

Opening a Space for the Female Filmmaker: Risk-Taking in Deepa Mehta's
Fire and Sally Potter's *Yes*

“Do we, as women, have choices? And if we make choices, what is the price we pay for them?”
~Deepa Mehta

“I think it may also be an unconscious tendency of female directors, or me anyway, to wonder, ‘Is this going to be my last film? I’d better get everything into it, just in case.’” ~Sally Potter

Deepa Mehta's *Fire* and Sally Potter's *Yes* explore female identity and sexuality by negating the male gaze and engaging the spectator through the eyes of female protagonists through their use of camera angles, sound, and images. Both directors play with identity politics by offering an opportunity for the spectator to explore female identity and sexuality in a unique way to deny the “male gaze.” The gaze is not essentially male, ‘but to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of the unconscious, is to be in the ‘masculine’ position’” (qtd in Cook 495). In some cases, “the female spectator may find herself secretly, unconsciously almost, enjoying the freedom of action and control over the diegetic world that identification with a hero provides” but instead of creating films where a female protagonist's sexual identity is unstable, ‘torn between the deep blue sea of passive femininity and the devil of regressive masculinity,’ Potter and Mehta create strong assertive female protagonists who are not objectified by the spectator because they accept their desire and sexuality, claiming the power that comes with knowing themselves and rejecting patriarchal restrictions (Mulvey 29-30).

While it is true that, “[t]he spectator is obviously in the voyeur position when there are sex scenes on the screen, but screen images of women are sexualized no matter what the women are doing literally or what kind of plot may be involved” (Johnston 354). In the attempt to pull the female spectator out of the “male gaze” so we don't objectify our image, Johnston suggests that female film makers and spectators start, “asking questions [as it] is the only discourse available to women as a resistance to patriarchal domination” (356). Mehta and Potter not only

construct films which leave all spectators asking questions about dominance, submission, tradition, and marginalization, but her female protagonists begin the process in their own situations. The female characters are modeling how to begin questioning dominance for the female spectator; Potter and Mehta offer a safe encourage space for questioning because of the unique depictions and power given to these characters but also because they are not punished with death for their “disobedient” questions. In their article, *Colonialism, Racism, and Representation: An Introduction*, Stam and Spence also created a space to ask important questions about who receives attention and in what way: “what characters are afforded close-ups and which are relegated to the background? Does a character look or act or merely appear, to be looked at and acted upon? With who is the audience permitted intimacy? If there is off-screen commentary or dialogue, what is the relation to the image?” (889). While many of these questions have been studied and these issues of equality and representation are currently being addressed, feminist film makers such as Mehta and Potter are experimenting with unique cinematic styles so the spectator can find intimacy and identification with female characters.

While there has been female representation on screen throughout the years, it has not been ideal. There are a few to pick from, but none of them offer realistic or complimentary narratives. The vamp, or a woman who seduces men, “is a phallic women rather than a fetishised woman . . . [and] can be a source of visual pleasure for the female spectator” but the vamp still feels controlled (Cook 495). The femme fatale is also a possibility and “[t]he female spectator can . . . identify with and draw pleasure from the powerful femme fatale in cinema” because she appears to be in control of her desire and her wishes whether this is really case or not but end the end she often must be seen as a scheming monster or be killed (Cook 495). The horror film also offers both male and female spectators a chance to identify with the “final girl” character as “her

self-rescue turns her into the hero and it is at that moment . . . the male spectator . . . [throws] in his emotional lot with a woman in fear and pain” (Cook 495). However, both the femme fatale and the “final girl” are masculinized characters and therefore can’t offer female spectators a way to escape objectification through the “male gaze.” While the vamp, the femme fatale, and the “final girl” opened a space for female spectators to experience limited pleasure, neither Potter nor Mehta choose these characters or avenues for their films. They are able to offer a distinct type of “female look” or woman centered gaze by “feminizing the audience” through their experimental cinematic and narrative style, female protagonists, and content. P and M making the spectator view the film from a women centered gaze and identify with fully actualized nurturing and powerful women who accept their desire and are not punished for it even though their desire pushes back on patriarchal values and threatens male centered ideology.

