

**DISCIPLINING THE BOUNDARIES OF SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN'S SEXUALITY:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN INDEPENDENT
SOUTH ASIAN 'LESBIAN' CINEMA**

by

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Abstract

The thesis analyses how same-sex desire is represented in independent South Asian ‘lesbian’¹ cinema. By using the medium of film, the thesis attempts to demonstrate how alternative cinema challenges the dominant cultural norms which are represented in Bollywood films. Central to this argument, is to analyse that whilst alternative cinema represents same-sex desire, it also reproduces normalised gendered and sexual ideologies.

The thesis explores issues of (in)visibility and (re)presentation from within feminist debates on race and ethnicity. By using black and post colonial feminism as a conceptual framework, the thesis demonstrates how historical discourses have shaped the construction of South Asian women as passive and obedient (Brah, 1992; Parmar; 1982; Rattanski, 1994). As such, the thesis considers how pathological constructions and representations continue to be perpetuated within Bollywood cinema and how independent South Asian lesbian cinema has sought to challenge such normative ideologies. Therefore, an exploration of the black female body and the ways in which essentialised ideologies construct South Asian femininities provides some insights into the ways in which such representations still continue to inform our understandings of South Asian women in contemporary society.

The thesis argues that whilst alternative cinema challenges normative ideologies, it also reproduces dominant norms and values through concepts of marriage, motherhood, religion and culture which continue to be perpetuated through nationalist discourses. Whilst the thesis demonstrates that South Asian women negotiate their identities within such complex arenas,

¹ The author recognises the word ‘lesbian’ is a contested term and is very much based on how one either constitutes themselves and how well they understand themselves or how they are understood by others. I am using ‘lesbian’ cinema to look at a selection of films which would be understood and constituted within the film industry and placed under the genre of ‘lesbian’ cinema. The author does not state or imply these are fixed identities as ultimately the study is looking at engagement in same-sex desire that is associated with female bodies rather than male bodies.

the space afforded to them within all three films is often located outside of the 'sanctity' and 'purity' of the domestic sphere.

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Introduction

The thesis navigates some of the complexities attached to the ways in which same-sex desire is represented in Indian cinema. Whilst the films *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey* selected for discussion have challenged the dominant cultural and societal norms represented more readily in Bollywood movies, the thesis examines the ways in which they still work to reproduce these norms to a certain extent. As such, these films represent femininities, in relation to sexualities, in ways which both challenge and reproduce gendered and sexual ideologies.

A variety of scholars (Brah, 1992; Parmar, 1982; Rattanski, 1994) have argued that the historical image of South Asian women is one which is embedded in a paradigm of passivity and obedience. Whilst the films *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey* facilitate a departure from the stereotypical understandings of passivity and complacency to an extent, representations of alternative female sexualities remain embedded within nationalist and heteronormative ideologies. The films represent the ways in which South Asian women negotiate their subjective experiences and essentialised identities.

An important feature in understanding contemporary representations of South Asian women is firstly to explore the historical contextualisation of South Asian women's experiences. By using black and post-colonial feminism, chapter one charts feminist debates and how they have succeeded in highlighting the importance of women's subjectivities (Takhar, 2013). Using black and post colonial feminism, the chapter deconstructs and challenges the ways in which black women have been marginalised and stereotyped within dominant hegemonic discourses. Whilst the commonality of experience has been central to feminist debates, the chapter uses black and post colonial feminism to gain a better understanding of contemporary representations of the black female subject. The chapter uses concepts of the 'Othering' and

‘Whiteness’ as a backdrop to deconstruct discourses which pathologise femininities (Wilson, 1978; Carby, 1982; Bryan et al., 1985; Grewal et al., 1988; Amos and Parmar, 1984).

Representations of the racialised body and the embodied experience are discussed in chapter two. The chapter raises questions about the ways in which the black or non-white body is inscribed by colonial and nationalist texts and how this manifests in contemporary representations for South Asian women in South Asian cinema. The chapter focuses on the ways in which film is used as a medium to deconstruct stereotypical and pathological representations of South Asian women.

Chapter three focuses on the methodological and research processes involved in my study and examines the rationale for choosing film as a genre to explore the experiences of South Asian women, same sex desire and the ways these are represented and appropriated. The chapter outlines why film is an important medium to capture data for analysis and highlights the strengths and limitations of using film analysis as a research method. The chapter explores the selection process for the research study and offers the reader a brief synopsis of the three films selected for analysis and discussion.

Chapter four critically details the key findings from the proceeding investigation of the films *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey*. The chapter discusses the major themes derived from the analysis of the data and is separated into seven sections which offer an analysis of the following themes; marriage, motherhood, 'izzat' (honour) and 'sharam' (shame/embarrassment), culture, religion, sexuality, sexual power and control and desire.

Ultimately, through an exploration of contemporary Asian independent lesbian cinema illustrated by *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey*, the study argues that representations of femininity and sexuality remain intimately wedded to deeply embedded cultural and societal

norms. As such, even within the small body of Independent South Asian lesbian cinema produced in Asia, traditional stereotypes of femininity and female sexuality are reproduced. Therefore the thesis contends that contemporary Independent South Asian lesbian cinema, whilst challenging the dominant norms of a gendered and heterosexualised society simultaneously reinforces these same norms relating to femininity and sexuality.

CHAPTER ONE

(IN)VISIBILITY AND (RE)PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND ETHNICITY

Introduction

This chapter explores issues of (in)visibility and (re)presentation from within feminist debates on race and ethnicity. The reason I review this material here is in order to provide the conceptual backdrop to this thesis. In other words, this thesis utilises a framework informed by both black, and to a lesser extent, postcolonial feminism to ultimately consider the representations perpetuated in South Asian lesbian cinema. Whilst I will take my main insight from black feminism, I will be using both black and post colonial feminism interchangeably. This chapter therefore looks at concepts of ‘experience’, ‘othering’, ‘difference’ and ‘whiteness’ and the ways in which these have shaped the contours of contemporary representations and understandings of lesbian South Asian women.

Whilst the development of ‘feminist theory’ has its roots deeply embedded within political activism and consciousness raising, the epistemological positioning of such activism during the social movements of the 1960s was firmly located in gendered emancipatory and liberatory strategies (Ali, 2007). By focussing solely on the subordination of women, gendered oppression was viewed through the subjectivities of white middle class western women resulting in homogenised narratives which negated the experiences of women of colour (Ali, 2007). As such, feminist activism came under attack for erasing global power differences and ‘universalising’ the category of ‘woman’. According to Ali (2007: 105), ‘While there were undoubtedly power differences between women, inequalities in access to knowledge and its dissemination, and uneven access to socio-economic and cultural resources

for women located in socially and geographically differentiated sites, these issues were loudly and painfully debated.’

As such, the category Woman was slowly deconstructed by black and post colonial feminism to ‘excavate the silences and pathological appearance of a collectivity of women assigned as the ‘other’ as she is produced in a gendered, sexualised [and] racialised discourse’ (Mirza, 2009:3). The work of Wilson, (1978), Carby, (1982), Amos and Parmar, (1984), Bryan et al (1985) have been highly influential in deconstructing pathological discourses which rendered the subjectivities of black women as either invisible or stereotypical together with Mohanty’s deconstruction of development literature (Ali, 2007). Notably, it was the work of women of colour in the US which tackled difference in terms of sexuality and disrupted globalised gendered and sexual ideologies (Ali, 2007). It is therefore observed through these writings that ‘Woman as an undifferentiated social category is untenable; women are a diverse group occupying multiply held positions, identities are never ‘fixed and complete’ (Hall, 1996a). Thus it is important to observe that women’s oppression is not only linked to patriarchy but is shaped and organised through lines of globalisation.

In relation to the study, it is important to note how black and post colonial feminism have disrupted globalised gendered and sexual ideologies and the essentialist ideologies and binary classifications which have been used to sustain powerful gendered constructs and representations of South Asian women in Indian cinema. Therefore, the chapter will aim to explore how the internalisation of norms and values perpetuates normative ideology which continues to shape the contours of our understandings of South Asian women.

By noting the historical representations of South Asian women within hegemonic colonial discourses, this chapter will begin to unravel the ways in which black and post colonial feminism have provided counter debates to deconstruct stereotypical representations and imagery used within Bollywood cinema. The chapter will therefore use concepts of experience, othering, difference, whiteness and intersectionality to illuminate how such representations continue to perpetuate and misappropriate South Asian women and to some extent the ways in which lesbian Indian cinema also reinforces such imagery through the centrality of heteronormative and nationalist discourses.

Black and Post-Colonial feminism

Black and post colonial feminism have without doubt shaped the contours of feminist theory on a global level (Mirza, 2009). By focussing on the invisibility and absence of the black female subject within dominant discourse, black and post colonial feminists have challenged powerful gendered constructs and ideologies through political empowerment and a social justice perspective (Hill-Collins, 1998). By calling for an analysis of inequality and discrimination, black and post colonial feminism have sought to deconstruct patterns of inequality and discrimination which both structure and are reflected in women's lives (Brah and Pheonix, 2004). Importantly, it must be noted that black feminism and post colonial feminism do not negate the significance of the feminist movement. The work of Oakley, (1974); Millett, (1977); Barrett, (1980); Hartmann, (1981); Walby, (1986) demonstrates how feminist theory has tackled patriarchal oppression in a diverse number of ways. However it can be argued that whilst second wave feminism in its quest for transcendental agency addressed issues of inequality and discrimination, it was limited in its scope on two levels: Firstly, it coined oppression only in terms of patriarchal oppression. Secondly it utilised

personal experience of oppression to address the inequalities only between men and women thus creating the notion of a 'universal sisterhood' (hooks, 2001). Whilst the universality of womanhood promoted some sense of visibility for western (white) feminists, to posit such a claim was inevitably contentious as it not only rendered personal experience as normative, but also excluded black women from the feminist agenda and as such, the construction 'woman' required further dissemination (Takhar, 2013). Whilst this resulted in a level of disintegration within the feminist movement, black and post colonial feminists highlighted 'the need to provide alternative formulations of the 'universality' of gendered oppression and struggles' (Mohanty, 1992:75). Whilst a number of black feminists have recognised the importance of difference in women's subjectivities, (Wilson, 1978; Bryan et al, 1985; Grewal et al, 1988), Patricia Hill-Collins captures how those in power have the ability to define black women as racialised gendered and classed subjects (Hill-Collins, 1991). Similarly, this point is taken up by Donna Haraway who states:

There is nothing about 'being' a female that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constituted in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices. Gender, race or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experiences of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism.

(Haraway, 1989:179)

Therefore, black and post colonial feminism has been instrumental in developing understandings of South Asian women and the ways in which they have been subjects of the 'curious gaze' (Mulvey, 1989) and also within hegemonic discourses which (re)produce essentialised and fixed identities. As such, the study uses film as a medium to challenge such dominant ideologies which perpetuate stereotypical representations of South Asian

femininities and deconstruct binary classifications. The study also demonstrates that we cannot underestimate the instrumental role of film, as Bollywood cinematic texts which rely on stereotypical imagery of South Asian women to reinforce heteronormative sexualities through nationalist discourses. Consequently, South Asian women are represented (and policed) through images of the ‘good’ woman - one who preserves the sanctity and purity of the nation.

Whilst post colonial feminism has challenged nationalist and colonial discourses, it can also be argued that the study of same-sex desire has been negated by post colonial feminist studies and critiques by neglecting to examine the ways in which heterosexuality and homosexuality are produced within these discourses (Gopinath, 2005). Whilst independent South Asian lesbian cinema has challenged such normative ideologies, the internalisation of such norms and values continues to shape thinking and understandings of the South Asian women and same-sex desire.

Therefore, it is through the analysis of the films *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey*, that I show how non heteronormative sexualities are depicted albeit through simplistic male-female/homo/hetero binaries. Whilst the films have certainly illuminated same-sex desire, the study also explores how threads of nationalist discourses continue to be woven into understandings of South Asian women where same sex desire is positioned either as an imported ‘western’ concept or something that ‘happens’ outside of the domestic sphere. Hence it is important to recognise how sexualities of the main characters in *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey* are marked by intersections of gender, race and class which are used to deconstruct issues of discrimination and oppression.

Intersectionality

Originally a term coined by Crenshaw, intersectionality has been an important concept in shaping black feminist theory. By allowing a holistic understanding of how discrimination and marginalisation affect the subjectivities of black women (Mirza, 2009), intersectionality allows an interrogation of the critical space which is occupied by patriarchal hegemonic discourses (Crenshaw, 1989).

As such, by exploring South Asian femininities within Bollywood and lesbian Indian cinema, the study illuminates how representations are complicated through intersections of race, gender, class and sexuality. As Rajiva highlights, ‘Gender dynamics play a crucial role in both Bollywood and diasporic cinematic texts, but these dynamics are deeply embedded in post-colonial national anxieties around diasporic alienation and the lingering ambivalences of the colonial relationship’ (Rajiva, 2010:215). For example, Bollywood cinema depicts South Asian femininities in terms of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Indian woman. The ‘good’ female subject is inscribed by national and colonial texts which depict and construct South Asian women as passive, caring, compliant and obedient. Here markers of race, gender, sexuality and class are used by Bollywood films to represent and appropriate South Asian women as ‘traditional’. In contrast I analyse three films, *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey* from South Asian lesbian cinema which seek to challenge such cultural and societal norms and excavate some of the complexities of how race, gender, sexuality and class intersect and impact on the subjectivities of South Asian women.

Thus the importance of intersectionality has been instrumental in the study as it allows a more nuanced analysis of how race and gender intersect to misappropriate South Asian women within hegemonic discourse. As argued by Mirza (2009), whiteness is described as ...‘a

powerful place that makes invisible, or re-appropriates things, people and places it does not want to see or hear'. (Mirza, 2009: 3). Therefore by juxtaposing intersectionality and 'whiteness' we can begin to understand how such concepts have been influential in understandings and constructions of South Asian women.

Whiteness

As a concept, whiteness remains fundamental in appropriating and (re)producing powerful ideologies and binary classifications. According to Kanneh, whiteness as 'a discourse is underscored by privileged exclusionary practices which marginalise the experiences and narratives of black women where 'she' the black female subject is permitted to appear' (Kanneh, 1995). This is further explored by Mohanty, (1988, 1992) where she argues that the black female subject is represented 'through the imperial voice of whiteness' (Mohanty, 1988, 1992), where whiteness reinforces the power of the colonist to define him or herself as the 'norm' (Brah, 1996).

