The elements trilogy in films of deepa mehta

Environment, Water

Abstract: This thesis examines Deepa Mehta’s trilogy—Water, Earth, Fire—and the trilogy’s exploration and contestation of colonial, anti-colonial nationalist, and religious ideologies as intersecting with patriarchal norms to enact symbolic and actualviolenceon the bodies of women. I argue that Mehta’s trilogy foregrounds the ways in which patriarchal nationalism legitimizes violence against women’s bodies and sexualities through different social and cultural practices and discourses which are interconnected.

To explain the historical and contemporary contexts of Indian women’s domination and the ways they resist this domination, Mehta’s films unveil the underlying power relations among social forces such as colonialism, anti-colonial reform movements, post-colonial nationalism, religious and patriarchal heteronormative discourses which make women’s domination an acceptable cultural norm.

Through an analysis of the experiences of women portrayed in Mehta’s films, I posit that the constructions of the Indian nation, in terms of nationalculture, tradition and identity, are gendered in specific ways that construct the Indian woman, both symbolically and physically, as a site where nationalist ideology provokes their political liberation, self-representation and agency. Mehta’s films disrupt these historical and contemporary practices, discourses and norms through the depictions of women’s multiple identities, experiences and sexualities.

Her works demonstrate the ways in which women constantly resist, contest and negotiate with this domination and violence through their daily activities and narratives. Introduction: Deepa Mehta’s Trilogy Indo-Canadian film

director Deepa Mehta was born in 1950 in Amritsar, a border city between India and Pakistan located in India (Banning and Levitin 274, Monk 201). Mehta's father, who was a film distributor, was forced to relocate to Amritsar from Lahore because of the violence of the partition of India in 1947.

Growing within a filmicenvironment, Mehta was already involved with documentary filmmaking when she completed her master's degree inPhilosophyat Delhi University. When Mehta was considering pursuing a PhD, she was invited to work with a production company to make documentaries for the Indian government (Banning and Levitin 274). While working in this company, Mehta learned various film techniques such as editing, sound, camera work, and narrative development, and she made her first documentary film on a child bride.

During her filming on another documentary, Mehta met with Paul Saltzman who was making a documentary on the High Commissioner of India at that time. Mehta moved to Canada in 1973 after marrying Saltzman and formed a production company, Sunrise Films with her brother photojournalist Dilip Mehta and Saltzman (Banning and Levitin 274 and Monk 201). At Sunrise, Mehta directed, produced, and edited for television, including the series Danger Bay.

In 1985, Mehta made a documentary on her brother photojournalist Dilip Mehta entitled Travelling Light: The Photojournalism of Dilip Mehta which gained international acclaim at the 1987 New York International Film and Television Festival. At this time, Mehta also won Best Feature Film Award at the 11th International Women's Film Festival in Italy for a television feature

Martha, Ruth & Edie. But Mehta earned her first success as a feature film debut when she filmed Sam & Me in 1991.

Sam & Me is a story of a young Indian boy who arrives in Canada with hopes and expectations but becomes frustrated when he can work only as a caretaker of an elderly father of 1his uncle's employer. According to Jacqueline Levitin, "[m]ore than a tale of a young Indian abroad, the film is an indictment of a country that is multicultural in name only. Coming from a comfortablefamilybackground, Mehta had been shocked in Canada to find herself viewed as a brown-skinned ' other'" (282).

After Sam & Me' s success, Mehta worked on episodes of George Lucas's television series The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles (1992) and Travels with Father (1994). In 1994, Mehta directed a big budget feature Camilla, a Canadian/UK production. Camilla also tells a story of afriendship, this time between an elderly woman and a young woman. When this film failed to fulfill box office expectations, Mehta decided to make only those films which inspired her. In 1996, Mehta made her first film of an elemental trilogy, Fire.

Fire (1996) is a story of two sisters-in-law who challenge the patriarchal religious traditions and heteronormative roles and duties assigned to women in a joint Hindu family and get involved in a homoerotic relationship. Fire engendered criticism and violent reception among Hindu religious fundamentalists, Indian and diasporic scholars and feminists because of this film's depiction of a lesbian relationship and the alleged misrepresentation of women and Hindu culture.

In 1998, Mehta produced and directed her second film of the elemental trilogy 1947 Earth1 based on diasporic Pakistani writer Bapsi Sidhwa's novel Cracking India, which portrays the horrible ethnic violence enacted on men and women during the partition of India in 1947. When Mehta began her filming of Water in 2000, the last film of the elemental trilogy, about the social, cultural, economic, and religious ostracism of Hindu widows in India, she was forced to leave India without completing her shooting because of the violence of Hindu fundamentalists against this film.

In 2002 and 2003, Mehta directed Boollywood/Hollywood and the Republic of Love, but went on to complete the shooting of Water in Sri Lanka in 2005, which was subsequently nominated for the 2007 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. Mehta directed Heaven on Earth in 2008, which depictsdomestic violenceenacted on a newly married immigrant woman in Canada. Currently, Mehta is in the final stage of completing the adaptation of Indian born British writer Salman Rushdie's novel Midnight's Children, which will be released in 2012.