Both Potter and Mehta experiment with camera angles, color, audio and narrative styles in an effort to help the spectator identify with their female characters. While Mehta is admittedly less experimental in her filming than Potter, she uses Radha’s memory of a family picnic in a field of yellow flowers to represent her voyage to toward her desire. The spectator doesn’t realize, at first, that it is a series of dreams Radha is having and not simply flashbacks but creating a dream sequence allows for an abrupt ripping away from the scenes when Radha wakes. It is as if we are being ripped away from the progress toward claiming her desire or “seeing the ocean” as the young Radha puts it. Another scene where Mehta uses nontraditional filming methods is during a dance scene between Radha and Sita dancing together as a couple in the family’s living room. During this fun and rebellious scene, Mehta uses traditional a horror genre filming with slanted, jumpy angles, loud music, and a feeling that at any moment the two women will be punished severely for their actions. We are relieved they aren’t caught and drawn

in deeper to their struggles due to the extreme tension created by the director's choices. Potter underscores her belief that using experimental techniques creates connection between the spectator and the characters:

Generally when you start to experiment formally in film, it's perceived as a distancing device, although it's not that for me. I find that if somebody has pushed a formal element in an extreme direction, it can be a very moving experience—it doesn't push me away, it draws me in. There isn't a correlation between abstraction and a kind of cold detachment—I think you can be passionately detached and you can be emotionally abstract. You can't package esthetics—form and content—into these discrete envelopes . . . there was an enormous amount of work with the actors on the question of emotional authenticity. (qtd in Lucia)

In addition to the actors' work, when Potter uses stop gap motion, security camera views, and extreme slants, the spectator is drawn into the female protagonist's mind and perspective creating intimacy. We know the biologist is having a war inside her head after finding evidence of her husband's affair and being approached by her soon-to-be lover, and the visual experimentation throughout the film allows the viewer to experience, in-depth, her emotional struggles. We aren't simply watching it; we are doing it, and the effect is a women-centered gaze. While watching *Yes*, we are not the typical voyeurs since we inhabit our female protagonist's mind by hearing her internal monologue. Extreme intimacy is established via Potter's technique and this contributes to the negation of "male gaze":

Voyeurism presupposes distance. [Mary Ann] Doane argues that the female spectator lacks this necessary distance because she is the image. Femininity is constructed as closeness, as 'an overwhelming presence-to-itself of the female

body' and the female spectator has the distance created for her by objectifying and desiring the female image on screen, because to view herself as an object to be desired, she takes on the 'male gaze.' (qtd in Cook 495)

Doane argues "the active desire of both the female character and the female spectator [is turned] into the passive desire to be the desired object . . . [and] 'desire to desire' seems to be, then, the only option for women," but Potter and Mehta have by-passed this objectification and offered the spectator, no matter the gender, an alternative space to inhabit (qtd in Cook 495). Our female protagonists in either movie are not the object of desire, by the spectator, nor are they being objectified, but instead, the audience identifies with their needs, emotions, and actions.

In both films, the spectator is surrounded by female silence and inner monologues either being spoken out loud, in the mind only, or a mix of both and this creates incredible intimacy and a women-centered identification. In *Fire*, silence is a way Mehta removes distance between Sita and Radha and the spectator; they communicate through their eyes, as if sharing secrets, and the audience is privy to those secrets which builds intimacy and trust. The spectator is positioned to reject all narratives except our two protagonists' and therefore we desire their acceptance of desire. Radha out of the two, seems most likely to reject her desire and Mehta uses silence and eye contact to reassure the spectator she won't; at one point, Radha leans over her husband, while he is sleeping, and pauses. Mehta builds intimacy through the silent tension as we wonder if she will wake him and reject her growing desire for Sita. Through her eyes, we view Radha's struggle between tradition and happiness and are relieved when we see the acknowledgement of her desire and resolve to listen to her heart.

Radha's mother-in-law, Biji, is also an example of how silence can be used to communicate meaning since she doesn't have a single line and must use a bell and body