As such, by analysing lesbian cinematic representations, we can begin to observe and analyse how whiteness operates in constructing pathological identities for South Asian women. Whilst the films *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey* challenge heteronormative ideologies surrounding South Asian women and sexuality, such representations are also marked by imperial and colonial relations which continue to locate and frame South Asian femininities within the context of 'Indianness and tradition' – which Mohanty argues are read as non-progressive, obedient, passive and docile (Mohanty, 1992). Here the authoritative voice of whiteness is internalised through societal norms and expectations as Rajiva (2010:216) asserts, 'In diasporic cinema, references to the colonial past are always part of the narrative, a poignant reminder to the viewers of the traumatic impact on the bodies and psyches of the

colonised'. In considering Rajiva's point, it could also be argued that much of white western feminist theory has contributed to reproducing and homogenising South Asian subjectivities – what Rich refers to as 'white solipsism': the tendency to think, imagine and speak as if whiteness described the world (Spelman, 2001). Hence the understandings of South Asian women continue to be referenced to a colonised past (Rajiva, 2010).

Difference

Although early second wave feminism was based on a common identity of 'woman' and notions of a united global 'sisterhood', it was the lived experiences of white middle class women which were used as a yardstick to represent the female experience. Black feminists challenged the use of binary classifications to understand gendered inequalities and called for a more nuanced approach to analyse difference not only between white and black women but also the differences between black women (Takhar, 2013). In relation to South Asian women, a number of writers (Wilson, 1978; Bryan et al, 1985; Grewal, et al, 1988) used the concept of difference to develop understanding of individual subjectivities. In doing so, not only was black feminism successful in moving away from the notion of universality of experience and sisterhood, but argued that the heterogeneity of black women was to be celebrated (Takhar, 2013). However, if we unravel this further it can be argued that black feminists, whilst trying to challenge the homogenisation of experience, were also in danger of creating a unique understanding by virtue of one's race and gender (Mirza, 2009).

Whilst 'difference' as a concept has been useful to enable a broader understanding of black women's experiences, it has also been utilised by Western (white) feminism to highlight that not all women have the same experiences of being a 'woman'. With this recognition, it can be argued that in its widest sense, whilst feminism seeks to empower and emancipate women,

through its evolution, mounting tensions and conflicts emerge in the understanding of the category 'woman' (Takhar, 2013). As Butler argues, Western feminism needed to address the issue of either,

Redefining or expanding the category of woman itself to become more inclusive
which requires the political manner of settling who get to make that designation
and in the name of whom) or challenge the place of the category as part of a feminist
normative discourse. (Butler, 1990: 325).

Here Butler raises an interesting point about the ways in which women are defined and positioned within hegemonic discourse. The recognition here is that whilst the feminist agenda has its epistemological roots in the emancipation of women, this also operates within power relations. As Said argues '...systems of thought [...] discourses of power, ideological fictions – mind fogg'd manacles – are all too easily made, applied and guarded' (Said 1978:328). Although a number of scholars have written about the multiplicity and polyvocality of South Asian women (Wilson, 1978; Bryan et al, 1985; Grewal et al 1988), Brah, (1996) argues, that those in in power will always be able to define and designate categories and identities. It is at this juncture that the concept of Othering provides a helpful framework to understand how South Asian women are positioned and located within hegemonic discourses and labelled as the 'Other'.

Othering and the 'Other'

The concept of Othering has been utilised to develop understandings of the oppression and marginalisation of the colonial subject and construction and positioning of 'woman' as the 'Other' (Brah, 1996). Although the Othering process has been used to develop hierarchical relationships, it is important to recognise that it also locates and positions the 'Other' as a

homogenous group with a fixed essentialised identity (Takhar, 2013). As the positioning of woman as the 'Other' has been central to feminist arguments, they have argued that they have been silenced and rendered powerless in the knowledge constructed by men (de Beauvoir, 1949; Daly, 1978; Ussher, 1991). The Othering process has also been applied by black and post colonial feminists who argue that in the context of race and gender, black women are also positioned and located the 'Other' (Amos and Parmar, 1984; Mohanty, 1988). As Brah, (1996) asserts, the existence of power relations helps maintain those in power to define Others and impose identities. As Bhavnani and Mirza both highlight, 'the black female subject is produced in a gendered, sexualised and racialised global discourse where 'she' is appropriated according to normative ideologies of femininity and gender (Bhavnani, 2001; Mirza, 1997). Although individual subjectivities are shaped by historical and everyday practices, our experiences are also defined by dominant discourses which can consequently lead to a sense of belonging (Brah, 1996). As such, Elspeth Probyn comments, 'If you have to think about belonging, perhaps you are already outside (Probyn, 1996:9-8).

In relation to the study, the position of insider/outsider is one which is marked by race and culture where South Asian women are positioned as the inferiorised other (Brah, 1996), but also where same-sex desire is seen as the other and outsider too. As Hammond highlights, failing to consider differences between female sexualities can also position the black female lesbian as the 'other' 'other' (Maynard 2001). As Hammonds argues,

Discussions of black lesbian sexuality have most often focussed on differences from or equivalences with white lesbian sexualities, with 'black' added to delimit the fact that black lesbians share a history with other black women.

(Hammonds, 1994: 386).

Hammonds makes an interesting analogy where she argues, by rendering black sexuality invisible in black feminist theorisation, it negates the opportunity to empower and explore agency and pleasure (Hammonds, 1994).

The process of 'othering' therefore poses some complexities not only in terms of the oppression and marginalisation women experience, but also in the ways identities are constructed and imposed. Thus one could argue that the armoury of normative ideology is impenetrable.

Whilst this makes unsettling reading, it remains significant to analyse and understand the ways in which power permeates into every part of one's existence and the silent ways in which it manifests itself in shaping identities and experiences according to where one is positioned in the social order of being.

Therefore exploration of concepts of othering, difference and experience and whiteness have all served to promote a broader understanding of how black and post colonial feminism have contributed to understanding South Asian women. A significant variable in the analysis of oppression and discrimination is the ways in which power intersects in producing normative essentialised ideologies which impact on the subjectivities of South Asian women.

As such, for the purposes of the study, the ways in which South Asian women have been objectified within essentialised ideologies and through racist stereotyping are deconstructed using cinematic narratives in the films *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey*.

CHAPTER TWO

GENDER, 'RACE', SEXUALITY AND THE BODY

Introduction

This chapter raises questions about the ways in which the black body is inscribed by colonialism. Given the importance of gender, sexuality and race, as they are performed via the materiality of the body, this chapter works to inform the author's reading of representations of South Asian women's (same-sex) sexuality. With this in mind, the chapter aims to explore how the black female body has been treated historically and culturally by focusing on the interconnections between racism and the body (hooks, 1992, 1994; Collins, 1991).

Gender and the body

Historically, the body has remained an important yet contested site to examine power relationships between men and women. Within early written legal codes, the law defined women's bodies as the property of men and as such, this legal status reflected the belief that women's bodies were different in ways which described women as defective and dangerous (Weitz, 2003). We only have to refer to Aristotle's choreography of the body to see how this belief was based on biological essentialism as he defined the female body as "a mutilated male" (Weitz, 2003). Women for Aristotle had "improper form", and were considered "monstrosities" and "misbegotten men" (Garland-Thomson, 1997). Thus the naturalised normative body (male, white, heterosexual and able bodied) works to classify the female body as the 'other', deviant, inferior and insufficient.

Entrenched within the social order of heteronormativity, the positioning of the sexual 'Other' is one which operates within a heterosexual social sphere (Ussher, 1997) thus creating

powerful gendered constructs which perpetuate, reinforce and shape the contours of our understandings of sexuality and the female body. Historically, the physical act of homosexuality has been defined as ‘a form of sexual deviance regulated through the literal control and confinement of the material body’ (Ussher, 1997:131). By focussing on the flesh, essentialist ideologies have firmly located sexuality to the materiality of the body – implicit within this is the association of femininity where the female subject is devalued by its difference and its otherness (Bradotti, 1997). As Bradotti (1997) argues; ‘... misogyny of discourse is not an irrational exception but rather a tightly constructed system that requires difference as pejoration in order to erect the positivity of the norm’ (Bradotti, 1997 cited in Conboy et al 1997:64).

As such, both scientific and philosophical readings of the female body have historically and culturally been governed by discourses of monstrosity where the myth of the monstrous feminine is associated with abnormality, power, danger and evil and strongly linked to sexual reproduction and difference. By linking the female subject to a non- human form (the abject, the monster), such discourses were based on ambivalence, fear and deviance where difference was used as a marker to solidify knowledge about what constituted the norm (white able bodied male) and to avoid disruption and disorder (Burns, 2012 cited in Robinson and Davies, 2012). Discourses on monstrosity have also been used to depict figures of non conformity and rebellion. For example, such discourses have not only pathologised, but also marginalised female same sex desire, as the visually deviant ‘monstrous’ body ignites fear as it threatens and continues to cause deep ontological anxiety to the social order of being (Price and Shildrick, 1999). Hence, dominant, powerful ideologies and discourses relating to sexuality continue to be entrenched within biological determinism which uses ‘difference’ as a marker to sustain what is considered the norm. Indeed, such representations of alternative

female sexualities for South Asian women remain embedded within nationalist and heteronormative ideologies which view same-sex desire within a 'sickness' and pathology paradigm (Gopinath, 2005). Thus it is important to explore how the body is inscribed by colonial and national texts which inform contemporary representations for South Asian women within Indian cinema.

Body and theory

Biological Reductionism

Western philosophical thought is reflected in the work of Descartes which has disparaged the body in favour of the mind. The analysis of power and gender and how it bears on women's and men's bodies has been conceptualised within feminist discourse and has challenged the neglect of the body within scientific thought. The mind/body dualism has permeated Western thought and the female body has become a metaphor which represents, nature, emotionality, sensuality and irrationality (Davis, 1997). This point is crystallised further by Bordo (1993) who argues,

The mind-body dualism within Cartesian thought has rendered the female body as the 'other' which is always in a threatening position to challenge the patriarchal order through 'distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression failure of will or even death. (Bordo, 1993 cited in Davies 1997: 5).

Whilst biological theories have focussed on the materiality of the body, they have also positioned the body as a primary site where heterosexuality and homosexuality distinctions are given - what Ussher (1997:144) refers to as the 'mechanics of the flesh' (what acts define homosexuality). By placing the body as a starting point of analysis, early essentialist

ideologies posit sexuality within a biological /condition paradigm whereby the physical act of same-sex sexual relations traditionally needed to be controlled and regulated. Such early reductionist theories have also focussed on linking same-sex desire between women to masculinity as the work of Ellis highlights:

among female inverts, there is usually some approximation to the masculine attitude and temperament [...] the sex organs [...] are sometimes overdeveloped, or perhaps more usually underdeveloped [...] there may be a somewhat masculine development of the larynx

(Ellis, 1893:199-200 cited in Ussher, 1977:141).

Although such early work focuses on the materiality of the body to understand same-sex desire in women, such essentialist theories were also accepted as a positive notion by women who identified with such identity markers (Ussher, 1977). For example, Frances Wilder in 1915, posited her desire for women as a result of her 'masculine mind' (Ussher, 1977).

Whilst Enlightenment philosophy privileges the experience of the masculine elite (Davies, 1997), such 'grand narratives' are open to critique not only for neglecting the cultural importance of the body (Davies, 1997) but also because they continue to inform traditional assumptions about women as either objects of desire, carers of men and children or dependent homemakers (Davies, 1997). Whilst these traditional attitudes continue to be promoted through film, advertising, women's magazines, newspaper, music, literature, they also often sit within the social order of heteronormativity which continues to represent and produce gendered and sexual ideologies in service of privileging heterosexuality. It is the reproduction of such dominant and societal norms represented in film and Bollywood cinema in particular that is of importance to the study as it explores as the ways in which these are still reproduced to a certain extent. For example, the mounting layers of discourses which exist around ideas

of passivity and complacency for South Asian women continue to be used to (re)produce an identity where they are depicted as either 'ideal' wives or mothers which positions her as the victim, or those who are sexually emancipated and thus viewed as dangerous, threatening and westernised (Takhar, 2013). As such Bollywood cinema has created this traditional/westernised binary through its depictions and representations of the characters where any form of non conformity or rebellion against traditional assumptions of women are regarded as westernised or an imported concept.

It is through the analysis of gender and power and the politicisation of the body and women's embodied experiences, that 'the feminist critique of dualistic thinking (male/female, culture/nature) has disrupted the social order of scientific thinking and highlighted the ways in which women's bodies are 'implicated in various social and cultural practices and on symbolic representations of the female body' (Davies 1997: 5). By placing the body at the very core of lived experiences, feminist work shows how the body makes itself present for a range of different embodied phenomena i.e. emotion, desire, identity and agency and how cultural discourses shape women's embodied experiences (Davies, 1997).

Foucault, sexuality and the body

The essence of Foucault's social constructivist theory suggests that the body is constructed around shared symbols and regulatory norms (Foucault, 1977). Foucault's interpretation of the subjugated body is one which he refers to as the 'docile body' which is subjected to forces of discipline and control. Foucault gives via his historicisation of sex, an understanding of how power operates in a very specific way. He does not see it only as a form of oppression, but as a normalising process whereby power operates by creating norms and surveying the population to measure those norms.

Foucault uses this premise as a starting point to argue how rules and regulations control and regulate individual experiences and how the experiences are shaped by the powerful structures they operate in. Thus the docile body is inscribed through powerful structural forces carefully regimented procedures and also without force (Foucault, 1977). Thus the construction of bodies goes undetected through techniques and strategies of observation and internalisation of dominant gendered and sexual ideologies.

Foucault suggests that power operates by the way we internalise these norms so we begin to measure ourselves against what we should be - a form of self-policing. Foucault's work is important in relation to the experiences of South Asian women who undertake the process of 'internal policing' to negotiate the challenges of expressing same-sex desire whilst navigating through powerful gendered norms of heterosexuality. The threat of 'lesbianism' to Asian culture is one which is perceived as dangerous and destructive (Parmar, 1982; Rattanski, 1994, Brah,1996), therefore must be policed through community surveillance (Kanwale, 2003). Furthermore, it can be argued that the internalisation of gender norms is reinforced through tradition, cultural and religious values whereby sexuality is perceived as immoral, hence sexuality becomes the site for community surveillance and policing for South Asian women.