Deepa Mehta's work, especially her elemental trilogy--Fire (1996), Earth (1998) and Water (2005)--has received international acclaim, instigated controversy, and caused debate in international and Indian newspapers and magazines, and among scholars because these films depict women's domination by the patriarchal religious and nationalist ideologies of India during the historical period represented. These films portray women's identity, empowerment, and sexuality as a challenge to the embedded power relations in Indian society and culture.

At the same time, Mehta’s trilogy has engendered a lot of contro versy because of Mehta’s diasporic, hence privileged, subject position. For example, Indian and diasporic scholars and feminist critics Madhu Kishwar and Uma Parameswaran critique Mehta’s portrayals of Indian culture, women, and religion and question Mehta’s privileged diasporic position and her lack of authenticity. The Hindu religious fundamentalist groups also burned Mehta’s effigy, vandalized her film set, and proclaimed death threats to Mehta, and these groups forced Mehta to leave India without completing the shooting of Water.

The diasporic and transnational identity of Mehta, as well as the transnational mode of Mehta’s production--for example, her international crew comprises British, French, Italians, Hungarians, and Indians-- and the transnational reception of Mehta’s films across North America, India, and the South Asian diaspora demand a nuanced understanding of Mehta’s transnational filmmaking practices and its contribution to diasporicfilm and media studies as well as feministscholarship.

More importantly, the depictions of feminist politics and sexual politics, women’s subjectivity and empowerment, and women’s historiography, as well as the deconstruction of post-colonial patriarchal and nationalist ideologies in Mehta’s elemental trilogy play a significant part in contributing transnational feminist perspectives and aesthetics to transnational and diasporic film and media studies.

To explore the feminist politics and aesthetics of Mehta’s trilogy, I have analyzed the narratives of Mehta’s films through various theoretical approaches across disciplines, such as transnational and diasporic film

studies, post-colonial feminist studies and film, transnational feminist frameworks, media studies and theorisations of diaspora, andcultural identity.

In film studies, transnational or cross-cultural analysis is comparatively new (Butler 119), but in feminist studies, transnational practice is very influential as a critique of globalfeminismwhich has failed to deal with alterity, difference, and diversity in feminist works across cultural divides (Grewal and Kaplan 2).

Before analysing Mehta's contribution to transnational filmmaking and feminist practices, it is necessary to discuss the significance and uses of transnationalism, diaspora, post- colonialism, and transnational feminist politics in the context of nation, culture, location and dislocation, gender, sexuality, and identity, which are the major theoretical concerns of my analysis. Transnationalism, Diaspora and Post-colonialism:

According to Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal, the primary aspects of transnationalism are " migration flows; the demise or irrelevance of the nation-state and the emergence of alternative identities that are not primarily national; the existence and study of diaspora; a form of neo-colonialism that implicates the transnational in movements of capital; and the ' NGO- ization' of social movements to supplant the international and the global" (Kaplan and Grewal quoted in Marciniak, Katarzyna, Aniko Imre, and Aine O'Healy 4). There has been a rapid increase of migration across the world since 1980s.

Because of the multiple and shifting identities of immigrants, the increasing transnationalization of cultural production, distribution, and consumption, and the fundamental transformation in the political economy of capitalism of late twentieth century, it is no longer enough to analyze the complexity of cultural production, distribution, and consumption by using a binary model of the world system such as global-local and center-periphery (Marciniak, Katarzyna, Aniko Imre, and Aine O'Healy 4, Brah 178-179, Grewal and Kaplan 9-16).

As Arjun Appadurai points out, there is a significant disjuncture and difference in global cultural economy: "[t]he new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models" (Appadurai 6) because these binary models may erase the existence of multiple expressions of local identities and resistances, and also overlook multilayered power relations embedded at various levels of socio-political agendas (Grewal and Kaplan 11).

In this context of cultural production, distribution and consumption, Grewal and Kaplan use the term transnational to problematize a " purely locational politics of global-local or center- periphery" (13). In this thesis, I have used the term transnational to question any homogenous and monolithic construction of local and global culture and identities. Rather, this term transnational can be used to explore the historically specific effect and influence of cultural productions and to understand the complex and multiply-constituted identities through the analysis of cultural production.

Further, I have applied this term to explain the cross-connection between cultures, power relations, and identity formation at various levels of socio-political agendas, rather than to focus on a purely local or hegemonic global. Most important, the termtransnational can be applied along with the critiques offered by post-colonial and post-colonial diaspora studies which interrogate the notions of unified and static national and cultural identity. The term post-colonial can be used in multiple ways.

The two most pertinent to my study are post-colonialism as a social condition --“ the condition resulting from a particular form of geopolitical cultural and economic domination and the subsequent struggles engaged against this domination that have been consolidated by the bourgeoisie as anticolonial nationalisms” (Desai10); the second is as a political critique of colonialism and modernity which can be better understood through the links of power and knowledge (Desai 10).

While post-colonialism as a social condition is significant to our understanding of the migration, displacement and the formation of post-colonial diaspora, the term post-colonialism as a critique of colonialism and nationalism is equally important to critique the Eurocentric discourses of hegemonic global culture and identity.