language to show her desires. She is the embodiment of patriarchal tradition, but she is also symbolic of how Radha throws off the strangle hold of gender restriction and accepts her own desires. Biji is left in the care of what she represents and touts, patriarchal authority and the desire for male acceptance, and finds herself neglected, but the spectator understands it is of her own doing. As the film centers around Sita and Radha accepting themselves and their freedoms, we see that Biji is a victim and a promoter of traditional male-centered power; Biji's eyes show us her struggle in two distinct scenes. The first, is when Radha, in a dress, and Sita, in a suit, dance in the living room in front of Biji and we see her smile and nod in a confused way. She, like us, is drawn into their happiness and acceptance of female-centered desire, but at the same time, when the couple drops to the floor below the frame we see Biji's disapproval and what little care we had for Biji begins to drain away. The second scene is at the end when we see the look of contempt and victory in Biji's eyes when her son, Ashok, picks her up to leave as Radha and the house go up in flames. Biji is the enforcer of tradition and patriarchy by allowing her son to leave his wife to burn alive, a fitting punishment for denying a male-centered future. Of course the very act of Ashok picking her up also shows us that without enforcing the institution of patriarchy, she would be left to burn to death; another example of how women will always be the tools of patriarchy no matter what role they play or what authority they give themselves.

In *Yes*, Potter tends to use inner monologue more than silence to create identification with female perspectives and place the spectator in a female centered consciousness. This device is used with all the female characters in the film and once with Anthony, the husband. Several times, the biologist begins speaking her thoughts and then we hear their conclusion in her mind privileging the spectator but also possibly symbolizing her loss of power in specific situations. She splits her thoughts at several key points: one as she tries to explain her connection to

terrorism and the second is during a fight in a parking garage when her lover is trying to end their relationship.

While cultural understanding and tolerance is a major theme, and as she admits in her interview with *Cineaste* the reason she began writing the script, Potter seems to oversimplify the diasporic experience. The biologist splits her monologue as she speaks to her lover, and never vocalizes her experience with terrorism and death growing up in Belfast Ireland, even though, due to inner monologue the spectator is allowed this information. We know she is not simply a privileged Western Eurocentric symbol but someone who knows war and its damage. Her Beirut doctor/lover says to her during a discussion centering around his diasporic experience, “They’d killed a man and murdered an idea--/that doctors answer to a human need/Without a thought of colour, or of creed--/And then had the effrontery to claim/That they had done it in my people’s name./It’s something that you wouldn’t understand” (Potter 25). In response to this story and the attack he makes on her ability to understand his experiences, the biologist replies, “Oh but I do. You’re not the only ones . . .” and this is all her lover hears, because we switch to inner monologue and the spectator is privileged thus creating intimacy:

I feel your story in my blood and bones . . . /I see a father, calling to his son/I see
the houses crumble, dust and stones./I hear the gunfire, and the knock at night/
Upon the door I see the women’s fright/I hear the adolescent called to fight:/I see
him march away in morning light/And not look back. He knows his
mother/Weeps. Sh’s buried two already. Listen/To her litany as the tears
glisten/On her cheeks, and to the bell that’s ringing/Calling her to church, to join
the singing/And to praise the Lord. (Potter 26)

Since our female protagonist doesn’t speak her story, she is judged which later comes back to

haunt her, as it does for many women who find their voice and story either rejected or unheard. His choice to end their relationship and punish her for her lack of understanding, thus shunning her new found and acceptance of desire, illustrates a point unexplored by Potter: how diasporic men react when they lose agency and authenticity in their hostland. With a lack of attention in addressing his desire to “police” her desire and control her thoughts, seemingly, Potter misses a chance to discuss the violence and abuse toward women due to this diasporic male “lack.” Yes, she reacts in a strong assertive way but it is depicted as a feminist rebuttal and the “real” cause of his attack is not acknowledged. He falls into the stereotype and reality of the diasporic male when he assaults her with verbal violence and while he accuses her of being privileged he calls her “unclean” which harkens back to extreme patriarchal restrictions. Potter says she focuses more on the struggle between imperialism, capitalism, and the need for tolerance and cultural understanding:

As a filmmaker, you can't really change objective conditions in the world, but you can work effectively on the subtle emotional body of the individual and of the society as a whole. [After 9/11 i]t seemed to me that we were tending toward a cultural mythology of evil that had to be urgently interrupted. . . to humanize the so-called enemy . . . I decided to start writing an argument, East and West, but between two individuals who are in love . . . That became a five-minute film, which formed the basis of *Yes*. (qtd. in Lucia).