Although heavily reliant on Nietzsche's work, Foucault also questions whether a materiality exists to the corporeal and argues that bodies are constituted through cultural meanings and attributes which are constructed and dependent upon according to history (Butler, 1990, 1994). Foucault argues that it is the mechanism of history operating through power and discourse which inscribes and imprints the body.

the cultural construction of the body is affected through the figuration of history as a writing instrument that produces cultural significations, language through the disfiguration and distortion of the body, where the body is figured as a ready surface or blank page available for inscription, awaiting the imprint of history itself' [ibd., 148]

The importance of Foucault's inquiry into the self denotes how technologies of the self 'permit' individuals to effect by their own means or with help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, 'so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality' (Foucault, 1988a cited in Gutman and Hutton, 2011:18). Foucault highlights that whilst technology is a form of practical action and is accompanied by practical reason, it operates and is governed through power relations. Technologies can instil in the body certain actions e.g. moral virtues or technical skills which involve training and modification. In relation to this research study, technologies of the self refer to how South Asian women are represented through dominant cultural and societal norms so readily available in Bollywood films. This point is taken up by Bordo who states, 'Foucault reminds us of how the organisation of time, space and movements of our daily lives, our bodies are trained, shaped and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity and femininity' (Bordo,1993 :309). As such, the study explores the experiences of South Asian women, same-sex desire and how the female body is represented and appropriated within Indian cinema.

As Cream (1995:33) describes it, these practices of the body are essentially interpretative, and 'there is no way that a body can escape its social and cultural setting. There is no body outside of its context'.

Thus it is important that in our understandings of South Asian women, we need to recognise how shared experiences of colonialism and racism construct subjectivities.

The body and embodiment

Black feminists place the self and the body at the centre of their theorising of notions such as ‘embodied difference’ as they seek to make sense of the black female/’othered’ woman’s symbolic and narrative experiences (Mirza, 2009). The discursive regulatory effects of gendered and sexualised racialisation continue to be resisted by black feminists. The representations of black women have without doubt focussed on imagery which has been produced and created to sustain patriarchal colonial and post colonial discourse (Kanneh 1995). If traced through history, the black/ ‘othered’ woman is constructed as a passive object, inscribed with meaning by those who gaze upon her and ‘name’ her. Here we can see how racialised and gendered modalities continue to represent black women through stereotypical imagery. For example, South Asian women are represented as passive, docile and exotic or black women as Mammies, Sapphires and Jezebels (Collins, 1991; 2001). It is therefore important to recognise how black and post colonial feminism have been instrumental in challenging the processes of stereotyping as Hall argues, ‘Stereotyping reduces, essentialises and naturalises and fixes “difference” (Hall, 1997:258). In relation to the study, we can see how stereotyping of South Asian women occurs in Bollywood films, which depict South Asian women as either dutiful, passive recipients of patriarchal order or deviant if they choose not to conform to acceptable forms of femininity. Such stereotypes are ‘normalised’ and pervasive within Bollywood films as they (re)produce and perpetuate the ways in which South Asian women are expected to act and behave in a certain way.

Whilst the legacy of cultural oppression has no doubt played a significant role in the analysis of the black female body and how it has been represented and appropriated, the importance of acknowledging differences in embodiment based on race, class and sexuality between women is particularly important in this study. As Davies argues, 'Understanding what embodiment means to individuals depends upon being able to sort out how sexual, 'racial' and other differences intersect and give meaning to their interactions with their bodies and through their bodies with the world around them' (Davies 1997:14).

Ideas about the female body and how this affects women's lives has produced a range of feminist literature. By using a diverse range of theoretical approaches, black and post colonial feminism have challenged scientific ideas about how women's bodies develop and are socially accepted. However, it can be argued that whichever way the body has been conceptualised, it has always been a site through which masculine power operates (Kanneh, 1995). Whilst the concept of 'difference' within feminist thought has been used to analyse particular experiences of what it means to be a woman, its application as a meaningful tool for analysis has proved to be problematic. This is taken up by Davies, (1997) who argues the paradoxical nature of feminist discourse which uses the body as a site for explaining socially constructed differences also treats the body as generic therefore ignoring specific features of women's embodiment (Davies, 1997).

As such, it is important to recognise how South Asian women are perceived, objectified and represented within hegemonic discourses which continue to be perpetuated through Bollywood and arguably to some extent through independent South Asian lesbian cinema.

The sexualised ‘other’

With biological arguments put forward by 19th century scientists about the superiority of European ‘racial’ types, dichotomies of ‘Otherness’ were produced. As Spivak comments, in order to represent Woman, white western women required an inferior ‘Other’ – the woman of colour or women from non Western countries (Spivak, 1999). At this point it is important to recognise that such identity formation can be traced back to the construction of Orientalism by the West (Inden, 1986) which was used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to create types of knowledge which placed Europe in a superior position to create a superior identity and as a justification for colonialism. As such, Orientalism can be shown to be used not only in the formative role of the racialised Other but also to emphasise the existence of competing discourses for Indian women under colonial rule (Mani, 1992). Thus if a discourse exists around ideas of passivity and complacency for South Asian women, not only can it be used to compare with the freedom and agency of western women but it is an identity which can be produced over time by those in power (Takhar, 2013) . As such, the image of the South Asian woman then resonates with the sexualised discourse which depicts the oriental colonised woman as not only submissive but also as the ‘carnal female temptation...a disturbing symbol of fecundity, peculiarly Oriental in her luxuriant and seemingly unbounded sexuality’ (Said, 1978:187). As such, the films selected for analysis highlight how such discourses are able to present South Asian women in profoundly contradictory ways where she is silenced or depicted as a dangerous powerful sexual object and viewed with fascination or repulsion (Parmar, 1982; Brah, 1987).

In a similar vein, according to hooks, ‘although contemporary thinking about black female bodies does not attempt to read the body as a sign of “natural” racial inferiority, the fascination with black “butts” continues’ (hooks, 1994: 122). In a traditional racialised

imagination, the protruding 'butt' is seen as a sign of heightened sexuality and racist assumptions suggest it is a sign of inferiority and position the black female body as the sexualised other. Examples of black female appropriation and exploitation of 'negative stereotypes' are used to assert control over the representation or reap the benefits of such exploitation (hooks, 1994).

Whilst invisibility is a fundamental aspect of being black in a white-dominated society, the black female body however becomes hypervisible when conceptions of sexual-subjection are discussed. For example when Black women's bodies are on display, they are to be ridiculed which at some level fulfils traditional racialised imaginations of the black body (Harris, 1996). For example, Serena Williams's buttocks continue to attract much attention in the world of sport regardless of the calibre of tennis which is played (Harris, 1996). In relation to the study, it could be argued that hegemonic and racialised discourse which represents South Asian women as exotic and licentious, or passive and dormant (Parmar,1982, Rattanski, 1994, Brah, 1996), firmly embeds South Asian identity within the realms of heterosexuality rendering 'lesbian sexuality as invisible' (Brah,1996:79).

As Das DasGupta highlights, 'South Asian communities of today are notorious for the oppressive silence they maintain around the topic of sexuality. As a group we tend not to encourage open discussions about sexuality, let alone open sexual expressions' (Das DasGupta, 1998: 137). Thus an important feature of the study is to navigate through some of the complexities attached to sexuality and same-sex desire and how this is represented in Indian cinema. Whilst alternative sexualities are explored through independent South Asian

lesbian cinema, the South Asian female body continues to be inscribed by nationalist and colonial texts which regulate and control the expression of non- normative sexual desire.

Representations of South Asian femininities and sexuality in Bollywood cinema

Bollywood cinema has a long history of representing the South Asian female body through a gendered and heterosexualised lens. Whilst working hard to preserve the myths of sanctity and purity, Bollywood has continued to reinforce and perpetuate gendered and sexual ideologies through its representations of tradition, culture and religion which have subjugated South Asian women. The power of Bollywood therefore cannot be underestimated as it seeps into societal norms and values through visual imagery and narratives therefore reinforcing mundane normative heterosexualities. Bollywood thus creates the embodiment of nationalist imagery through the prosperous, Hindu, heterosexual, man and his family where alternative sexuality is unimaginable and unthinkable (Gopinath, 2005). Therefore South Asian women in Bollywood cinema are then either positioned within the passivity and obedience paradigm (inscribed by nationalist and colonial discourses) or erased to close down and avoid any expression of non- normative sexualities.

As such, the regulation of women's bodies and representations of sexuality and femininity continue to be entrenched in discourses of dangerousness, deviance and fear where women's sexuality is set within the binary of modesty or modernity - the latter being potentially disruptive to the national imagery of the 'good' Indian woman. Such is the power of Bollywood films, Pandurang asserts, '...film producers still project a particular version of the 'good' Indian wife by resorting to the virgin/vamp dichotomy of the nineteenth-century and early cultural nationalists (Pandurang, 2003: 92 cited in Puwar and Raguram, 2003). Here we can see how such powerful visual representations allow the internalisation of patriarchal

constructs where South Asian femininity and sexualities are grouped together under historical and religious myths of the patriarchal ideology of dominant Hindu culture (Pandurang, 2003).

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the materiality of the body and the ways it has been discursively positioned to define the experiences of same sex desire for South Asian women. Although historically South Asian women have been regulated and controlled in dominant discourses, the chapter has discussed how such ideologies have been challenged by feminist discourse to deconstruct pathological representations of South Asian women. The chapter explored the ways in which the black body is inscribed by colonial and nationalist discourses and texts and how this manifests in contemporary representations for South Asian women in Indian cinema but also how these to some extent have been challenged by independent South Asian lesbian cinema.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODS

'The "truth" of [women's] oppression cannot be "captured" on celluloid with the "innocence" of the camera; ...what the camera in fact grasps is the "natural" world of the dominant ideology.'

(Clare Johnston, 1973)

Introduction

This chapter examines the rationale for choosing film as genre to explore the experiences of South Asian women and same-sex desire and the ways they are represented and appropriated. It begins by outlining why film is an important medium to capture phenomena and provides fertile ground for analysis and will go onto highlight the strengths and limitations of using film as a research method. The chapter also explores how the sample of films were selected for the research study and how they were coded according to the variables which were taken into account and concludes by offering the reader a brief synopsis of the three films selected under discussion.

Although the films represent same-sex desire – thereby challenging the dominant cultural and societal norms represented more readily in Bollywood movies, they still work to reproduce these norms to a certain extent. As such, not only do these films represent femininities they also represent female masculinity in relation to sexualities, in ways which both challenge and reproduce gendered and sexual ideologies.

Methods

As a research method, film can provide rich and fertile ground for data collection and analysis. For this study, film has been selected to promote greater understanding of the ways in which same-sex female desire and South Asian women are represented and depicted through visual, narrative and symbolic imagery. According to Marshall and Rossman, (2006) films have a long history in visual anthropology and rely heavily on visual representations to capture phenomena. They argue that as a method, film is, especially important as it possesses the unique capacity to provide data of interactions, dialogue, verbal and non-verbal communication and the ways this is managed in a variety of spaces to present findings (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). As such, film as a medium is used for visual, narrative and symbolic representation, and although it has the ability to record phenomena, this is always from the perspective of the film maker (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). It is the filmmaker who decides what to focus on and how to interpret and organise that data in the recording together with the film maker's intent and interest in the subject area (Marshall and Rossman, 2006).

The strengths of using film as a research method is that it provides visual samples to enhance the validation of discovery. Film can record non- verbal behaviour and communication such as facial expressions, gestures and emotions and can be used as a new way of seeing, analysing and understanding processes of change and how they happen and occur (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). Film can be used to examine time, space and place and cultural activity and explore possible changes within this. It also has the ability to preserve data which the researcher can interpret which can also be validated by another researcher (Ferro, 1983).

Whilst film has the capacity to provide rich data for analysis, the ways in which films are produced, directed and financially supported can actively manipulate, depict and construct

reality (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). This is underscored by the professional bias and interests of the film maker, the audience it aims to capture and financial considerations. Thus, it can be argued that whilst film has the potential to shape the contours of reality, it is important to acknowledge that such representations of reality can also be manipulated by external forces as argued by Ferro, (1983:358) 'As agents and products of history, films and the world of films stand in a complex relationship with the audience, with money and with the state, and this relationship is one of the axes of its history'.

It can be seen that whilst the relationship between money, audience and the state is one rife with complexities, the relationship between these variables is one which determines film makers' techniques and styles (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). As a product, film will evolve and change according to the cultures which produce it and the audiences at whom it is aimed (Ferro, 1983). The importance of film in this study is therefore two - fold: firstly film has the potential to enable us to think about and understand how same-sex desire impacts on the realities of individual subjectivities of South Asian women. Secondly to challenge the ways in which Bollywood films continue to reproduce heteronormative and mundane heterosexualities.

The selected films therefore provide rich data which express many themes not only in relation to female same sex desire but also in relation to sexual abuse, rape, incest, suicide, mental health, female exploitation and prostitution, isolation and rejection. Interestingly, whilst *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey* have tried to articulate and represent same sex-desire, feminist autonomy and sexuality as major themes, these are also silenced and closed down as the films are shrouded and underscored by religious frameworks and cultural expectations of South Asian femininities.

Sampling

Whilst it is relatively easy to access films to analyse the ways in which South Asian women are depicted and represented within various media, not all lend themselves to a study of female same-sex desire. Contemporary Indian cinema relies heavily on captivating an idealised Indian society entrenched within religious and cultural codes of appropriate behaviours for women (Anwary, 2003). Indian cinema provides an escapist function whereby film sequences capture a series of song and dance routines which provide the audience an idealised version of family life, with romance remaining entrenched within the boundaries of heteronormativity. Whilst the simple narrative and the audience's need for identification run through such films, on closer inspection, female eroticism is articulated and enforced within heteronormative social and cultural processes (Gopinath, 2005).

In selecting the sample, a range of films were viewed which represent female same-sex desire and South Asian women. The sample selected was based on a number of criteria which deconstructed stereotypical imagery of South Asian women whilst engendering a sense of agency and empowerment. The films selected, evoked a site whereby an alternative sexual identity could emerge potentially disrupting hegemonic Indian culture which has historically rendered female same-sex desire as invisible.