As Jigna Desai argues, “[P]ostcolonial critique theoretically and politically attempts to identify and to deconstruct the universalizing Eurocentric discourses of colonialism, nationalism, and modernity through challenging universalist narratives of history, critiquing the form of the nation, and interrogating the relationship between power and knowledge” (10). Similarly, the term diaspora can be used as a potential theoretical framework to

theorize nation, “ race” 2, and transnationality in relation to power, culture, and identity.

In this thesis, I have used diaspora as a theoretical framework to critique the concept of pure and fixed home, place, nation, and origin and to question the ways in which the construction of fixed origin and home play important roles in defining who embraces the hegemonic ideas of home and nationbut went on to complete the shooting of Water in Sri Lanka in 2005, which was subsequently nominated for the 2007 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.

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In this thesis, I have used diaspora as a theoretical framework to critique the concept of pure and fixed home, place, nation, and origin and to question the

ways in which the construction of fixed origin and home play important roles in defining who embraces the hegemonic ideas of home and nation 2 This is a highly-contested and a constructed category of social organization and identification that originates in discourse.

Therefore, I place the term “ race” in quotations marks though out my work to underscore the fact that this is a problematic construction, yet it is necessary to name racialization and to discuss it because it circulates in contemporary discourse and has real effects on people’s lives as Mehta’s work shows. 6 and who does not. Here, diaspora is being used to interrogate the hegemonic nationalist construction of home, space, and cultural and national identity. Diaspora also interrogates the social, cultural, and political processes through which inclusion and exclusion operate and power is formed through the construction of hegemonic identity.

As Avtar Brah points out, “[T]he concept of diaspora . . . is embedded within a multi-axial understanding of power; one that problematises the notion of ‘ minority’/ ‘ majority’” (Brah 189). Analyzing the concept diaspora in relation to borders and multi-axial locationality of transnational movement, culture and capital, Brah proposes a new concept entitled “ diaspora space” which not only indicates those who have migrated but also those natives who are constructed and represented as outsider and marginalized (208-209).

According to Brah, Diaspora space is the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes. It is where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and transgressive

imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition (Brah 208).

In this thesis, especially in the chapter on Fire, I have used the term diaspora as a cultural identity which critiques the gendered formation of national and cultural identity and sense of belonging by the hegemonic nationalist discourses through the discourses of pure tradition and past in opposition to the contaminated west (Hall quoted in Desai 20).

To understand the ethnocentric and gendered construction of home, nation, and identity, my research seeks to respond to several questions: how does Mehta critique patriarchal and nationalist constructions of static and pure home, tradition, and mythic past through the depiction of transculturalism? 7 How can feminist politics be applied to challenge these nationalist constructions of home and space which are inherently gendered?

How are women's bodies posited in this imaginary construction of national and cultural identity? How does Mehta portray cultural identity in relation to gender, " race", class, nation, and sexuality through the examination of multiple axes of differentiation? How do gender and feminist politics play important role in the analysis of diaspora and transnationalism? To understand the feminist politics of Mehta's work, it is necessary to focus on post-colonial and transnational feminist critical frameworks.

Situating feminist and gender politics in relation to the politics of location and identity, transnational feminist practices critique the universal nature of feminist movements (Grewal and Kaplan 17). According to Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, there is an imperative need to address the concerns of

women around the world in the historicized particularity of their relationship to multiple patriarchies as well as to international economic hegemonies ... We need to articulate the relationship of gender to scattered hegemonies such as global economic structures, patriarchal nationalisms, ‘ authentic’ forms of tradition, local structures of domination, and legal-juridical oppression on multiple levels (Grewal and Kaplan 17). To understand the historically specific oppression and domination of women and to explore the resistance and agentic power of women in a specific context of identity formation, Shari Stone- Mediatore provides significant definitions of transnational and post-colonial feminist frameworks.

According to Stone-Mediatore, By transnational feminism I refer to a theoretical and political project that confronts, with a view toward resisting, far-reaching political, economic, and cultural relations of 8 domination and the specific dangers that these relations present to women. Such a project is transnational because the relations of domination that it confronts cross over national boundaries and produce historically specific cooperative as well as hierarchical relations among women of different nations, races, and classes.

It is also postcolonial in the sense that it takes seriously the continuing social and psychological effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism and seeks ways to move beyond such colonialist relations (Stone- Mediatore128). Transnational and post-colonial feminist theorists such as Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, Ella Shohat, and Lata Moni deconstruct the Eurocentric hegemonic and monolithic constructions of “ Third World” 3 women which erase the multiple

experiences and differences of women in relation to gender, “ race”, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and nationality.

For example, Mohanty in her groundbreaking essay entitled “ Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse” interrogates western feminists’ hegemonic knowledge production which constructs a singular and monolithic subject of “ Third World” women. She argues that this construction discursively colonizes the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women all over the world (Mohanty 19).