While there is always great need to address the demonization of foreignness and prejudice, especially of color, Potter had an opportunity to do much more when she positions the argument after he is fired for defending his religious and traditional beliefs and in essence takes out his loss of agency and power on his lover instead of acknowledging the hostland authority's

responsibility. This could have been shown through a discussion of his displacement or simply more honest communication, but just like our female protagonist, we are struggling to make sense out of our emotions and the situation. Beyond any discussion of diaspora or “East and West,” every time Potter experiments with open conversation and inner monologue, the spectator builds trust and intimacy with the female character. An interesting exception is when Potter allows the spectator into a male mind using this technique. Ironically, the spectator is so comfortable being inside the mind of our female characters, when Potter allows us into Anthony’s thoughts, using inner monologue, it feels shocking and raw. One reason for this reaction, besides the fact it betrays our close identification with the female characters, is due to Potter’s own desire to explore Anthony’s character:

It’s easy to forget the loneliness of the place of the white middle-aged powerful man—the one who is blamed for everything, for all the ills of all societies . . . I wanted to explore some of the suffering of that place—of being the one who’s blamed. I wanted to evoke the prison that such a person lives in . . . Such men usually are terribly uncomfortable in their own skins. But perhaps he wasn’t always. (qtd. in Lucia).

Like in *Fire*, the spectator may sympathize with the male characters, but we don’t identify with them since, for the most part, they don’t make female happiness a priority or even a consideration, except for the cook/doctor. Since both films deal with acceptance of and a redefining of female desire, for the characters and consequently the spectators, we are struck by and reject the selfishness and loneliness tradition and patriarchy create. It is this acknowledgement of alternative narratives for the expression of love and desire which negates and subverts the male gaze.

In addition to experimental filming and sound or lack of, Potter and Mehta's themes create connection and identification. One particular theme which resonates through both films is the portrayal of and attention to "otherness" and outcasts. Both do this overtly with their main narrative, diaspora experiences in *Yes* and a lesbian relationship in *Fire*, but they also use subplots dealing with class and age to discuss how mainstream society treats "outcasts." Potter tends to break up scenes by either having the protagonist's maid address the audience directly or show another type of sanitary worker stare wordlessly into the camera. She also has the biologist's aunt, who is comatose and near death in a Belfast nursing home, dictate 8 pages of inner monologue to the spectator just before she passes away. The aunt's commentary on her life, regret, aging, dreams, and stabbing observations about society's treatment of the elderly, is extremely emotional while universal and through the direct and private inner monologue, which ends with two spoken words, the spectator builds intimacy in relation to both the aunt and the maid as Potter explains:

She [the maid] speaks her inner monologues out loud, addressing us, which is also totally nonrealistic. But she doesn't speak to anyone else, so we, the audience, have a private, intimate relationship with her thoughts as we do with the Aunt's But she's [the maid] also an outcast. They both are. The very old are the thrown-away people; the cleaners are the outcasts . . . the cleaner is an exile of class and the auntie of old age. (qtd. in Lucia)

Mehta also uses a male servant, Mundu who is from a lower caste, and Biji, the elderly mother-in-law to discuss treatment of "outcasts" and the elderly. Mundu is fired and told to leave toward the end of the film and when he pleads to stay saying this is the only home he has, his reply is silence. It is clear that he too is part of the "thrown away people" and no one seems to take a

second look. While Biji's fate is very different than Mundu, she has no independence or autonomy due to her age; we are never allowed into her mind as we are the aunt and the spectator doesn't feel the same identification. This theme of representing marginalized people opens up a space to reflect upon female filmmaker's fears concerning how their films are received and how this may lead to a lack of opportunity. Both Mehta and Potter have commented on their concerns; *Fire* opened in India to rioting and violence inciting conservative religious traditionalist anger and was the only film to be reviewed twice by the nation's censor board. On the DVD's special features section, Mehta commented on the situation: "On one hand, I've been thanked for opening a 'dialogue' between men and women and, on the other, have been accused by men for destroying their happy, 'safe,' and satisfied marriages." She had received so many death threats due to the content and themes in *Fire*, that armed guard traveled with her whenever she was in India. Potter on the other hand confessed her concerns about a lack of opportunity due to her cinematic risk taking: "Almost everyone I spoke to gasped, saying, 'Oh God, Sally, not another risk. Can't you just repeat yourself once and do something you already know works?'" (qtd. in Lucia). Potter went on to explain what an emotional toll her experimentation and "theme-heavy" narratives had taken on her peace of mind: "I think it may also be an unconscious tendency of female directors, or me anyway, to wonder, 'Is this going to be my last film? I'd better get everything into it, just in case'" (qtd. in Lucia). Like the characters in films, female film directors are also "others" who have to struggle so their voices are heard and many times live in constant fear of "being thrown out" for offering ideas that challenge normative ideology.