The films which were not selected for analysis were: *Utsav*, *Khush* and *Nina's Heavenly Delights*

Utsav (1984) Director Giresh Karnad

Utsav is a Bollywood film which follows the life of a fourteenth century prostitute. Situated within the courtesan genre of films, it follows a story line which involves a triangulatory relationship between two women and a man. The film tries to engage the viewer in some

form of nostalgic ancient erotic Indian past (Gopinath, 2005) although focuses on the emerging relationship between the two women who compete for the attention of a man. Whilst the inference is that this relationship plays out some form of heterosexual sex (anticipation of wedding nights), Gopinath states that ‘The relationship between the two women hints at the histories of female homoerotic relations that mark the space of the courtesan’ (Gopinath, 2005: 105). Whilst *Utsav* offered rich analysis of the ways in which female same-sex desire is represented within Bollywood cinema, being set in the fourteenth century, it did not meet the inclusion criteria due to its lack of contemporary relevance.

Khush (1991) Director Pratibah Parmar

Khush is a documentary which tries to raise consciousness about gay men and lesbians in India, Britain, Canada and the United States. Based on ethnographic research, the film allows some deconstruction of how Indian culture suppresses lesbian sexuality and renders homosexuality invisible (Anwary, 2003). Whilst the film deconstructs issues relating to patriarchy, sexuality and gender oppression, the rationale for not selecting this particular film was due to practical and accessibility issues as the film was unavailable to view on line or via purchase.

Nina’s Heavenly Delights (2006) Director Pratibah Parmar

The film is a drama/romance/comedy set in Glasgow which considers the impossibility and possibilities inherent in describing the same-sex desire between South Asian women in two different national contexts. Although female same-sex desire becomes a possibility, its focus on ideologies of visibility and ‘coming out’ appear to eliminate its likely critique of some of the challenges posed to queer South Asian women. As the film is set in Glasgow, *Nina’s Heavenly Delights* provided a very different perspective as it offered an account of South

Asian culture which is geographically located in the UK. Whilst this would have made an interesting comparison for a different study, an analysis of this film would have undermined the consistency of my sample.

Variables and pilot coding strategy

Having assembled a list of films, a pilot coding sheet was implemented which firstly focussed on variables associated sexual identity, religion and marriage. All films were viewed in their entirety and detailed qualitative notes were taken. The coding strategy was further refined through a series of six² films to examine further variables which included:

- Marriage
- Motherhood
- ‘Izzat’ (honour) and ‘Sharam’ (shame)
- Culture
- Religion
- Sexuality, Sexual power and control
- Desire

The coding sheet also focussed on the variety of character and place characteristics. For example, characteristics of the place setting were recorded using variables relating to the time period, the country in which the films take place and whether subtitles were used.

² Whilst six films were initially viewed, the films *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey* were selected for the study to provide a sample which not only highlighted variables but also to represent some analysis relating to the time period which the films were produced.

Coding and analysing data

This looked at the number of scenes which sought to capture the interactions between South Asian women and their male married partners

- Scenes which sought to capture how femininity is shot through religious frameworks
- Scenes which sought to capture cultural expectations of South Asian women i.e. marriage
- Scenes which shot sexual intimacy between South Asian women
- Comparative scenes of how sexual intimacy between South Asian women is represented in India and in the UK

All films were available on media and technological sources therefore the ability to stop, pause, rewind and fast forward were all used as methods to help to code specific details and to write qualitative notes without missing salient information from the films.

The above research methods were used to analyse data on the variety of constructions relating to South Asian femininity and same-sex desire. The three specific films selected as a sample offered a comparison of contemporary cinema where narratives of the main characters centre on some of the internal, religious and cultural conflicts of female same sex desire for South Asian women. The films also offer some comparative analysis of the ways in which tradition and modernity are depicted and translated in film. A comparative analysis of the ways in which female same sex desire is represented for married women and single women is explored through cultural and religious frameworks. The films also capture scenes which challenge many of the stereotypical constructions of South Asian women which are shot through ‘internal contradictions and historical disruptions’ (Connell, 1995:72).

The films have been selected to deconstruct the widely accepted stereotypical imagery of the submissive, docile passive South Asian woman. The films demonstrate how South Asian women challenge and disrupt various cultural and religious frameworks constructed and ‘seek to control and overcome their stereotyped image as submissive Third World woman’ (Anwary, 2003:429). The films *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey* have also been selected to explore how they have engendered various forms of agency but also the political challenges these films have attracted as South Asian culture is embedded within homophobic attitudes and values. The films offer an alternative perspective to mainstream Bollywood films although on closer inspection women’s sexuality is represented and shot through the lens of ‘invisibility’ rather than make reference to visible female same sex desire. This point is illustrated through the influential work of Gopinath who states,

Indeed the most enabling and nuanced instances of queer female desire on the Bollywood screen transpire not through the representation of explicitly queer coded, visible “lesbian” characters but rather through evoking the latent homoeroticism of female homosocial space (Gopinath, 2005:25).

Films selected for analysis:

- *Subhah/Umbhartha*
- *Fire*
- *The Journey*

***Subhah/Umbhartha* (1981), directed by Jabbar Patel**

The film follows the struggles of a middle class housewife, Savitri, in India who leaves the confines of middle class domesticity to become the warden of a women’s reformatory. The film charts Savitri’s journey and the ways in which she manages the challenges posed by her

husband and her mother-in-law. Whilst the narratives of the film instil a sense of autonomy and independence, this is pitted against the ideological notion of the 'good' wife who does not leave the confines of domesticity. Although there are some glimpses of Savitri empowering and enabling the women in the reformatory, the film perpetuates dominant cultural norms and locates South Asian identity as essentialised and fixed by using motherhood and religion to instil heteronormative imagery to the audience. Whilst the producers infer and make reference to female same-sex desire where two female inmates are named "lesbian", the film is firmly situated within a narrative of sickness and pathology. (Gopinath, 2005). The film, whilst hinting at particular forms and organisations of female same sex desire, fails to articulate and represent South Asian women as agents of control regarding their sexual preferences.

Fire (1996), directed by Deepa Mehta

The film highlights the subjectivities of two sisters in law who live within an extended middle class family in Delhi. The film is centred on the main characters Radha and Sita who experience different forms of rejection from their respective husbands. Both Radha and Sita develop a sexual relationship which is subsequently discovered by the servant Mundu and Radha's husband Ashok. Whilst the film explores mandatory heterosexuality by deconstructing concepts of motherhood, religion, culture, honour and izzat, female same-sex desire and pleasure is only explored within the space of the middle-class home.

The film asks the viewer to examine the relationship between heteronormative structures of gender and sexuality and religious and nationalist constructions of community and nation. The film disrupts dominant gender and sexual constructions of South Asian identity and narratives of an "out", visible "lesbian" identity. The film underscores complex models of

female homoerotic desire which according to Gopinath ‘challenges a Euro-American “lesbian” epistemology which relies on notions of visibility and legibility. (Gopinath, 2005:26)

***The Journey* (2004), directed by J. Pullappally**

The Journey explores the development of desire between two young women Kiran and Delilah. The film is set in Kerala and follows the path of friendship to love between the two young women. *The Journey* challenges heteronormative cinematic images by positioning same-sex desire and love in the context of regional narratives which moves it away from the ‘Bollywood nationalist vein’ (Meghani, 2009).

The story centres around the growing relationship between two young women, Kiran and Delilah and allows some exploration of same-sex desire. The film also uses ancestral narratives to instil some form of self-determination and choice for the young women although this is obscured by heteronormative nationalist discourse which seeps through the cinematic images and narratives.

Conclusion

Choosing an appropriate research method and material is vital given its potential to provide sources for data collection and analysis in the ways in which female same sex desire is depicted through visual and narrative representations. This in turn, as the epigraph to this chapter suggests, works co-dependently with culture and society as film is shaped by, as well as shaping, cultural and societal norms. Film as a research method has informed this study, allowing opportunities to explore and deconstruct essentialised imagery of South Asian women whilst simultaneously disrupting cultural and religious representations which render female same sex desire invisible within South Asian cultures.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

This chapter presents and analyses the key findings from my investigation of the films *Fire*, *Subhah* and *The Journey*. Emerging themes are discussed in seven sections. Section one concerns the representation of sexuality through marriage. Section two discusses the ways in which ideology surrounding women's sexuality is constructed in terms of motherhood and reproduction. Section three explores concepts of 'izzat' (honour) and 'sharam' (shame) and the ways in which South Asian women are bound by moral and religious codes within communities. Section four aims to explore the representation of sexuality through an analysis of culture and the ways in which 'Indian' culture is constructed. Section five discusses the complex representation of religion and the ways in which the 'sacred' is used to construct images of the idealised traditional self-sacrificing Indian woman. Section six considers how intense male relationships form a range of expressions of sexuality, sexual power and control and the ways in which desire and repression is expressed. Finally, section seven discusses representations of sexuality through desire and how the body is used as the object of physical need, pleasure, reproduction and experimental use.

Marriage

Without exception, the visual codes used to represent same-sex desire albeit within the boundaries of Indian middle class domesticity are identified in the narratives of the main characters within *Fire* and *Subhah*.. As such, female same-sex desire and pleasure is encoded and mediated through heterosexuality and song and dance routines where a 'lesbian' subjectivity remains invisible and concealed. As Patricia White states, "What is prohibited by

the [Motion Picture Production] Code or ideologically excluded from dominant representation, what is unnamed, may nevertheless signify on screen” (White, 1990:8 cited in Gopinath, 2005: 109-110). Although *Fire*, *Subhah* and *The Journey* negotiate the gendered role of wife, mother, daughter-in-law and daughter with the ‘feminist self’³, the films appear to situate the middle class South Asian woman within the confines of the home and marriage (Gopinath, 2005).

Although the experiences of the main characters in *Subhah* and *Fire* offer representations of middle class South Asian women which are located and positioned within the patriarchal structures of their husband’s families, the narratives of all three films represent the ways in which marriage is used as a parameter to represent heteronormative desire and homosocial space (Gopinath, 2005). For example, the familial narratives of *Subhah* indicate how the main character Savitri is shown to reject the confines of middle class domesticity and her desire for autonomy is suffocated by her husband and extended family whereby tradition and modernity are pitted against one another. *Subhah* encapsulates the ways in which marriage and gendered roles of wife and mother are repeatedly shown to depict elitist status (Gopinath, 2005). For example, Savitri is pitted against her sister-in-law who is shown to conform to the expectations of married life whilst Savitri clearly rejects the dull existence surrounding her. As Savitri has a child, the normalised gendered role of being a mother is disrupted by the film which portrays Savitri as a woman who is unable to put the needs of the child before her own. The scene at the dinner table captures the moment quite intensely whereby the child is seen refusing to eat and it is only through the attention provided by Savitri’s sister-in-law and brother-in-law that the child accepts food and is comforted by them. Savitri is ‘reprimanded’ by her husband for not taking an interest (*Subhah*: 23.57). Similarly, the narratives of the film

³ The ‘feminist self’ refers to the ways in which the women in all three films negotiate their subjectivities between the ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ selves.

also show Savitri refusing sex repeatedly with her husband which infers some level of ambiguity about Savitri's sexuality and sexual desire. The scenes signal the ways in which female autonomy is pitted against marriage to create a character that is unable to conform to the stereotypes of South Asian femininity.

Fire also resonates with the ways in which familial narratives signal and promote stereotypes of South Asian femininity by illuminating the dichotomous relationship between tradition and modernity through Radha and Sita's characters. Both women are represented as accepting rejection by their respective husbands, reinforcing the stereotypical image of the passive respectable Indian woman who is self-sacrificing and whose sexual desires are bound by religious and moral codes of behaviour. This is further reiterated throughout the film whereby scenes capture the disapproving looks and glances by the mother-in-law (Biji) which infers some form of regulation through hierarchal and patriarchal familial ideologies of the ideal woman and carrier of tradition (Gillespie,1995). An example of this is captured when Sita displays a feisty attitude towards traditional expectations whereby she disrupts stereotypes of Asian femininity by trying on her husband's jeans and trainers whilst dancing to music (*Fire*: 11.01).



Figure 1

Not only does this scene interrupt traditional expectations and ideologies of the way South Asian women should dress, but also captures the figure of a cross dressing and butch coded character which Sita instils for the audience (Gopinath, 2005). Here Sita's parody of masculinity depicts two very clear messages: male agency and a disruption of normative and 'proper' appearance of South Asian women which are both important in patriarchal South Asian communities (Mani, 2003). Whilst Sita's body bears the markers of 'tradition' through her sari, her act of 'dressing up' reconfigures her gendered and racialised body. As Tarlo 1996 states, '...although there are large variations within clothing patterns in the Indian Subcontinent, there has always been a tendency for certain garments such as the sari or salwar kameez (tunic and trousers) to gain hegemonic status' (Tarlo, 1996 cited in Raguramun : 26). When Sita performs in her husband's jeans and trainers, the scene signifies how 'western' garments are positioned within modernity whilst her quick change back into her sari locates Sita back to her 'traditional' space (Tarlo,1996). This is further reinforced by Mundu the servant who watches the dance routine and states, 'Sita is too modern'.

The essentialised cinematic imagery of South Asian women is also challenged by the film *The Journey* which draws on 'ancestral narratives' (Meghani, 2009: 63) to reinforce the process of marriage and reproduction. This is captured in the opening scene when Kiran comes to her ancestral home. Kiran's mother charts her matrilineal heritage through story-telling and tells Kiran "You are descended of great warriors, child. Martial arts were practiced in the courtyard" (Meghani, 2009:64) which is used to instil a sense that one is able to challenge struggle and tradition and defend one's choices. Kiran's mother uses the story of a female ancestor who eloped with a poor soldier to create a sense of dissent from "tradition" (Meghani, 2009: 64). Although the story advocates some form of emancipation against struggle and tradition, it also locates women's identity within heteronormative and nationalist

contexts by reinforcing the expectation that Kiran as a young woman will continue the matrilineal heritage through a heterosexual relationship and reproduction. Whilst *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey* offer some recognition of female same-sex desire, it can be argued that it has done so through a reductive and narrow lens which presents Indian culture as having patriarchal control over female sexuality. Although all three films represent same-sex desire – thereby challenging dominant cultural and societal norms represented more readily in Bollywood films, they still work to reproduce these norms to a certain extent. For example, both *Fire* and *Subhah* reproduce both gendered and sexual ideologies through representations of motherhood, reproduction, infertility, sexual abstinence and infidelity. For example, Radha's character in *Fire* perpetuates stereotypes of South Asian femininity by framing Radha's infertility as 'problematic' which is used to devalue women of childbearing age. Meanwhile both Sita and Savitri's characters reject motherhood only to be subjected to sexual violence or infidelity. Therefore it can be argued that the connections being made here are far too simplistic and superficial thus making an assumption that South Asian femininity is solely constructed around motherhood. According to John and Niranjana, (2000), a sharper critique of the ideological constructions of free choice, compulsory institutions of heterosexuality, the politics of visual pleasure and the patriarchal structures of the law are required.