These feminists focus on the politics of location of diverse women across the world—the politics of location identifies the historically specific experiences and similarities between women “ in diverse and asymmetrical relations, creating alternative histories, identities, and possibilities for alliances” (Kaplan 139). 3 This is a highly-contested and a constructed category of social organization and identification that originates in discourse. Therefore, I place the term “ Third World” in quotations marks though out my work to underscore the fact that this is a problematic construction. Originally coined by Adrienne Rich in the early 1980s, the term politics of location has been used in different ways as a method of interrogating and deconstructing the privileged position and identity of white feminism (Kaplan 139). However, pointing out the limitation of the politics of location and its usages in transnational and post-colonial feminist practices, Caren Kaplan argues, “[a] politics of location is most useful, then, in a feminist context when it is used to deconstruct any dominant hierarchy or hegemonic use of the term gender.

A politics of location is not useful when it is construed to be the reflection of authentic, primordial identities that are to be re-established and reaffirmed" (Kaplan 139). In women's cinema, " a feminist politics of location is articulated by those films which situate female identity in dynamic historical situations, to reveal the imbrications of technologies of gender with those of local, national and international power" (Butler 91).

My thesis therefore investigates how Mehta constructs the historically specific experiences and agentic power of women in Fire, Earth, and Water and asks how the particular context of women's oppression and domination connect the broader contexts of colonialism, nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and patriarchy. Further, how does Mehta portray the politics of location of the women protagonists by deconstructing the pure and static past? Finally, I seek to clarify the ways in which these three films in tandem posit gender and women in relation to colonialism, anti-colonialism, patriarchy, religion, and nationalism.

Post-colonialism, Gender, and Nationalism: Within Cultural Studies, Benedict Anderson's definition of nation as " an imagined political community" (Anderson 6) has provided am important materialist framework for the critical study of national cultures and identity (Butler 91). According to Anderson, "[i]t is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow- 10 members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion " (Anderson 6).

Anderson's definition of nation has provided a significant theoretical framework for understanding the socio-cultural roots and cultural systems

through which nation, nationalism, and national identities are formed. This definition is also imp[[ortant to understand the ways in which nation-state has been naturalized by nationalist myths and stories. As Anderson proposes, “ nationalism has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which-as well as against which-it came into being” (Anderson 12).

Therefore, my thesis aims to understand the socio-cultural and historical contexts of the formation of nationalist ideologies through the examination of the portrayal of nationalism in relation to colonialism, anti-colonial nationalist ideologies, religious and patriarchal discourses. My research further investigates whether nationalism is gendered by placing women’s politics and identity in the core of the politics of Indian nationalism and anti-colonial social and reform movements as depicted in Mehta’s films.

In a chapter entitled “ The Nation and Its Women,” Post-colonial Studies and Subaltern Studies scholar Partha Chatterjee elaborates the relationship between women’s politics and the politics of Indian nationalism in the nineteenth century. According to Chatterjee, the women’s question was a central issue in the social reform agenda in the early and mid-nineteenth century Bengal, but these women’s issues were eclipsed in the politics of nationalism in the last decades of the nineteenth century (Chatterjee 116).

Chatterjee argues that nationalist and social reform movements in the nineteenth- century did not address women’s questions as a feminist politics within a specific context of social relations; rather, nationalism situated women’s issues at the demarcation of Indian traditionalism in opposition to

colonial rule and to the contaminated west 11 (Chatterjee 119). Chatterjee explains this resolution of women's status and concerns in nationalist ideology by invoking a framework that separates the cultural domain into two spheres: the material and the spiritual (119).

In the material sphere such asscience and technology, rational forms of economic organization, modern methods of statecraft, Indian nationalist ideology adopted western techniques to compete with European and western development, civilization, and modernization. But in the case of the spiritual sphere, the nationalist ideology took a different approach—focusing on a distinct spiritual essence of India's national culture (Chatterjee 119-120).

At the same time, nationalist ideology posited this framework of material/ spiritual as an analogous dichotomy: the outer/world and the inner/home (Chatterjee120). The nationalist discourses posit their spiritual essence and true self in the domain of inner/ home which must be uncontaminated from the profane activities of outer world and material activities of western civilization, and women are the holder of the spiritual essence of India's cultural and national identity (Chatterjee 120).

In another essay entitled " Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized Women: the Contest in India," Partha Chatterjee demonstrates the ways in which nationalist ideology has resolved women's questions in the new contexts of social, cultural, economic, and political changes in post-colonial India. According to Chatterjee, The need to adjust to the new conditions outside the home had forced upon men a whole series of changes in their dress, foodhabits, religious observances and social relations. Each of these

capitulations now had to be compensated by an assertion of spiritual purity on the part of women.

They must not eat, drink or smoke in the same way as men; they must continue the observance of religious rituals which men were finding difficult to carry out; ... . The new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon women the 12 honor of a new socialresponsibility, and by associating the task of female emancipation with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood, bound them to a new, and yet entirely legitimate, subordination (Chatterjee, colonialism, nationalism 629). Drawing on Chatterjee's framework of inner/ outer dichotomy, R.

Radhakrishnan addresses the incorporation of women's question in the politics of nationalism in post-colonial India. As Radhakrishnan points out, " by mobilizing the inner/outer distinction against the ' outerness' of the west, nationalist rhetoric makes ' woman' the pure and ahistorical signifier of ' interiority'. In the fight against the enemy from the outside, something within gets even more repressed, and ' woman' becomes the mute but necessary allegorical ground for the transactions of nationalist history" (192).