Another indication that the spectator is viewing both *Yes* and *Fire* from a women-centered perspective can be attributed to the directors opting for an unconventional ending or at least an alternative to classical Hollywood narrative where a women who recognizes and owns

her desire is punished. At the end of *Fire*, we see Sita standing in the rain waiting for her lover, Radha and the spectator assumes this forbidden love will not be allowed to bloom; female spectators are trained to see their sexuality limited, banished, or derailed, especially if it is threatening to the patriarchy such as the case with their eroticized lesbian love. But instead, the scene cuts to Radha, slumped against a pillar, drenched in symbolic rain, with nothing other than half burned clothing to signify her recent near death experience. The lovers embrace and kiss as the audience hovers above the caring couple. Both Sita and Radha have fully realized, accepted, and acted upon their desire without being sentenced to the typical rehabilitation or death. How threatening to traditional patriarchy; no wonder this film caused riots and controversy.

In *Yes*, Potter has also established a strong, assertive female protagonist who defines her desire and acts upon it. While she finds healing in Cuba from the recent death of her aunt and waits for her lover to join her from Beirut, she allows herself several days of space for self-discovery. We might argue that for Potter to have truly created a women-centered ending, the biologist would have enjoyed her time of healing and self-meditation alone without the intrusion of another, and in an interview with the journal *Cineaste* she explains:

I wrote many versions of the ending, including one where she goes to join him in Beirut. . . [and] I did write and shoot a scene in which . . . he has arrived in Cuba in order to say goodbye . . . [but] as we were shooting the scene, I became very uncomfortable with it, as did the actors . . . we don't really need to see all of this, it can be left open. It's enough that he's arrived. (qtd in Lucia)

So instead of the affair being discovered by either her husband or her goddaughter, which would have been even more destructive and punishing, or creating a conclusion in which her lover comes to say goodbye and end the relationship, Potter writes assertive characters who can

realistically live a scene that acknowledges the protagonist's desires and power without threatening the relationship; the spectator does not see a punishment dealt out and instead sees two adults, equally accepting and respecting their sexuality and desires, who find an erotic space to co-exist. Potter says, "It's a hopeful ending but not necessarily a happy one" and the same can be said about *Fire's* closing scene except for the spectator's relief that Radha has not been burned alive (Lucia). Both endings join the elite sector of films where the spectator is allowed to identify and reveal in actualized female desire and keeping the endings "open" is key. As Potter articulates, "The problem with the ending—any ending—is that it, appears to be a resolution, a summation of the meaning of the whole film, but it's not really; it's just the point at which we leave the story" and both directors force the spectator to accept the space and autonomy needed to respect the love, desire, and caring both couples have cultivated (qtd in Lucia).

Johnston addresses female spectators' "need for feminist films that at once construct woman as spectator without offering the repressive identifications of Hollywood films and that satisfy our craving for pleasure" (355). We need film makers who create narratives with characters that female spectators don't have to objectify in order to find pleasure and that is exactly what Mehta and Potter have achieved. By offering complicated female-centered narratives and strong female protagonists who have the ability to ask questions about identity and desire without punishment, *Fire* and *Yes* join the small number of films that creates a space to negate the male gaze.

Work Cited

Fire. Screenplay and Dir. Deepa Mehta. 1996. N.E.W Yorker Films, 1997. DVD.

Johnston, Sheila. "Is the Gaze Male?" Notes on Women's Cinema. Ed. Claire Johnston. London: Society for Education and Film and Television, 1973. 350-356. Print.

Lucia, Cynthia. "Saying 'Yes' to Taking Risks: An Interview with Sally Potter." *Cineaste* 30.4 (2005): 24-30. *MasterFile Premier*. Web. 6 Dec. 2010.

Potter, Sally. *YES Screenplay and Notes by Sally Potter*. New York: Newmarket Press. 2005. Print.

Smelik, Anneke. "Feminist Film Theory." *The Cinema Book*. Ed. Pam Cook. 3rd ed. London: British Film Institute. 2007. 491-501. Print.

Stam, Robert and Louise Spence. "Colonialism, Racism, and Representation: An Introduction." *Film Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford UP, 2004. 877-891. Print.

Mulvey, Laura. "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)." *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Bloomington: Judicial UP, 1989. 29-38. Print.