Whilst *Fire*, *Subhah* and *The Journey* have all produced narratives of female same sex desire, they have done so by anchoring women's oppression mainly in the denial of female sexuality and limitation of sexual independence (John and Niranjana, 1999). For example, whilst *Subhah* was heralded a feminist film in terms of Savitri's decision to leave the confines of the home in pursuit of a career, the narrative openly sees her refusing sex with her husband but is never seen to desire anyone else (Gopinath, 2005). Such ambivalence surrounding Savitri's sexuality remains a theme throughout the film where any expression of her sexuality is closed

down. Indeed, the film ends with Savitri alone on a train where her destination is left open to interpretation. The narrative in *Fire* also suggests that female same sex desire operates through the denial of female sexuality or within the limitations of sexual independence. As such, female same-sex desire is either narrated through cross dressing or 'drag' performances between the two women.

By locating female sexuality primarily as a gay/lesbian issue, *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey* appear to promote a naturalised hegemony of heterosexuality where women's sexuality is controlled and regulated through nationalist discourses (John and Niranjana, 2010). The relationship between the body and nation is one which is highlighted by Meghani (2009), who utilises Anderson's (1991) analogy of 'Imagined Communities' a style in which nations are distinguished from other nations by the ways they are imagined (Meghani, 2009). Meghani uses this analogy to make links between the body and nationalism and argues that it invokes a gendered and sexualised manner in which a nation is imagined (Meghani, 2009). Here Meghani highlights the ways in which Hindu nationalists since the late nineteenth century have imagined India as the 'Great Mother' (Nandy, 1998:92 cited in Meghani 2009:60). In its quest for independence, India became the "Motherland". As Urvashi Butalia (1995) highlights, 'it becomes important to establish the purity of Mother India. The country [...] is imagined in feminine terms, and the partition, as a violation of her body' (Butali 1995:69 cited in Meghani 2009:60). Thus all three films to some extent appeal to religion and tradition to reinforce the imagery of a heteronormativity to characterise the idea of the nation (Meghani, 2009). By upholding the values of post-colonial nationalism, the 'imagined' nation naturalises heteronormativity and ethnicity and locates same-sex desire as 'cultural failure' (Meghani, 2009). The 'lesbian' image is thus imagined as 'unnatural' and 'immoral' in order to control female sexuality.

As Gopinath argues, ‘one of the most powerful methods of disciplining and controlling female sexuality within such movements has been the prescription of state sanctioned heterosexuality’ (Gopinath 2004: 136).

Thus, it can be argued that *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey* are underscored by dominant Indian nationalist narratives which continue to consolidate the nation in terms of sexual and gender normativity of the female subject (Gopinath, 2004). For example by repressing women’s sexuality through surveillance and policing, the maintenance of heteronormative practices such as marriage remain intact (John and Niranjana, 2010).

An indicator of how fragile gender and sexuality rights are in India is seen through the legislative and policy structures whereby Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in 2009 had criminalised same sex relations. Although the repeal of this code by India’s Supreme Court in December 2013 suggested a sign of changing attitudes towards lesbians and gays in India, it remains to be seen whether the diversity of sexual experience can stand alongside Indian nationalism (Misra, 2009).

Given the time frame of all three films (which spans nearly four decades), it could be argued that whilst *Subhah* was heralded a feminist film, the naming of a lesbian subjectivity was strongly pathologised bringing with it a notion of incommensurability of female same-sex desire and feminism (Gopinath, 2005). In contrast nearly a decade later, *Fire* caused outrage as it as it represented female same sex desire through the lens of sexual emancipation and choice which disrupted nationalist Hindu discourse regarding the purity and sanctity of the home and family. Unlike the ambivalence surrounding Savitiri’s sexuality in *Subhah*, *Fire* clearly rejected gendered, sexual and patriarchal structures of the home by allowing the

characters Sita and Radha to walk away from the family in pursuit of a new life as an expression of sexual emancipation and choice.

Since the release of both *Subhah* and *Fire*, a number of films within the Bollywood genre have attempted to articulate female homoeroticism although this has been encoded through heterosexual relationships where female same sex desire remains invisible. In contrast, diasporic filmmaker Pratibha Parmar has produced a number of films which have raised consciousness of same sex desire, the most prominent being *Khush* which documented the lived subjectivities of LGBTQ communities in India, Britain and North America. Furthermore, significant developments to promote LGBTQ rights in India have been seen through Gay Pride marches in Mumbai and same-sex couples attempting to be married through ceremonial rituals conducted in temples. However, this has been met by a backlash from right wing Hindu parties and legislation which makes same-sex marriage an offence. Despite this, organisations such SALGA (South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association - based in New York), and CALERI (Campaign for Lesbian Rights – based in India), continue to promote rights for LGBTQ communities although the Bollywood screen persists in representing sexuality through the confines of heterosexual marriage only.

Although *Fire*, *Subhah* and *The Journey* have paved the way in challenging dominant cultural and societal norms relating to female same sex desire, the imagery and representations of women's bodies in all three films has also reproduced heteronormative ideologies. The narratives in the films also illustrate the ways in which women's identity and sexuality are intertwined with religious traditions which emphasise sexual purity.

Motherhood

The construction of female identity, domesticity and motherhood has been the object of much debate and remains central to discussions in feminism (Amos and Parmar, 1984). Both *Fire* and *Subhah* elucidate the ways in which the family and its role in ideologies surrounding women's sexuality have been constructed in terms of motherhood and reproduction. The films also illustrate the ways in which women's sexuality is represented through issues relating to infertility or by rejecting the notion of the desirability of motherhood. As such, these images are then mapped throughout the films and used to value women only in terms of their ability to reproduce (Purewal, cited in Puwar & Raghuram, 2003). For example, in *Subhah*, motherhood is constructed in ways which uphold notions of women as dutiful, devotional, caring and nurturing to the point where they exude authentic love for a child. Although *Subhah* perpetuates the ideological notion of 'devotional' mother, it also generates some anxiety about the ideological norms and values attached to the roles of mother and wife in the home. This is represented by positioning Savitri as a woman and mother who is unable to meet the emotional needs of her child as she does not respond overtly to the child's need for attention. Savitri is also pitted against her sister in law who is seen to react to the crying child at the dinner table in a manner which defines what motherhood should be – caring, nurturing, loving. The scene not only perpetuates but reinforces constructions of 'good' and 'bad' Indian woman – the 'good' is represented by Savitri's sister-in-law as the all-embracing subordinate woman and the 'bad' by Savitri who is seen to be 'rejecting' domesticity and motherhood to pursue her career. The film also perpetuates the role of motherhood as the pinnacle of Indian womanhood and identity, thus using infertility as a marker of identity which is devalued (Meghani, 2009).

Similarly, the ways in which infertility is used to represent and devalue women is seen in *Fire* whereby Radha has ‘failed’ in her reproductive duties to produce a child for her husband. Radha’s husband Ashok, thus spends the majority of his time with his male guru and through the act of celibacy, disavows sexual desire as “the root of all evil”. For Ashok, women are the object of sexual desire and are associated with materiality and worldliness (Marsh and Brasted, 2002). *Fire* illuminates the ways in which Radha’s sexuality is rejected as ‘evil’ since it cannot perform its sole function to reproduce (Marsh and Brasted, 2002). Not only does *Fire* elucidate the ways in which motherhood is used as a marker to construct women’s identity, but also the ways in which infertility is used to devalue women. Whilst Ashok punishes Radha through the act of celibacy, Sita is seen to revolt against the notions of motherhood as she makes herself unavailable for sex after Jatin tells her that a baby would keep her busy. The juxtaposition of both narratives illustrate the ways in which women’s identity and sexuality are constructed through the concept of motherhood.

Whilst the patriarchal context provides the backdrop in *Fire* and *Subhah*, there is also the tendency to pathologise and assume that the women have little agency when it comes to motherhood. As highlighted above, Sita refuses to fit into the stereotypes of the chaste, devotional, Indian woman by her sexual non-availability towards her husband Jatin. Her refusal to be a ‘baby producing machine’ is bolstered by her ability to control her own sexual desire and although this challenges the idealistic notions of the Indian woman and motherhood, her ability to contribute to female emancipation is captured through elements of choice and agency. However, as patriarchy has long located women’s power in their sexuality, it has developed methods to dominate sexual independence through the mechanism of the metaphor (Das Gupta 2002: 116). As Das Gupta states, ‘Indeed, the most pervasive images of women across cultures are those of the “goddess” and the “whore”. The “Goddess”

is the chaste life giving mother who gently influences all her moral superiority supporting rather than questioning the prevalent order of society. On the other hand, the whore is the immoral temptress who lures men to their destruction with her abundant sexuality' (Das Gupta, 2002:64). Hence, constructions of the 'good' and 'bad' woman are depicted in *Fire*, *Subhah* and *The Journey* and characterised in the words of Das Gupta as "women who do" and "women who don't" (Das Das Gupta, 2002:64). Radha initially is seen as the 'good' woman who does not disrupt codes of patriarchy and Sita and Savitri as 'bad' women who exert their agency by rejecting the mothering role which is assigned to them. Similarly, *The Journey* also represents images of 'good' and 'bad' woman through its depiction of Delilah's marriage as well as her rejection of it and Kiran's decision to separate from her parents and pursue sexual autonomy based on her desire for Delilah (Meghani, 2009).

Whilst patriarchal control represents a range of oppressive structures which obscure the lives of the women represented in *Fire*, *Subhah* and *The Journey*, the films also amplify and perpetuate essentialist imagery of South Asian femininity through the construction of motherhood. Although narratives of both films instil some form of agency and choice, motherhood remains symbolic of South Asian femininity and the ultimate product of (hetero)sexuality.

'Izzat' (honour) and 'Sharam' (shame)

The South Asian identity for women is one which is frequently compounded by cultural requirements emerging from 'izzat' (honour) and 'sharam' shame/embarrassment (Gilligan & Akhtar, 2006). It is important to mention that whilst South Asian women are not a homogenous group, functioning within communities is bound by moral and religious codes

where 'izzat' and 'sharam' remain a pre requisite in acquiring a sense of belonging and acceptance.

Negative stereotyping of South Asian women remains firmly entrenched in traditional expectations of womanhood whereby tradition and culture remain synonymous with 'izzat' and 'sharam'. As 'carriers of tradition and culture' (Gillespie, 1995:80), South Asian women's subjectivity is organised through a range of identities, which are ascribed by hegemonic discourses and also through tradition and culture. What constitutes a 'bad' or 'good' woman is still firmly located by 'apparent choice[s] between personal liberation and cultural loyalty' (Das Gupta and Das DasGupta, 2002:113). Such binaristic thinking only serves to promote essentialised notions entrenched within dominant discourses which preconceive South Asian women having to make a choice between loyalty/liberation and tradition/modernity. As such, the expression of sexual identity is located as a struggle namely between two cultures, the 'West' as the 'liberator' and the 'homeland' as 'traditional' (Mohanty, 2004). As Mohanty states, 'This is always from the vantage point where legal, economic, religious and familial structures are treated as phenomena to be judged by Western standards and structures that are defined as "underdeveloped" or "developing" and women are placed within these where the image of the 'Third World woman' is produced' (Mohanty, 2004:40).

Since discussions on the various themes identified earlier centre around religious and familial structures, they are held in the context of the "underdevelopment" of the Third World which then assigns women as a group or category which 'automatically and necessarily defined as religious (read: non progressive), family- orientated (read: traditional), legally unsophisticated (read: they are still not conscious of their legal rights), illiterate (read: ignorant), domestic (read: backward)' (Mohanty 2004:40). Mohanty refers to this as "Third World difference" as

she argues that this also ignores the directionality of the power relations between the First and Third Worlds (Mohanty, 2004).

The experiences of the female characters in *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey* suggest that South Asian women's maintenance of 'izzat' operates within the confines of heteronormative relationships and domesticity. The significance of 'izzat' is a running theme through all three films and is further intensified by locating and positioning it within religious codes of conduct. Both Radha and Sita in *Fire* are represented as accepting rejection by their respective husbands thus reinforcing the stereotypical image of the passive, respectable Indian woman whose sexual desires are bound by heterosexual, religious and moral codes of behaviour. Obedience and subordination are gained through the maintenance of acquiring and sustaining 'izzat'- any challenge to cultural norms and values would bring 'sharam' (shame) onto the family. Both Radha and Sita are seen to uphold the family's 'izzat' through the sexual division of labour within the household, through caring duties undertaken by Radha for Biji and also through the patriarchal rituals and traditions both women undertake as wives regardless of Jatin's infidelity and Ashok's sexual abstinence. Both women are seen to manage feelings of isolation and rejection for the sake of 'izzat' and to avoid 'sharam'. *Subhah* is also underscored by the concept of 'izzat' by capturing the ways in which female autonomy is seen as threatening the sanctity of marriage and familial relations. Similarly, *The Journey* also highlights the ways in which 'izzat' and 'sharam' play a significant part in the lives of both Kiran and Delilah as both young women are subjected to abusive threats if they do not comply to the demands set by their respective families in order to maintain 'izzat' and avoid 'sharam' in the community. This is captured by Delilah's mother stating, "Do you care about the family's reputation?" (*The Journey*:1.17.20). Delilah's mother tells her she must stop seeing Kiran "as the family will be ostracised from the church, because of this

travesty” (*The Journey* 1.18.08). This is further embedded when the conversation is overheard by a woman who comes to visit the house and Delilah’s mother cries that “the whole countryside will find out – get inside you little devil!” (*The Journey* 1.18.57). Both Kiran and Delilah are subjected to threats of marriage which reproduce gendered and sexual ideologies of South Asian femininity.

The interrelationship between marriage and ‘izzat’ in *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey* aims to propel the notion of harmonious familial relations whereby the women in all three films obey cultural expectations and ideologies of South Asian femininity. ‘Izzat’ remains a constant issue through all three films and is represented through heteronormative relations which are firmly entrenched in the static and immutable, pure and pristine imagery and representation of South Asian culture (Ratna, 1999). The ramifications of losing ‘izzat’ can result in isolation and ostracism from family and community as *The Journey* elucidates. Whilst patriarchal control represents a range of oppressive structures which mar the lives of the women represented in *Fire*, *Subhah* and *The Journey*, the films also amplify and perpetuate essentialist imagery of South Asian femininity.