However, it is important to note that Chatterjee not only addresses the ways in which nationalist ideology addressed women's identity by including women's issues as identity markers of the inner/ spiritual essence of India, but also demonstrates how post-colonial nationalism constructed the ideas of new womanhood in the new context of post-colonial India by reinforcing women's sexuality—pure and respectable middle class sexuality in opposition to " brazen, avaricious, irreligious, sexually promiscuous" (Chatterjee, Colonialism, Nationalism 630).

The post-colonial theorists and scholars that I have discussed above make it clear the ways in which women are symbolically constructed as bearers of meanings—communal, national, cultural, and religious, by nationalist discourses in colonial and post-colonial India (Chhachhi 75, Chatterjee, colonialism, nationalism 630, Radhakrishnan 192, Butler 91-92, Shohat n. p.).

Especially, Chatterjee's discussions about the construction, by means of post-colonial nationalism, of new womanhood through the discourses of middle class feminine qualities and his analysis of the ideological construction of women as mother or goddess to erase her sexuality are an important 13 departure for analyzing the relationship between nationalism and heteronormativity in Mehta's trilogy.

Heteronormative Discourses and Nationalism in Post-colonial Feminist Studies: According to Jigna Desai and Gayatri Gopinath, few studies have focused on the ways in which gender and sexuality are affected by heteronormative discourses of nationalism and the ways in which heteronormativity is produced and maintained through the discourses of colonialism, anti-colonialism, and nationalism (Desai 29, Gopinath, Nastalgia, Desire 469).

Some of the post-colonial, transnational and diasporic feminist studies have addressed how the notion of good citizenship is produced through the naturalization of heterosexuality and through the criminalization of other forms of non-procreative sexualities in post-colonial nationalism. For example, M.

Jacqui Alexander in the article entitled " Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas" interrogates the racialized and gendered legislative gestures of these post-colonial nations which produce the ideas of normal/deviant sexualities through the legitimization of heterosexual bodies and criminalization of non-heteronormative bodies.

As Alexander argues, Not just (any) body can be a citizen any more, for some bodies have been marked by the state as non-procreative, ... Having refused the heterosexual imperative of citizenship, these bodies, according to the state, pose a profound threat to the very survival of the nation. Thus, I argue that as the state moves to reconfigure the nation it simultaneously resuscitates the nation as heterosexual (Alexander 6).

Alexander poses important questions regarding the relationship between non-heteronormative subjects, sense of belonging, and home in post-colonial countries. The abovementioned quotation 14 also suggests that non-heteronormative subjects have a different relationship to the constructions of home, family, and citizenship in which people of alternative sexualities do not belong to the nationalist definition of good citizenship because citizenship continues to be defined through heterosexuality and heteromasculinity (Alexander 7).

Therefore, she suggests that the process of decolonization which was the aim of anti-colonial nationalist movement is seriously disrupted (Alexander 7). Similarly, Paola Bacchetta in the article entitled " When the (Hindu) Nation Exiles Its Queers" interrogates Hindu nationalist attempts to create an inclusive and homogenized cultural nationalist ideology through the

enforcement of heterosexuality as only legitimate sexual practice in opposition to queer gender and sexuality in post-colonial India (Bacchetta 14, 143).

As Bacchetta argues, [T]he construction of queer gender and sexualities, which appear in Hindu nationalism, are largely effects of Hindu nationalist reworkings of misogynist notions of gender and heterosexist notions of sexual normativity imposed through colonialism. These effects are manifested in a binary in which qualities of virile, militaristic masculinity combined with obligatory asexuality(for Hindu nationalist leaders) and forced heterosexuality (for Hindu nationalized masses) are valorized and placed in opposition to queer gender and sexuality(assigned to all others).

In this scheme, queer gender and sexuality are constructed as already outside the Hindu nation; when queerdom reenters, it must be immediately exiled (Bacchetta 143). Bacchetta's analysis of Hindu xenophobic queerphobia (in this logic, Hindu nationalism claims that queerdom is not Indian and it is imported from Britain) and queerphobic Xenophobia (in this usage, Hindu nationalism signifies queerdom metaphorically to all the designated others regardless of their sexualities) (Bacchetta 143-144) suggests that the usage of queer is contextual 15 nd it signifies multiple meanings, trajectories, and multidirectionality across the sexual identity (Bacchetta 144). Similarly, Nivedita Menon in the essay entitled " Outing Heteronormativity: Nation, Citizen, Feminist Disruptions" analyzes the politics of location embedded in the particular use of queer in post-colonial Indian context. She suggests that the term queer is used to question the supposed naturalness of heterosexual identity (Menon19-20).

Referring to the volume entitled Queer Politics in India, Menon points out that The term queer . . . speaks . . . of communities that name themselves (as gay or lesbian for example), as well as those that do not, ... Queer politics does not speak of the issues of these communities as ‘ minority issues’, but instead speaks of larger understandings of gender and sexuality in our society that affects all of us, regardless of our sexual orientation.

