension a counter to patriarchal spouting of convenient philosophies, scriptures and codes, characters from Mehta's other films included.

*Heaven on Earth* and *Bollywood/Hollywood* depict the other of the Great House, the great colonial ghettos where Sue, Chand and their families live. Sue, through her Pablo Neruda sonnet, is a link to the space of Allende's Tres Marias and they are thus all linked together: the films, the symbols, all whorled into one another as causes and effects of colonialist hegemony.

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<sup>24</sup> The eighteenth-century Great house, home to the Anglo-Irish, became an important symbol of a grafted, hybrid identity that Yeats and others sought to invest Ireland with - a house that bespoke the virtues of refinement, art and gracious living, even as its inhabitants pursued a life of adventure and action. Eagleton remarks that "The house, as both artefact and agricultural headquarters, revealed an intimate relationship between spirit and body, culture and economics, and thus suggests how much culture shaped the life of the Ascendancy as a whole. The house Tres Marias also serves similar purposes in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*. Here, the Parsi House may be said to don the mantle especially since it is both the writer's and narrator's house and had after all served a 'bearing witness'. For details, refer to Eagleton, T. 1995. 'Ascendancy and Hegemony' in *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture*, London: Verso: 9.

As regards *Heaven on Earth*, the connections are quite obvious, and also refer to the racist Komagata Maru episode when the white-only policy of Canada made the abstract heaven on earth, a living hell – pun intended. In this film, though the kind of ghetto Chand was pushed into did not need the outside world, her husband and his family were qualified enough to make existence a real hell and sufficient to showcase the insidiousness, the chauvinism of patriarchy that assaults physically.

In *Heaven on Earth*, Loveleen is Chand's foil, Maji and Aman the vicious and the frustrated, Papaji is ineffectual, Baldev is the unemployed parasite and Rocky Chand's repressed apology of a husband, the male who sets new benchmarks for vicious wife beating. The third generation is constituted by Loveleen and Jabir and some strange God in Heaven made them too on Earth. The point is that there is a spectral double and some form of empowerment, but not in the conventional sense for the one and for the other it is in the Canadian space.

If Sue and Shakespeare dance on 'Ji' Strings, all three in a diaspora, in Postmodern Canada, in *Bollywood/Hollywood*, the protagonist of *Heaven on Earth* uses literally a root, a root which a dramatist unconcealed from a myth, a film maker made with a difference, a popular actor commercialized and a diasporic mendicant likewise uses as a cure for patriarchal hegemony. The reference here is to Karnad's *Nagamandala*, Nagabarana's differential perspectives, which are more rational and gender sensitive, Shah Rukh Khan's glamourisation of it in *Paheli* and Deepa Mehta using it as a cure to heal the malady of an insensitive and brutal husband, respectively. The myth occurred in *Duvidha* a Hindi feature film as early as 1973 and Karnad's *Nagamandala* appearing as it were much later in 1988, could have had an alternative inspiring text, too, as it was part of the folk tales of northern Karnataka.

Well, there is no space whatsoever for Radha and Sita or Shanta or Kalyani and the women they represent in the world of Agni, Ap (áp-), Prithvi.

Having said this, consistent with all her films set outside of the Indian space and specifically in the Canadian one, the resolutions are not terminal and there is also a third space for Rocky as Rukini the drag queen, though limited, the space is delimited by his agency, a space not available for Gulabi of *Water*. There exists also an alternative space, a nest for the male to escape and the bar where to some extent Sue can live her life as a 'pretty woman'. The workspace also seems to offer some kind of a relief space to Chand which makes us recollect the heterotopic space which Foucault talks about, though of course they are underscored by subject positions and class, caste and groups.

The point is, in the nation space of India which is imaged as a woman, Shanta, Kalyani, Sita and Radha, are all left, dead, deadened, or are part of the living dead, all despite the watchful eyes of Gandhi.

Interestingly enough, the actor Kulbushan Kharbanda, who is the adherent of Gandhi's idea of God as truth, conceals the truth as the holy man in *Water* – pun intended - to the widow Shakuntala played by Seema Biswas, suppresses truth to protect Shanta in *Earth 1947*, when he plays the role of Imam Din, and burns Sita's other Radha, in *Fire*, now his wife, when he plays the role of Ashok, Radha's husband.

Hence his playing all these roles may be read as no accident, but a conscious decision perhaps. Further, he also features in *Bollywood/Hollywood* where he does say tongue-in-cheek, idolising celluloid that the truth of the matter is, in cinema you can turn volte face - reel and real lives are here smudged within hazy boundaries. Similarly, Lisa Ray is the protagonist of *Water* and *Bollywood/Hollywood* as Kalyani and Sue Sunita respectively and Nandita Das the Shanta of *Earth 1947* and Sita of *Fire*. So is the case with the repeat of Raghubir Yadav and Ranjit Chowdhry. This repeat in the mind of the viewer provides for other associate possibilities.