Although it is recognised that historical, cultural and social factors have contributed to the subordination of South Asian women, dominant ideologies of respectability and standing in the community also remain an issue for many women (Takhar, 2013). The construction of what constitutes notions of a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ woman falls under the remit of two concepts related to South Asian culture; ‘izzat’ and ‘sharam’ which feature as important factors in South Asian women’s lives, acting as a form of community surveillance (Wilson, 1978). Although it can be argued that this might be the repository of ‘archaic cultural practices’ (Brah, 1992), dominant forms of ideology continue to dictate terms and conditions and set modes of behaviour for South Asian women.

As 'izzat' is an important point of reference to the value placed on women's lives, women only become acceptable if they conform and 'obey' to the terms and conditions offered to them by their husbands, family and the community. It can be argued that all three films as cultural products present acceptable forms of femininity and behaviour through a reflection and affirmation of a patriarchal society. Nonetheless, *Fire*, *Subhah* and *The Journey* have been able to feed into public spheres and create spaces to elucidate the marginalised struggles of South Asian women and sexuality. However, as Bollywood cinema offers few alternatives for the expression of sexuality, it appears that the impact of the prevalence of roles which depict women as 'good'/idealised' (without agency) or 'bad'/'deviant' (with agency) remain prevalent and cannot be underestimated. For example, representations of alternative sexualities depicted in Bollywood films are usually centred around discourses of deviance and invisibility where the unspoken remains shrouded by ambivalence. Whilst a range of films elude to female same sex desire, they continue to be framed within the confines of heterosexuality where two women enact and replicate the sexual connotations of 'wedding nights' and the excitement of marriage. However there is never any explicitness (censorship of heterosexual kissing still exists within Bollywood cinema), thus allowing the imagination rather than the visual to explore the possibility of alternative sexualities (Gopinath, 2005).

As constructions of the 'good' woman are deeply embedded within cultural and religious ideologies, women who challenge such notions also can run the risk of isolation, mental illness and suicide. As Patel states, 'suicide rates among Asian women between the ages of 16 and 35 in Britain are up three times the national average for 16 to 35 age group' (Patel, 1997: 263). In relation to mental health and suicide, one of the characters in *Subhah* is portrayed through stereotypes of 'madness' which is presented as a direct result of rejecting patriarchal norms and acceptable modes of behaviour that resulted in the violence and

isolation she experienced from her husband and family. The narratives of *Subhah* in this scene capture the ways in which constructions of the ‘bad’ woman are visualised and represented. It is the ‘bad’ woman who challenges and rejects dominant ideologies of acceptable modes of behaviour and is then represented as suffering from madness.



Figure 2

In the above figure, the character is stereotyped as displaying traits of schizophrenic conditions. For example, ‘seeing’ and hearing things/voices, dishevelled clothing and un-groomed hair which all perpetuate the lack of agency for women. Similarly, representations and constructions of ‘bad’ woman also appear throughout *Fire* where same-sex desire is viewed as a challenge to patriarchal social order and technologies of heterosexuality (Arora, 2006).

Indeed, the tie between same-sex desire and constructions of ‘bad’ women can be long located in Western philosophy where ‘bad’ labels were dependent on the language of the mythic and the inhuman (Morrissey, 2003). Consequently, the message of these myths has meant that patriarchy has long located women’s power in their sexuality attributing the female body with mystery, fear and loathing (Das DasGupta, 1998). As such, to gain control over this power, patriarchal societies have developed methods of domination over female economic, social and sexual independence by placing sociocultural norms and expectations which prescribe gender roles that support rather than question the social order. Ultimately heteropatriarchal societies

have thus created stereotypes about what women should and should not do and the reality is that women who do exert some form of agency, interrupt gender stereotypes and dominant discourses about women's roles in general (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2008). Thus, by using the narrative of sexual dysfunction, we can see how women's destiny is directly related to her ability to please men, to be a good wife, bear children and mother the children borne to her – this is viewed as key to womanhood. Thus, if women are unable to fulfil their 'biological destiny' they are then grouped as sexually deviant either as 'lesbians', infertile or as sexually failing their men in some way. Thus the language of sexual dysfunction is used to explain away their defiance of traditional gender roles (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2008). As such, efforts to make sense of female same-sex desire tend to be linked to the category 'bad' woman as this simplistic construction attempts to reduce non-stereotypical behaviour to the comprehensible (Downing, 2013).

Whilst *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey* have challenged constructions of 'good' and 'bad' woman, they have to some extent also reproduced and recreated cultural and religious ideologies. However, whilst mainstream Bollywood cinema tends to represent South Asian women as victims of male violence and subordination thereby reinforcing victim/passive/docile feminine stereotypes and reducing the position of the South Asian woman as disposable, films such as *Fire*, *Subhah* and *The Journey* have considered social change as a possibility (Arora, 2006). The messages conveyed remain as a counter debate to the hegemonic ideological construction of the South Asian woman within mainstream Bollywood cinema. As Mulvey states, 'A political and aesthetically avant-garde cinema is now possible, but it can only still exist as a counter point' (Mulvey, 1989: 16). Whilst visual pleasure has been manipulated through the Hollywood/Bollywood screen, it appears that the

ways that mainstream film is coded through the erotic language of the dominant patriarchal order remains unchallenged (Mulvey,1989).

Here the contributions of psychoanalysis within film studies and theory can be used to illustrate the ways in which South Asian women are negatively portrayed. Lacan's 'mirror stage' serves as a metaphorical mirror as we learn about identities by watching films which in turn influences the viewer's subconscious and can result in the affirmation and identification of roles assigned to women in society (Gairola, 2002) .

As Rahul Gairola states,

Film, like all popular media, serves as a metaphorical mirror for human beings – this is conspicuously evident in postmodernism. As such, we learn identities by watching films and imbibing the social and political statements imbedded in their visual narratives; the films themselves act as metaphorical mirrors after which we pattern ourselves (Gairola 2002: 316).

Whilst *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey* interrupt dominant cultural and religious ideologies that shape women's lives with a counter discourse that enables representations of agency, the concept of 'izzat' remains as a metaphorical flickering image which manages to perpetuate the cinematic imagery and representation of 'traditional' Indian womanhood. As such, 'izzat' remains a critical reminder of the normative constraints imposed through gendered, sexual and patriarchal ideologies.

Although Indian feminists voiced some appreciation in the counter protests against Hindu fundamentalism, 'many feminists in India positioned *Fire* as exploitative of both religion and sexuality as they opposed the film for not interrogating issues relating to guilt, shock, fear,

shame and the anarchic and threatening emotions that accompany sexual practices generally considered perverted, criminal and taboo' (Arora, 2006: 519). As the role of Hindu fundamentalism is set against modernity and promotes censorship and criminalisation of same-sex marriage, it also denotes sexuality through the confines of heterosexual marriage only. As such, an understanding of Hindu fundamentalism can be framed in the language of patriarchal oppression for South Asian women which can be familial, cultural and traditional (Takhar, 2013). Here, women are required to suppress their personal needs and desires in favour of the family, religion and cultural tradition. However, for those who do not want to or refuse to be confined within such parameters, disrupt their gendered role and are consequently labelled as women who wash their community's linen in public (Patel, 1997; Gupta, 2003). Alongside this of course is the shame attached to such acts of defiance where women are held accountable for putting the family's honour at risk.

It can be argued that whilst Indian feminists might be justified in wanting a more diverse range of depictions of lesbianism and female sexual autonomy and the emotional ramifications this may involve, *Fire* exposes how issues of 'izzat' emerge, 'how this is managed and sustained within the confines of a middle class family and the patriarchal rigidity that most women experience in their lives' (Arora, 2006 : 18). *Subhah* also illustrates how the idealised middle class Hindu family home restricts agency by not wanting Savitri to take up a post as Warden. Here the matriarch takes 'izzat' as a reference point by highlighting 'what will people will say and think about the family if Savitri works way from home?' (*Subhah*: 1.26.50). Not only does this scene confine women's value within the sphere of domesticity – the 'good' Indian woman but also sees the community acting as a form of surveillance to keep 'izzat' intact. However, the film constructs agency by the family

begrudgingly allowing Savitri to take up a post as Warden and work away from home albeit through depicting and constructing the 'bad' Indian woman as gaining agency.

Whilst 'patriarchal discourses' position South Asian women as 'carriers of tradition and culture' who can bring shame on the family's name (Gillespie, 1995:80; Brah, 1996; Sudbury, 1998; Kalra, et al, 2005; Wilson, 2006), 'patriarchal structures may also seek to 'punish' those who challenge oppressive cultural practices demonstrating the tensions between loyalty to one's community and to one's rights as a woman' (Kalra et al., 2005:60).

The narratives in *Fire*, *Subhah* and *The Journey* clearly illustrate this point further. In *Subhah* we see Savitri returning to the family home and it is the first time we see her engaging in sexual intimacy with her husband only to be told by him that he has been having an affair whilst she has been working away from home. It appears that this is her 'punishment' for leaving the family home – it is only through the 'neglect' of her husband that Savitri is exposed to issues of infidelity. In *Fire* we see both Radha and Sita being ostracised by the family as they stand at the temple after they have been exposed by the servant Mundu. The fact that both women are re-united outside of the private space of domesticity only serves to promote the notion that same-sex desire can only exist within public spheres. To some extent the films draw on notions of public and private spaces indicating that non heteronormative desire can be located elsewhere from one's own community (Meghani, 2009). Although all three films depict the private space of "home" as a space of purity, tradition and authenticity, embodied by the figure of the 'woman' (Gopinath, 2005), by doing so they also draw on the notion that the public space is one which is more liberatory.

However Gopinath argues that the 'private/public binary is somehow blurred, as 'home' 'is a vexed location where queer subjects whose very desires and subjectivities are formed by its

logic simultaneously labour to transform it' (Gopinath, 2005:15). This resignification according to Gopinath, positions the 'home' as a site of both desire and pleasure thereby refusing to position same-sex desire coupling outside of the private space (Gopinath, 2005). Whilst 'izzat' and 'sharam' are used to control women's sexuality and to reproduce ideologies of acceptable feminine behaviour (Gillespi, 1995; Patel, 1997; Siddiqui, 2000; Wilson, 2006) both concepts are also set within the modern/tradition binary which continues to discursively position and construct people's identities as they 'are rooted in the history of imperialism and colonialism and continue to shape peoples' understanding of the cultural changes in which they participate' (Gillespie, 1995: 206). However we should not underestimate the reality for women who challenge such stereotypical and gendered identities as they risk isolation and rejection.

Although national discourse on women as mothers, wives and daughters upholds heteronormative and patriarchal values alongside Indian nationalism, (Mahn & Watt, 2014) representations of women's oppression in *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey* appears to be firmly located in either the denial of female sexuality and/or patriarchal control which perpetuates constructions of idealised femininity and continues to be driven by notions of obedience and respect. Although the patriarchal authority and maintenance of cultural values is reasserted in *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey*, this imagery is also visualised in mainstream Bollywood cinema whereby gender dynamics and representations of women come through the imagery of 'good' wives and daughters who follow 'traditional' Indian ways through their obedience to fathers and husbands (Rajiva, 2010:215).

Culture

The combination of culture and patriarchy has unduly pathologised South Asian women as both concepts have been used interchangeably to problematize cases relating to 'third' world contexts (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992). The dominant perception of South Asian culture is that it is patriarchal and misogynistic (Parmar 1982, Brah 1996, Narayan, 1997) which only serves to shape narrow attitudes and understandings of South Asian women and South Asian gender relations in general. Whilst Brah (1996) exerts that culture is a set of continually changing processes, hegemonic discourses have presented 'Indian' culture as a set of ideological 'familiar essentials' (Das Gupta 2002:114) which are 'lumped under the rubric of Indian Culture' (Das Gupta, 2002:114). Das Gupta argues that these 'familiar essentials' establish values of a close knit interdependent family, differentiated gender roles, familial hierarchy, recognition of insiders (Indians) versus outsiders (all others) and religious rituals (Das Gupta and Das DasGurpta, 2002). Such cultural essentialism only further perpetuates the image of the Indian woman as pure, chaste, nurturing, and upholder of culture, rituals and traditional family values. (Das Gupta and DasGurpta ,2002). *Fire*, *Subhah* and *The Journey*, albeit in different ways, challenge the idea that Indian culture is unaccommodating and stagnant (Kapur, 2000). Kapur argues:

The story of *Fire* is about a film that was forced to undergo the test of public moral scrutiny and cultural validity. It opened the seam lines of legitimate speech by pushing the boundaries of sexual speech and expression in and through the idiom of culture (Kapur, 2000: 54).

By using fire as a motif throughout the film, identity markers such as marriage, family, duty, tradition, religion and sexuality are used to elucidate that alternative and liberating choices exist for women (Marsh and Brasted, 2002). Indeed, Stuart Hall comments about the diversity of cultural identity and states:

We cannot speak about one identity, one story without acknowledging the ruptures and discontinuities of the story we tell or re-tell. We cannot speak for very long with any exactness, about ‘one experience, one identity,’ without acknowledging its other side – differences and discontinuities...Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.

(Hall, 1996a: 212 cited in Ratna, 2000: 58)

Whilst *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey* reveal that culture and cultural identity are fluid categories, the tension between sexual identity and culture is an important component within the films as the underlying ideologies about sex and sexuality have disrupted the heterosexual male fantasy of the ‘purity’ of Indian culture and values (Mani, 1998).

Whilst all three films interrupt essentialised notions of cultural identity, protagonists of Hindutva, locate marriage, family, sex and sexuality as a ‘pure’ space of Indian culture, which is uncontaminated by the Colonial encounter (Chatterjee, 1989). Hence the reading of culture by the Hindu right is one which is underscored by an agenda which deems ‘outside’ influences to be corrosive to Hindu ‘purity’ and is aggressively anti- Muslim and anti-Western (Ratna, 2000). The Hindutva representation of women is one which alludes to prescribed roles as good wives and mothers which are tied to a traditional sense of national and essentialised identity. According to Hall, he states that culture is bound by ‘one, shared culture, a sort of collective one true self, hiding inside many another, more superficial and artificially imposed selves, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common’ (Hall, 1996a:211 cited in Ratna, 2000: 58).