It speaks of sexuality as a politics intrinsically and inevitably connected with the politics of class, gender, caste, religion and so on, thereby both acknowledging other movements and also demanding inclusion within them (Narrain and Bhan quoted in Menon 20). This quotation points out the particular context of queer politics of post-colonial India, and at the same time, connects this politics with other axes of social differentiation across the nation such as gender, class, “ race”, caste, religion, and ethnicity.

Reviewing the queer movement in India, Menon argues that queer identity emerges in India from the following accounts: a) queer politics questions biology critically and argues that sexuality is fluid, not a generic given, b) queer is a political and unstable term which challenges heteronormativity through gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender/ hijra, feminist or other identities, and c) “ queer politics sees 16 itself as complicated as its point of origin by class, caste and community identity, and is self- critical to the extent it is unable to engage with this complication” (Menon 21-22).

At the same time, Menon demonstrates the importance of diasporic location in the politics of queer to interrogate nationalist ideologies regarding pure and authentic past, sense of belonging, and home (Menon 41). David L. Eng in the article entitled “ Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in

Asian American Studies" posits feminist and queer methods in Asian American studies and demonstrates the ways in which Asian American racial, sexual, and national identities are formulated through compulsory heterosexuality (Eng 32).

Posing important questions regarding the roles of nations and nationalism in the construction of racial formation of Asian Americans, Eng argues that the cultural nationalism of Asian Americans not only focuses on Asian American as a racial minority group, but also prescribes who is a recongnizable and legitimate Asian American—male, heterosexual, working class, American born and English speaking (Eng 34). Critiquing this narrow definition of Asian American by cultural nationalist groups, Eng applies queer methods to denaturalize any claims regarding the definition of nation-state and home as considered as heterosexual (35).

Rather, Eng defines " queerness not just in the narrow sense of sexual identity and sexual practices, but queerness as a critical methodology for evaluating Asian American racial formation across multiple axes of difference and in its numerous local and global manifestations" (Eng 39). Similarly, Gayatri Gopinath proposes the " queer South Asian diasporic subjectivity" as a challenge to nationalist ideologies regarding home and nostalgia by restoring those practices, desire, and subjectivities that are considered impossible and unimaginable in the conventional diasporic and national imaginings (Gopinath 470, Menon 41).

Following the post-colonial and transnational critical frameworks of queer politics that I have analyzed above, I have used queer methodology not only to suggest homosexual identities and alternative sexual practices but also to

critique the construction of any ‘ normative’ discourse. I have applied queer politics to reveal the ways in which heterosexuality and other modalities of power such as patriarchy, religion, and institutions construct the dichotomy of normative and deviance in which multiple sexual practices and identities are punished and exiled.

Along with the focus on the politics of location, embedded in the particular usage of queer politics in post- colonial India, I have also emphasized queer politics that is relational to global and diasporic cultural politics. Therefore, I have used a queer diasporic framework as a critical method to critique the ethnocentric and gendered formation of cultural nationalism and identity through the discourses of heterosexual family, marriage, home and citizenship.

Also, queer diaspora interrogates heteronormativity that works as a site of cultural authenticity through the discourses of pure and authentic past, home, and identity. Therefore, my thesis will address what kind of roles nation and nationalism play in the construction of heteronormativity and how Mehta’s portrayal of women’s multiple sexualities and desires contest and negotiate the nationalist constructions of home, family, and citizenship.

Transnational Filmmaking Practices and Deepa Mehta’s Trilogy: In film studies, according to Katarzyna Marciniak, Aniko Imre, and Aine O’Healy , we find the following categories of films: “ cinema of the borders,” “ cinema of migration,” and “ cinema of displacement” (Marciniak, Imre, and O’Healy 9) which refer to the experiences and discourses of exile, migration, and border crossings.

These categories and filmic narratives, as Marciniak, Imre, and O'Healy point out, cannot be linked exclusively to any single national and cultural production because of " thematic foci and complicated production contexts" (Marciniak, 18 Imre, and O'Healy 9) in the increasingly globalizing world and media environment. Since the 1960s, the increasing accesses to multiple channels and different types of local and transnational media, and the displacement of a huge number of people have challenged the notions of national culture and identity, and the dominance of national cinema and genre (Naficy 8).

In the critical juncture of the world media system and transnational mode of production and reception of cinema, Hamid Naficy brings attention to " a new and critical imagination in the global media: an accented cinema of exile and diaspora and its embedded theory of criticism" (Naficy 8) in the book entitled An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking. In the exilic nd diasporic experiences and discourses of filmmakers and, in filmic narratives, the socio-cultural politics of the directors' multiple identities, the effect ofglobalizationin cinema industry, the internationalization of story plot, hybridization of styles, and the transcendence of national and cultural boundary in film production and reception have brought forward a new transnational filmmaking practice (Levitin 271, Tay 111-113).

According to film critic and scholar Asuman Suner, certain films and filmmaking practices can be considered as transnational filmmaking practices when they problematize the question of national identity and belonging by directing attention to the multiplicity of the experience of

displacement, de-territorialization, and migration within and across the non-Western world.