Kalyani, Shanta, Radha, Sita, Sue and Chand, are all part of the nation and on their bodies is mapped the story of women and the pillaged nation. Three children in *Earth 1947*, one crippled, one married to a dwarf, one widowed and raped in *Water*, and then a sterile world in *Fire* with no children and suggestions of alternative sexuality for survival, these are loaded issues which have in their core love as ever present in a truth that is voiceless for Mehta's female protagonists. Having said this, one sees that the Canadian space spells different possibilities in *Bollywood/Hollywood* and *Heaven on Earth*.

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### ***8. Open-ended conclusion***

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When one reads cinematic narratives, one has to address the look through aspects/ elements and languages of cinema, but being a format that is word-centric, the attempt to do them has been sparse. The look at the stories should be as painted by light, unconcealed by the lens, refracted by the prism as the spectrums of colours created, inform in myriad ways through their ever-shifting kaleidoscopic patterns of different wavelengths and bandwidths. This alone shall unconceal the shades and shadows, contours and contrasts through lighting; colour, its hues and its conspicuous absence through mise-en-scène; movement and stasis through frames with incredible pace and as frozen moments with freeze frames through dynamic time warping; symbols through montages, punctuated by sound and silence of musical notes, to mention but a few. This knowledge and techniques actually belong to so many great masters and one needs to sing them, too, for without them one may never know the beauty enshrined in this genre.

We cannot talk of Montage and Juxtaposition without referring to Vertov and Kuleshov. Kuleshov's notion is that the meaning in shots comes not from the actor, but rather from the juxtaposition of his face with the other shots. He believed that

each shot in a sequence should be incomplete, and that the meaning should come from the composite of the shots, rather than from one self-contained shot. Depending on how shots are assembled the audience will attach a specific meaning or emotion to it.

The idea may be said to owe its origin to The Soviet Montage movement, in Russia in the early 1920s with Dziga Vertov's *Man with the Movie Camera*. His contemporary Sergei Eisenstein defines "montage as an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots." This brings in the idea of crosscutting, used for multiple ways of depiction. As regards movement and dynamic time warping, one needs to look at Akira Kurosawa for the former, the *Shichinin no Samurai/ Seven Samurai*, which was followed by Satyajit Ray in *Postmaster* of the *Teen Kanya* trilogy, where the relative and variable speeds of stamping the post and the ferrying of water, to and fro, marks time in movement. As regards the masterpiece of cinematic narration, dynamic time, warping it is of course credited to Eisenstein on whose altar we pray. The reference here is to *Battleship Potemkin*, the Odessa Steps scene that is stretched virtually so many times over the real time for ideological reinforcement. This technique is also used in Majid Majidi's *Children of Heaven* also a classic in the context of mixing past and present in the interspersing of shots. In that sense, Montage, Juxtaposition and cross cutting are also part of movement and dynamic time warping is undoubtedly a part of this.

When you are just reading one aspect, say colour, and run through three of Mehta's films, *Earth, Fire, Water*, we have almost all the shades of amber, green blue and white with a spinning whirlpool and it is unnecessary to state what it is emblematic of. So, not doing this is one of the greatest limitations also of this paper. Having said this, these details are available in certain other papers of mine and two of they are listed in the bibliography for the interested.

This paper also just infers and does not go into deeper introspections and interrogations based on, for instance, intersectional feminisms or cartographies of change, due to space constraints, but they are mentioned in the bibliography for reference as accrued knowledge. This is its next great limitation and also the reason for the open-ended conclusion.

The point is stories of women across lines of time and space are contained in images that touch the senses, trigger feelings, register emotions, intellectualize thoughts, sensitize the person, making us take more than a casual look at ourselves, our inconsistencies, our inadequacies and our proclivities for being part of the hegemonies of the past, and/or for being responsible overtly and covertly for their continual in the present and they are annunciated best through this medium perhaps due to its felicity. They are also stories of the nation and we need to take them seriously.

The readings are inspired by the work of the film maker and there is nothing original as great art is intuited as an act of grace from above as Auden puts it, but limitations and erroneous readings are of course solely mine.

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### *Filmography*

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*Fire* (1996) <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0116308/>  
*Earth* (1998) <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0150433/>  
*Bollywood/Hollywood* (2002) <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0303785/>  
*Water* (2005) <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0240200/>  
*Heaven on Earth* (2008) <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0240200/>

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