Whilst Hindutva locates Indian culture within notions of *dharma* – (the correct order of the whole universe) it also propels ideological notions of woman’s *dharma* as unquestionable devotion and obedience to her husband and her religiously ordained duty to fulfil this (Marsh and Brasted, 2002). Such thinking and understanding of Indian culture has caused an outcry from Indian nationalists who argued that *Fire* was a direct attack on Indian culture which posed a threat to the institution of the family and marriage (Marsh and Brasted, 2002). The controversy also appeared to centre around gay identity within Indian culture as the spokesperson for the extreme right wing organisation Patit Pavan Sangarhan stated the, movie should be banned to protect ‘society and our own daughters, wives and sisters from the Western concept of lesbianism’ (Patit Pavan Sangarhan cited in Ratna, 2000:56). Here the ‘representation of a lesbian relationship was also seen as western contamination which threatened to destroy Indian cultural values’ (Ratna, 2000: 56). Hence the positioning of Indian culture is set up along the lines of ‘insider/outsider’ – the insider being Indian and outsider being the ‘West’. The representation of sex, sexuality and gay identity are cast outside of Indian culture and viewed as perverse and vulgar by Hindutva with a view to restoring Indian culture to its pristine ‘purity’ thus perpetuating assumptions that Indian culture is static and immutable (Ratna, 2000).

Whilst gay and lesbian groups have contested and defended films such as *Fire* as a statement of lesbian identity, they have also argued that homosexuality has always been part of Indian culture through an excavation of stories about the existence of lesbianism in ‘ancient’ Indian culture (Ratna, 2000). Although the formation of CALERI - a coalition of lesbian, feminist and progressive organisations based in New Delhi, challenged violent rhetoric of the Hindu right, they did so under the rubric of visibility, naming and identity formation and as such, used ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ identities as markers of modernity (Gopinath, 2005). As Gopinath

clearly highlights, 'CALERI found the only way to counter the elision of sexuality within progressive defences of the film was to enact a reverse discourse, responding to the film's strategy of disarticulation with one of explicit articulation and naming' (Gopinath, 2003: 159).

Whilst CALERI used static labels to name the characters as lesbian, liberal humanists challenged Hindu nationalist ideologies by arguing that the film was not about lesbianism but about women's emancipation. Fundamentally, the liberal critique of right wing attacks on Fire argued that female same sex desire was used as a modality to promote sexual emancipation and choice which converges with some particular strands of Indian feminist scholarship on sexuality as it denotes the incommensurability of queerness and feminism (Gopinath, 2005).

Whilst CALERI have been instrumental in campaigning for the repeal of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in 2009 which criminalised same sex relations and was seen as a sign of changing attitudes towards gays and lesbians in India, the overturning of this decision by India's Supreme Court in December 2013 unfortunately appears to be a strong indicator of how fragile rights relating to gender and sexuality are in India (Mahn and Watt, 2014).

Whilst Hindutva has offered very little to promote the emancipation of women in India and indeed the diaspora, one must also seek to address how such notions of cultural practices and status exist. As Narayan (1998:94) argues, it is only by 'excavating the historical colonial context that produced this status' we can see how South Asian women have been constructed in such pathologised ways. Whilst a plethora of work has been undertaken to critique such pathologised imagery (Parmar, 1982; Brah, 1996; Narayan, 1997) problematic perceptions continue to underscore South Asian women's identities. It is clear that the notion of 'culture'

requires a deeper and contextual understanding rather than ‘as a bounded, impermeable, monolithic entity’ (Gillespie, 1995:206).

Without doubt *Fire*, *Subhah* and *The Journey* have recognised and created awareness of female same sex desire and have challenged the ‘Asian culture’ paradigm to some extent. However, still the modern/tradition dichotomy discursively positions and constructs South Asian women’s subjectivities through culturalist expectations which can contribute to the stereotyping of South Asian women.

Religion

The complex representation of religion remains prolific in the ways nationalist discourses on mothers, wives and daughters construct images of the idealised,, traditional, self-sacrificing woman. Such representations draw heavily on national imagery of Mother India which Ramaswamy argues is symbolic of the struggle and self-sacrifice India had to make to secure independence (Ramaswamy, 2010). She further argues ‘that the emergence of mother as nation was a product of colonial mapping at a time when India was struggling for independence but also the ways in which Mother India was presented as a mother goddess which represented the force to give birth to and nurture a new state that could overcome religious and ideological conflict’ (Ramaswamy, 2010:227). The symbolism is represented in both *Fire* and *Subhah* and to a lesser extent in *The Journey* of how women are depicted as self-sacrificing and how they manage their emotional and sexual struggles as wives, mothers, daughters and daughter- in- laws. The title *Fire* symbolises the sacred nature of Agni (fire) as the receiver of sacrifices and the intermediary with the Gods (Mahn and Watt, 2014). Set within this canon, the women also are given highly religious names which within Hindu religion encapsulate the Ramayana, the Sanskrit text where Sita is consigned to a fire

to test her purity, devotion and chastity which she survives unharmed (Mahn and Watt, 2014). Whilst this symbolism is captured by the music of Ramayan playing continuously in the background in *Fire*, there are also visual clips of the Ramayan available to the audience (Mahn and Watt, 2014). This is captured in the figures 3 and 4 below:



Figure 3



Figure 4

In figure 3, the scene features a theatrical performance of the Ramayan watched by Ashok and his Guru as Sita emerges from the fire unscathed; In figure 4, Mundu the servant finishes masturbating in front of the matriarch Biji whilst the Ramayan is on the television screen; Radha's sari towards the concluding frames in the film also see her emerging unharmed from the flames ignited in the kitchen. Religious coding is also evident in *Subhah* when Savitri, as the new warden, introduces communal prayer into reformatory life.



Figure 5

The imagery of all the women praying through religious singing is a response to the ways in which the sacred value of woman and wife is restored within the reformatory. Savitri herself comments about the reputations of the women in the reformatory stating that if they were 'good' Indian woman and had not undertaken 'bad' things, they would not be subjected to life in the reformatory (*Subhah* 1.35).

The reaffirmation of religious codes used in the films instil a sense that the only space for South Asian women is the space of domesticity which can regulate protection from outside forces. Women stepping outside of this space can also be put at risk of exploitation. To illustrate this point further, there is a specific scene when Savitri is trying to regulate the reformatory of corruptive practices but also receives a threatening telephone call. Following

this scene, Savitri flees her office and is seen running to her flat for safety although it is unclear whether she is being pursued which produces some anxiety about the ways in which spaces outside of domesticity are coded as unsafe. Similarly when ‘cases’ are brought before the reformatory panel, decisions are made to either ‘send them back’ to their husbands or fathers which only serves to perpetuate notions of subordination and submission under patriarchal control and suppress any form of agency for the women in the reformatory. We also see how Savitri returns to her husband’s home unable to ‘cope’ with her post as Warden only to find that her husband has been entangled in a relationship whilst she has been working away. Savitri is then asked by her husband to continue in this triangulatory relationship to which she expresses distress and discomfort. Whilst the film infers that it is the ‘duty’ of women to meet the emotional and sexual needs of their husbands, some form of agency is demonstrated when Savitri is seen to make the decision to leave her husband. Similarly, towards the end of the film, Savitri is also seen alone which indicates some sort of challenge to hegemonic national discourse on wives, mothers and daughters. It can be argued that the ways in which symbolic religious codes are used in both films only seeks to elucidate the reductive ways in which religion is used to position women as subordinate and oppressed within the spaces afforded to them in both *Fire* and *Subhah*.

The religious significance of the ghanta (bell) is instrumental as it is used to ward off evil spirits and also used in puja (deities) within Hinduism (Mahn and Watt, 2014). Whilst signifying a religious symbol, the ghanta is also used by Biji in *Fire* as a form of communication but also to signal her disapproval and distress to the sexual violations around her and also against herself (Mahn and Watt, 2014). For example, the ghanta signals disapproval from Biji’s observations of the growing relationship of her daughters-in-law when they enact a scene from a Bollywood movie with Sita in her husband’s clothing. The

ghanta also signals the distress Biji experiences (through personal sexual violation by the male servant Mundu), whilst he masturbates and ejaculates in front of her.



Figure 6

The scene cleverly alternates from showing Mundu masturbating and ejaculating whilst watching pornography to scenes which show the Indian epic of Mahabharat when Radha checks on Biji as signalled by the bell ringing. The scene elucidates the ways in which desire, sexual power and control are symbolised by the ghanta and bell ringing within the extended family.

Karva Chauth

The ways in which religious rituals are used to symbolise women as subordinated and oppressed is seen in *Fire* when both Radha and Sita participate in the festival of Karva Chauth; when married women fast for a day to ensure a long life for their husbands. The fast is broken at moonrise when the husband offers his wife some water and food (Pandey1, 2001). To illustrate this point further, the work of Freeman highlights the ways in which devotional practices and sacraments are used across many religions which she argues can bring about inner change and draw communities together. As Freeman states,

I'm taken with the idea of treating texts the ways that sacraments are treated: take, eat, this is my body, this is my text. Breaking them, taking them, eating them, drinking them as if they were body and blood capable of not only transforming our own minds, but also our individual bodies and of manifesting not expertise but communities across previously divided spaces and times (Freeman 2011:182).

Whilst Freeman argues that sacraments can help us understand the devotional practices, the religious ritual of Karva Chauth reduces woman to her body which can be argued is quintessentially an emblem of an oppressive Indian culture and tradition (Pandey1, 2001). Whilst the symbolism of Karva Chauth is underscored by the sacred and devotion, *Fire* cleverly illuminates and challenges the heteronormative space it occupies. For example, Sita's husband, Jatin fails to return on the evening of Karva Chauth and it is Radha who breaks the fast and performs the symbolic sacramental ritual by offering water to Sita which is symbolic of the devotion between the two women although Sita at one point in the scene quips 'I'm sick of all this devotion. We can find choices', thus challenging the heteronormative subtext attached to the ritual of Karva Chauth. Sita is also seen to exert some form of agency by questioning her own decision to observe rituals of Karva Chauth and does so by stating, 'Somebody just has to press my button, this button marked tradition, and I start responding like a trained monkey'. (*Fire*: 40:2).



Figure 6

Figure 6 shows the ways in which subordination is inscribed onto the female body through the ritual of Karva Chauth as it attempts to 'regiment the body's behaviours which then have interpersonally and socially identifiable meanings and functions within the social systems' (Pandey1, 2001:).

The reproduction of religious ideologies have been used in *Fire*, *Subhah* and *The Journey* to shape the identities of the main characters in all films. Although the films seek to elucidate the paradoxical nature of religion as both emancipatory and oppressive, ultimately these films reproduce the same ideological assumptions present in Bollywood films which view religion as a central identity rather than a part of many different identities.

Sexuality, Sexual power and control

Alongside the narrative of female same sex sexuality, celibacy and intense male relationships form the range of expressions of sexuality, sexual power and control within the family situation. *Fire* captures this through the narratives of the male characters, Ashok, Jatin and Mundu and the different ways in which desire and repression is expressed.

Ashok is the eldest son and is represented as straddling two conflicting strands of Indian ideology that emerge from this tradition (Marsh and Brasted, 2002). The dichotomous relationship of patriarchy and celibacy are seen in Ashok's disavowal of sex (which then becomes a sexual and emotional rejection for Radha) and also by insisting that Radha lies next to him to test his resilience. Ashok is also seen to spend a considerable time with his male guru who he supports financially and as Mahn and Watt point out, this relationship is implicitly homoerotic due to the devotion Ashok displays and the physical contact between the two (Mahn and Watt, 2014). For example, Ashok is seen massaging his guru's feet which mirrors a scene where Sita massages Radha's feet earlier in the film (Mahn and Watt, 2014). It can be argued that the sexual control Ashok exerts over Radha also reduces her sexual autonomy and choice in terms of heterosexual and same-sex desire. This representation is reversed in *Subhah* as it is Savitri who consistently refuses sex with her husband. Here, Savitri displays sexual autonomy through sexual abstinence although the film recoils from articulating any possibility of same sex desire by Savitri (Gopinath, 2005).

In contrast to Ashok, his younger brother Jatin displays characteristics of hedonistic post-modernity (Marsh and Brasted, 2002) which were 'sold' to middle class India in the latter part of the twentieth century through film, television and advertising (Mann and Watt, 2014). Jatin also displaces his sexual energy away from the home by having an affair with his girlfriend Julie, clearly rejecting Sita emotionally and sexually. Although Jatin has sex with Sita, this is understood in terms of the value placed on motherhood and women's ability to reproduce as Jatin states clearly that having a baby would occupy her implying that this would fulfil her emotionally, and spiritually.

Fire also captures the issue of repressed male desire from the male servant Mundu who continues to masturbate in front of the powerless matriarch Biji who is unable to voice her

distress due to her paralysis. Mundu exerts his sexual power and energy by forcing Biji to watch pornography as she can only voice her distress by the consistent ringing of the bell which gathers pace to mirror Mundu's masturbation and eventual ejaculation. Although the matriarch is a powerful symbol of power and control within both *Subhah* and *Fire*, Biji's 'muteness' in *Fire* is representative of the lack of power she has over the family and the abuse inflicted on her by Mundu (Niranjana, 2000). For example, Biji's inability to voice her concerns also represents the ways in which Biji is unable to control the forces of change within the household as she silently observes Radha and Sita engage in performative acts of gender play and same sex sexuality.

The alternative representations of femininity and sexuality in *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey* have no doubt contributed to the fracturing of familial, cultural and sexual ideologies. (Ratna, 2000). Whilst challenging oppressive patriarchal control over women's bodies, the films to a certain extent have also reproduced the ways in which South Asian women's sexuality is under constant surveillance and hidden under private domains. Whilst conveying alternative sexualities, the films to some degree reproduce ideologies that same-sex desire is dangerous to the status quo (Ratna, 2000).