Testifying to the complexity of the question of displacement in their own geopolitical contexts, they effectively prove that the problematization of the relations of belonging and identity is not the monopoly of the exilic/diasporic subjects residing in the West (Suner cited in Tay 112). 19

In this thesis, following Suner's definition of transnational filmmaking practices, I situate Deepa Mehta's filmmaking practices as transnational, not because Mehta is a diasporic subject nor because of the transnational mode of her films' production, distribution, and reception across North America, South Asia, and South Asian diaspora; rather, Mehta's filmmaking practices in her elemental trilogy can be better understood as transnational in terms of the representation of cross-cultural content and the " complexities of geopolitics, mobilisation, displacement, desires, and identity (Tay 114).

In other words, the critique of the binary model of global-local; the depiction of multilayered power relations among different discourses at various levels of social relations such as colonialism, the anti-colonial reform movement, nationalism, religion, and patriarchy; the critique of " authentic" and static past and tradition; the portrayal of multiple experiences of characters and multiple historical narratives of India and nationhood; and the depiction of female multiple subjectivities, desires, and sexualities in Mehta's trilogy make her filmmaking practices transnational and feminist.

Mehta's transnational filmmaking practices cannot be analyzed through the traditional binary model of east/west or global/local. Rather, Mehta portrays

a very complex relationship between multiple cultures, experiences, histories, stories, and identities of characters in colonial and post-colonial India.

Therefore, Mehta's filmmaking practices can be better understood as transnational in the following ways: first, the transnational mode of production, marketing, and consumption of Mehta's trilogy in the age of global media flows; second, the representation and questioning of nation and nationalism and national and cultural identity of India through filmic discourse; third, the cross-examination of the national, cultural, political, ethnic, and gender identity of individuals and communities in colonial and post-colonial India; fourth, the revisiting and reconstructing of the national history of India and complicating of the construction of nationhood through the portrayal of women's 20 histories; and fifth, the portrayal of multiple experiences, narratives, cultures, desires, and identities in cross-cultural and intra-cultural levels (Lu 3). According to Jacqueline Levitin, transnational filmmaking is not a homogenous category and it does not exist in a vacuum.

Rather, she argues that it exists in symbiosis with the dominant and alternative cinemas and in constant negotiation between the global and the local at the moments of encoding of meanings and moments of decoding and re-coding. Viewing Mehta as a transnational filmmaker allows her films to be read and re-read not only as individual texts produced by authorial vision and generic conventions, but also as sites for intertextual, cross-cultural, and transnational struggles over meaning and identities" (Levitin 271). Therefore, Mehta's questioning of patriarchal and religious traditions and nationalist discourses of women's identity and sexuality and her

critiquing of cultural politics through the depiction of sexual politics in the trilogy have engendered a lot of controversy and debates around Mehta's authenticity of speaking about Indian culture and women.

I would like to point out that " authenticity" is a pitfall for transnational filmmaking practices since the role of a transnational filmmaker is complex (Banning and Levitin 281) because, on one hand, Mehta is expected to play a role as a native informant in the west, and on the other hand, her Canadian identity makes her an outsider from India where she was born. Concerning this complex position of transnational filmmakers, Levitin poses some important questions: " how can the transnational filmmaker avoid this pitfall? How can she situate herself in a particular culture while simultaneously aiming the film at an international market" (Levitin 273)? 21 According to R.

Radhakrishnan, there is no single way in which we can define authenticity or Indian because " when people move, identities, perspectives, and definitions change. If the category ' Indian' seemed secure, positive, and affirmative within India, the same term takes on a reactive, strategic character when it is pried loose from its nativity" (Radhakrishnan 207). Therefore, there is no singular version of authentic India which can rule over multiple experiences and perspectives about India and Indianness (Radhakrishnan 209). Moreover, the notion of authenticity tends to degenerate into essentialism; therefore, Radhakrishnan argues that we should address the problem of authenticity " alongside the phenomenon of relationality and the politics of representation" (Radhakrishnan 211).

Placing the controversy and the violent reception of Mehta's films in the context of the growing religious fundamentalism and nationalism in the

1990s in India, I would like to argue that in the context of Mehta's transnational filmmaking practices, the question of authenticity reveals ananxietyover the demand for unified cultural nationalism by the Hindu fundamentalist religious groups. Mehta's transnational filmmaking practices have critically intervened in the dominant discourses of national identity, the construction of nationhood, and the imposition of women in this hegemonic construction, which may not be possible for Mehta by positioning herself in a singular national context. The multiple experiences, narratives, histories, and identities that Mehta has portrayed in her trilogy deconstruct any singular ethnocentric vision of history, culture, nationhood, and identity.

My interest in Mehta's trilogy—Fire, Earth, and Water --grows out of the multiplicity, heterogeneity, and diversity in her filmic narratives. Specifically, the gender and sexual politics of women depicted in these three films powerfully critique the cultural nationalist and religious definitions of tradition, family, marriage, home, sense of belonging, culture, history, sexuality, 22 and identity in the Indian context, which enable the audience to make sense of the evolution of feminist politics in India through the narratives of film. Mehta's contribution is not only its focus on counter-hegemonic discourses of patriarchal religious nationalism, but also it reframes transnational feminist practice within the core of diasporic and transnational media studies.

The portrayal of women's domination and resistance and women's articulation of multiple identities and sexualities in the particular context of colonial and post-colonial India, including the relation to a global politics of culture, capital, and identity, depicted in Fire, Earth, and Water, especially

demonstrates the significance of transnational feminist practices in diasporic and transnational media studies. 23 Chapter 1: Nationalism and Religion: Women's Bodies in Deepa Mehta's Water In this chapter, I will examine Deepa Mehta's approach to Indian patriarchal nationalist discourses which equate women and national identity, then exploit women as political tools to decolonize India.

I will also analyze the ways in which women--in particular, Indian upper caste Brahmin widows -- were doubly exploited by the British " civilizing mission" (Chatterjee 118), on the one hand, and the neo-colonialist discourses of upper caste Hindu patriarchy and reformists on the other. The depicted time frame in Deepa Mehta's 2005 film, Water--the 1930s in India--provides important historical, social, political, and cultural contexts to explore how women become a central issue in the political and ideological discourses of British, nationalist, and reformist agendas. The beginning of the twentieth century is significant for many reasons in understanding Indian history, and Mehta's film seeks to untangle this history through her exploration of the narratives of women's lives.

Water focuses on the ways in which the patriarchal nationalist and religious discourses construct ' womanhood,' ' wifehood,' and ' widowhood' in the context of social and political reforms and how these discourses discipline widows' identity, sexuality, and desire. Addressing the social, religious, political, and cultural issues regarding widowhood, Mehta's Water allows the audience to engage critically with the historical context of widows' oppression and delineates an important aspect of the long-standing sexual control of women. At the same time, Mehta draws attention to the social and

cultural roots of imagining India as predominantly an upper-caste Hindu and male-dominated nation by focusing on the ideological power of the Hindu religious scriptures and priests and on the patriarchal hegemonies of landlords and gentry (Lall 236).

My analysis is informed by the feminist critiques of nationalism as elitist and patriarchal and the religious disciplining of 24 women's bodies and sexualities in both colonial and post-colonial India; both are problematized by Mehta in Water. Widow-burning was abolished in regulation XVII by the British government in India in 1829, and widows' remarriage was legalized in 1856 by the efforts of social reformers such as Rammohun Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (Bandyopadhyay 100). In spite of the laws and regulations, widow-remarriage was not socially accepted by the upper caste Hindu Brahmins because they considered widow-remarriage as " a deviation from the established moral- behavioural codes of Hinduism" (Bandyopadhyay 112).

Therefore, the efforts of social reforms by educated social reformers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have not been very successful because of the dominance of upper caste, Brahmanical patriarchal ideologies in popular culture and among the general public in India (Bandyopadhyay 101). Water in its depiction of 1930s India portrays this historical background of nationalist movements against British colonialism in India. The Indian nationalist movement called for modernization and social change for the masses, but women's status, especially widows' social and economic status, remained unchanged because of the ideological and political interests of British and upper- class patriarchal nationalists.

Mehta’s film investigates the ways in which Hindu patriarchal and nationalist ideologies construct widows as ‘ markers’ or ‘ bearers’ of Indian cultural, religious, and national identity in order to revive their past and lost traditions. The Hindu Brahmins in this film promote this ideological construction of widows as symbols of Hindu identity through the imposition of religious ideologies of widows’ purity, chastity, and devotion to their dead husbands. For upper-caste Brahmins, issues regarding widows’ domination, forced celibacy, and sexual control become symbolic of authority over India’s religious, cultural, and national identity (Bandyopadhyay 109). 25

To investigate the relationship between the colonialist, patriarchal nationalist, and religious ideologies which enact control upon widows’ bodies and sexualities in the historical contexts of reform and nationalist movements in India, Mehta’s film addresses the following areas: a) the colonial and upper-caste nationalist aspects of the repression of widows, b) nationalist and reform movements regarding widow’s remarriage, and the controlling of widow’s sexuality and body, c) the construction of widowhood as social and sexual death and as abject by upper-caste Hindu patriarchy, and the role of Dharmashastra (religious scriptures) to reinforce and legitimize widows’ social vulnerability, d) the economic aspect of religion in disciplining widows’ bodies and dominating their sexualities and identities and e) widows’ identity, agency, and resistance against Hindu patriarchy and religious normativities.

Along with Mehta’s analysis of patriarchal nationalist and religious domination of widows’ bodies and sexualities, this chapter elucidates the ways in which Mehta chooses not to romanticize the issue of widows’

remarriage, nor does she construct widows as ‘ victims’; rather, she depicts the social, cultural, religious and political violence inflicted on widows, which affect all women’s lives and identities, but do not, necessarily, eliminate all their agency to destabilize the patriarchal nationalist and religious discourses. However, this chapter also will address the limitations of Mehta’s depiction of liberal nationalism through the portrayal of Gandhi and Narayan as women’s saviours. It is important to examine the ways in which post-colonial India is constructed not only as a modern nation, but also “ fundamentally a ‘ Hindu’ nation” (Rao 318), given the recent rise of fundamentalist Hindu political organizations.

Though Gandhi’s anti-colonial and nationalist movements are different in nature from the Hindu fundamentalist initiated ‘ Hindutva’ ideology, nonetheless, it is important to critiq