Desire

The context of women's lives has either denied the existence of female sexual desire or acknowledged it only by suppressing women's voices and bodies. (Creed, 1993). As such cultural resistance then continues to reify and perpetuate women's bodies as objects of men's fantasies and desires. (Morrissey, 2003). As such, the economy of desire (Hart, 1994) then operates and focuses solely on male desire as either heterosexual or homosexual which has led to the erasure of women within discourses of desire (Hart, 1994 cited in Morrissey,

2003). For example, Hart uses Freud's work to elucidate this point further and highlights how Freud insisted that boys alone developed active desires such as scopophilia and epistemophilia (the gaze) whilst girls relinquished these in favour of narcissism and exhibitionism (to be looked at) as the object of the gaze (Hart, 1994 cited in Morrissey, 2003). Hence, according to Freud's analysis, boys learned to desire the other and girls learned to desire themselves as objects for male eyes and in doing so submerged their own active desire in order to become the passive desired (Hart, 1994 cited in Morrissey, 2003). Hart cites Teresa de Lauretis' summary of such notions by the following statement, 'One may be born a woman or a man, *but one can only desire as a man*' (Hart, 1994 cited in Morrissey, 2003: 154) which elucidates how the economy of desire in fact reifies the erasure of female sexual desire. Whilst Hart (1994) locates desire as intrinsically male, she does so by arguing that male desire has nothing to do with desiring to know the other – woman, but is locked in the male desire for a male fantasy of a woman which she argues is a reflection of man himself and refers to this as a male narcissistic fantasy (Hart, 1994 cited in Morrissey, 2003). Similarly, we can argue that historically same sex desire was too located outside of this economy and deemed impossible as it was based on notions that 'lesbians' were 'not women' but desired males in female bodies (Hart, 1994: 15 cited in Morrissey, 2003) . Here we can see how such discourse ensured heteropatriarchal systems remained intact and desire between women 'was not only repressed but completely fore-closed' (Hart, 1994: 15 cited in Morrissey,2003: 154). As such, the existence of female same-sex desire was closed down to avoid destabilizing heteropatriarchal systems (Morrissey, 2003).

In relation to the study, Lorde's analysis of the power of the erotic has been helpful in locating how the economy of desire (Hart, 1994) is not only intrinsically masculine but also through its reduction to the sexual, has systematically prevented the acknowledgement and

recognition of the power that resides within women themselves (Lorde, 1984). Lorde uses the erotic as a resource and highlights how this lies within each of us as a deeply female and spiritual plane and is rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognised feeling (Lorde, 1984).

In relation to the study, this is a useful entry point to discuss how *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey* have been influential towards dismantling the organising technologies of moral-social norms and values, the home, family and religion within South Asian cultures. In doing so, *Fire* has according to Pandey1, ‘... heralded a new era of body. In sum, the narrative offers an anxiety-ridden spiritual resolution of the dilemma between desire and identity’ (Pandey1, 2001: 120). It is precisely the juxtaposition of desire and self-regulation which is taken up by Radha’s character which places the body as the object of physical need, for pleasure, reproduction and for experimental use by her husband Ashok. This ‘taken for granted ownership’ (Pandey1, 2001), of Radha’s body and its availability for Ashok to practice his experiments and testing of celibacy is questioned by Radha when she asks Ashok “But how does it help me?”, Ashok simply responds by stating “By helping me you are doing your duty as my wife.” (*Fire*: 31.54). The narratives in this scene illustrate how abstinence is used to suppress sexual desire and the ways in which this is linked to religious and *dharmic* beliefs that sexual desire is sinful (Pandey1, 2001). Similarly, sexuality and sin are also juxtaposed in *The Journey*. This is captured in a scene when Delilah is locked in her bedroom after her mother discovers her affair with Kiran and subsequently threatens her with marriage. Delilah’s Uncle enters her bedroom and states, “Don’t worry dear. God forgives all sinners” (*The Journey* 1.23.17). It is only through an interrogation of such masculinist norms and practices that we can expose how this type of behaviour regulates desire and sexuality and subjugates the female body.

In *Fire* and *Subhah*, it is only when Radha and Savitri are depicted as sexually unavailable to their respective husbands that the films offer a recovery of the emancipated self and by doing so it also threatens to dismantle the idealised notions of home, marriage, cultural and religious norms and values and the hypocrisy which surround these concepts (Pandy1, 2001). Similarly we see the brutality and violence depicted within the sexual act between Jatin and Sita, whilst Jatin turns his back on Sita and goes to sleep, Sita gets up to find the bedsheet soaked in blood. Not only is this symbolic of 'the virgin wife' preserving her body for her husband but also indicates a psychic inscription on the female body - one which is only to be expressed in relation to their husbands and marriage (Pandy1, 2001:128). The imagery is used to highlight the trauma and brutality of women's experiences in relation to marriage but it also exposes how this can be stopped by Sita by refusing sex with Jatin (Pandy1, 2001).

The brutality of women's experiences in relation to marriage and desire is also depicted in *The Journey*. When both Delilah and Kiran are confronted about their desire for each other, the young women are subjected to threats of marriage. Delilah's Uncle states, 'Get her married. You have no other choice - once this news spreads, she'll get no-one - at least no-one from a good family' (*The Journey* 1.21.20). The other male relative states, 'I agree, we must focus on how to save her from this crisis'. Similarly, Kiran's parents also echo the same sentiments as both parents agree that they need to marry Kiran although Kiran objects and states she does not want a 'hollow marriage' to which her father adds, that nobody in the community would want her if her sexuality was exposed. (*The Journey* 1.35.06). Whilst Delilah is seen to conform to marriage in order to save the family from being ostracised, Kiran is seen to voice her agency by stating that she and Delilah will 'run off' with her Uncle's help. Her father responds by highlighting, 'Govinda is a man- it's different for him. You need to understand your limitations' (*The Journey* 1.35.33). Hence highlighting the

economic viability of this plan is limited because she is a woman which only reproduces gendered and sexual ideologies. Kiran's mother also informs her that if she does 'run off' with Delilah, the reality is that she would never be allowed to return home (*The Journey* 1.36.11), thus reinforcing and reproducing powerful gendered and sexual ideologies and representations of same-sex desire and the repercussions attached to this.

The representation of same sex desire is also seen through the mimicry of a heterosexual couple when Sita dresses in her husband's clothes and both sisters-in-law dance to a Bollywood song. It is at this point that the peeping servant Mundu states 'that there is too much electricity' between the sisters-in-law prompting the viewer to see beneath the veneer of idealised middle class family life (Pandy1, 2001). The peeping element displayed by Mundu also highlights how cinema can offer a number of pleasures, one such being Scopophilia – the pleasure of looking (Mulvey,1989). By stating there is 'too much electricity' between the two sisters-in-law, Mundu turns them into objects of the curious gaze for the audience by locating lesbianism within the politics of visibility and public sphere (Gopinath, 2005). *The Journey* and *Subhah* similarly locate same sex desire through song and dance sequences which are seen not only as scenes to express sexual fantasy but also where the female body and female sexuality are displayed in ways which transcend the narrative confines of the script (Gopinath, 2005). At this point it is important to clarify the importance of song and dance sequences as they can be used as aspirational sequences where one can seek to become through the act of performance. As formal acting sequences may carry a degree of formality and inhibition, this may be lowered in song and dance sequences not just in sexual fantasy but also fantasy sequences in general. Hence song and dance sequences seek to play out the non-normative. Unsurprisingly, all three films attempt to create a song and dance sequence which is used as a space to disrupt heterosexual narratives which dominate

Bollywood cinema and society more broadly. As such, careful reflection on symbolic and visual imagery within each film was considered with particular reference to scenes which depicted same sex desire which were either veiled subtly through song and dance routines or represented through a lens of sickness and pathology (Gopinath, 2005). For example, In *Subhah*, the women are celebrating a festival as the camera focuses on the ‘lesbian’ characters who gaze at each other adoringly during a song and dance routine. Savitri meanwhile is drawn into the camera focus and exchanges looks between the two characters as she both returns and receives their admiring and curious glances. Here the reworking of triangulatory relations between the two lesbian characters and Savitri, locate female desire outside of the private domestic space which is only vaguely inferred through a song and dance routine (Gopinath, 2005). *The Journey* also captures female same sex desire within a triangulatory relationship which sees Delilah performing a group song and dance routine whilst Kiran and Rajan (male) gaze at her adoringly. As both song and dance routines function as a ‘space of resistance’ for the abjected other (Gopinath, 2005), she argues that, for Bollywood to register queer female desire on the screen, it requires,

Reading the codes of Bollywood queerly demands that we look not so much for characters who are explicitly marked as sexual or gender deviants, but rather to those moments emerging at the fissures of rigidly heterosexual structures that can be transformed into queer readings’ (Gopinath, 2005: 103).

By rejecting the male body, the films elucidate the emancipation of same sex desire through the symbiosis of the erotic and emotional in the female (Pandy1, 2001). It is through the narratives of *Fire* which help us to understand that it is not through an uncaring relationship the women have with their respective husbands, but the deep attachment which is formed by the two sisters- in- law (Pandy1, 2001). As Radha states, ‘there is no point in living [...] I

desire to live. I desire Sita. I desire her warmth, her compassion and her body. I desire to live again' (*Fire*). However Pandy1, argues that *Fire* recodes same sex desire by locating this within the spiritual self, the home and destiny which is romanticised and does not coincide with forms of lived sexuality (Pandy1, 2001). Whilst *Fire* positions desire through the authentic love of a couple, it also reformulates passion and love as feminine qualities thus promoting essentialised versions of femininity where woman represents kindness, care and consideration.

Subhah, *Fire* and *The Journey* elucidate the ways in which illusions of 'normality' are exposed. Whilst the main character roles are confined to their gendered identities, each is striving for his or her version of freedom and choice (Marsh and Brasted, 2002). As Marsh and Brasted state, 'For Radha and Sita, as wives, this freedom is disallowed even more so than it is for Mundu the servant. His transgressions are easily forgiven for his role in society is not as crucial as that of the women with their burden of maintaining social order and purity' (Marsh and Brasted 2002: 242). The scene very cleverly captures the social hierarchy represented by Mundu within the household as class and caste also require further critical analysis. In *Subhah*, Savitri is also seen to restore some kind of social order by returning to the family home and resuming her gendered identity as wife. Whilst the narratives have offered some voice and agency to the women in all three films, the maintenance of nationalist ideals of respect and obedience perpetuate the ways in which the women are portrayed.

In contrast to Bollywood cinema, *Fire*, *Subhah* and *The Journey* have created discursive spaces which depict South Asian women as reclaiming their bodies and sexual identities. Without doubt, the films have disrupted dominant discourses where the abjected 'other' depicted in the characters are seen to recognise that their identities are constructed in ideological notions of Indian womanhood (Gopinath, 2005). Whilst all three films offer some

form of agency to the characters, the question remains whether the voices of the South Asian women are actually heard? In the landmark essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Spivak posits the claim that the Indian woman remains voiceless within insurmountable patriarchal and colonial oppression (Spivak, 1988).

Whilst the films represent and speak on behalf of South Asian women where they are allowed voice and agency, this is always from the vantage point of colonial and nationalist texts inscribed on the South Asian female body which is depicted and constructed to exhibit some aspects of subaltern identity (Spivak, 1988).

Conclusion

It is through the exposure of desire, family, culture, religion, and sexual power and women's sexuality that *Fire*, *Subhah* and *The Journey* interrupt the internalisation of 'izzat' and 'sharam' but also capture the ways in which women can reorganise the gendered identities afforded to them. Whilst the films rest on the intricacies of competing discourses on identity, sexuality, nationalism, religion, modernity and globalisation (Mahn and Watt 2014), they are also imbued with ambiguity and complexities. As a result, the films are unable to articulate authentic pathways for women to pursue outside of the private sphere.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the thesis has been to unravel some of the complexities relating to the sexual representations of South Asian women within Indian cinema. Grappling with the challenges of nationalist discourses which underscore the Bollywood film industry, the thesis has utilised independent South Asian lesbian cinema to highlight the ways in which same-sex desire is represented. Utilising films such as *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey*, the thesis charts and navigates the subjectivities of South Asian women and explores how alternative cinema has been instrumental in shifting representations of South Asian women away from a victim status to one which affords some sexual autonomy and agency.

An important question within the thesis has therefore been to analyse the ways in which representations of South Asian women in Indian cinema continue to reproduce binary imagery – one which depicts the South Asian woman as either the passive victim of patriarchal and sexual control or the ‘Other’ and ‘Outsider’ who challenges the social order by exerting her sexual and political agency (Takhar, 2013). Whilst alternative cinema raises important questions and seeks to challenge such ideological binaries, it does so by locating same-sex desire within in the public domain which only serves to perpetuate the ‘sacred’ space of the ‘home’. Such associations lie in legacies of colonial and anti- colonial nationalist Indian discourses where the ‘home’ is used as a primary site where otherness in racial, religious, national and gendered terms was imagined (Gopinath, 2005). Marked by powerful patriarchal gendered and sexual arrangements, all three films view the home through the lens of purity and tradition which emerges as an uncontested and undisturbed site, a space to be escaped in pursuit of liberation and freedom of sexual expression for the leading characters.

The thesis therefore highlights some of the complexities of how South Asian women negotiate between their subjective experiences and essentialised identities.

It is apparent from analysing *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey*, that the films elucidate thematic discussions around concepts of marriage, religion, motherhood, culture, 'izzat' and 'sharam' which continue to be instrumental in shaping the identities of South Asian women. The thesis explores the ways in which such concepts continue to be utilised not only to challenge dominant cultural and societal norms and values but also the ways in which they still continue to reproduce these norms to a certain extent. Each theme indicates the ways in which South Asian women negotiate their individual subjectivities within such powerful ideologies of what it means to be an Indian woman. The thesis unravels how Indian womanhood is inscribed by nationalist and colonial discourses which continue to be reproduced to a certain extent within independent South Asian lesbian cinema.

It would seem that pathologised categorisations such as docile, passive and complacent feminine sexualities remain prolific within hegemonic discourses relating to South Asian women. As Brah (1996) highlights, South Asian women are viewed through a limited lens where she is depicted as 'gentle', 'dependent', 'quiet' and 'sensitive' which mark her subjectivity and place her as the 'inferiorized 'other' and the 'outsider'. As stereotyping is such a powerful process, any expression of sexual autonomy does not reach beyond the boundaries of heteronormativity for South Asian women (Gopinath, 2005). Whilst nationalist discourses perpetuate such gendered and sexual ideologies within cinematic representations, the thesis has aimed also to explore some of the complexities which South Asian women experience in their everyday lives. Ultimately, through an exploration of contemporary independent South Asian lesbian cinema illustrated through *Subhah*, *Fire* and *The Journey* representations of femininity and sexuality remain intimately wedded to deeply embedded

cultural and societal norms. As such, this dissertation contends that contemporary Indian lesbian cinema, whilst challenging the dominant norms of a gendered and heterosexualised society simultaneously reinforces these same norms relating to femininity and sexuality.

It is through thematic discussion that awareness might be raised, which in turn has the potential to lead to an enhanced sense of how South Asian women continue to negotiate their identities within this complex arena.

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