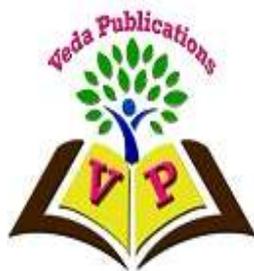


**A ŽIŽEKIAN READING OF THE ENDING OF DEEPA MEHTA'S FIRE**

Rahul Sandal

*(Research scholar, Punjabi University Patiala, Punjab, India)***ABSTRACT**

Critical thinking in contemporary times has been widely influenced by the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek. Though Žižek is generally read as a philosopher who distances himself from the issues of gender struggle, the present paper uses his concepts of 'objective violence' and 'ethics of the real' to read the film *Fire* based on gender issues. The aim of this inclusion is to argue that Žižekian approach is valid to analyse gender problems and has the potential to provide new insights even in this field. Deepa Mehta's films have remained conspicuous in interrogating the dominant socio-political power structures from the perspective of the marginalized. In an attempt to explore the issue of the alternative sexuality, *Fire* becomes an artistic expression of objective violence and ethics of the real. The forces working to dismantle the oppressive symbolic reality of lesbians relate dialectically with the forces maintaining reality as such. This paper intends to explore this dialectics of objective violence and ethics of the real as expressed in the ending of the film. The focus shall be on the intervention of the artistic expression in the larger structure of socio-political imagination.

**Keywords:** *Žižekian Studies, Film Studies, Violence, Ethics, Homosexuality.*

**Citation:**

- APA** Sandal,R.(2018). A Žižekian Reading of the ending of Deepa Mehta's *Fire*.*Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature-JOELL*, 5(1), 308-316.
- MLA** Sandal,Rahul. "A Žižekian Reading of the ending of Deepa Mehta's *Fire*."*Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature JOELL*, Vol.5, no.1,2018,pp.308-316.



In an attempt to explore the issue of alternative sexuality, Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* becomes an artistic expression of objective violence and ethics of the Real. The ending of the film is perhaps the highest level of this expression that shows emergence of the Real in the familiar reality of the characters. The forces that work to dismantle symbolic reality relate dialectically with the forces that work to maintain symbolic reality as it is. This paper intends to read this dialectics of objective violence and ethics of the Real as expressed in the ending of *Fire*. The focus will be on the intervention of the artistic expression in the larger structure of socio-political imagination. To serve this purpose, the paper is primarily divided into two parts. First part is an exposition of Žižekian terms especially objective violence and ethics of the Real, and the second part is an interpretation of the ending of *Fire* in the light of these terms.

#### EXPOSITION OF ŽIŽEKIAN TERMS

Žižekian philosophy is an attempt to use Lacanian psychoanalysis in the socio-political field. Terms like objective violence, ethics of the Real, the big Other, *object a*, ideology, concrete universal, gaze etc. form an integral part of this philosophy. So, an exposition of these terms is relevant here for the reading of the cinematic text *Fire* from the Žižekian perspective. First of all to make sense of objective violence, Žižek has differentiated it from subjective violence. In subjective violence, violent agent can be identified clearly, while objective violence is performed by the socio-political structure lived by its social agents. Žižek argues that subjective violence is generally seen from a non-violent zero level of existence as if there is a normal peaceful state of life which is disturbed by subjective violence. The idea of objective violence negates this perception of non-violent zero level of existence. As Žižek writes, "It (subjective violence) is seen as a perturbation of the 'normal' peaceful state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this 'normal' state of things" (*Violence* 2). Two dimensions of objective violence are 'symbolic' and 'systemic' violence. In symbolic violence, Žižek sees violence in the very form of language used by human beings. As a Lacanian psychoanalyst, Žižek perceives language as a foreign intruder that makes human

beings conscious about their role in the symbolic order of reality. Language in this sense makes human beings act as if they have a natural role to play. Žižek's perception of violence is clearly visible in the following expression:

Language simplifies the designated thing, reducing it to a single feature. It dismembers the thing, destroying its organic unity, treating its parts and properties as autonomous. It inserts the thing into a field of meaning which is ultimately external to it. When we name gold "gold", we violently extract a metal from its natural texture, investing into it our dreams of wealth, power, spiritual purity, and so on, which have nothing whatsoever to do with the immediate reality of gold. (*Violence* 61)

The other dimension of objective violence is systemic violence which exists in the seemingly smooth functioning of our political and economic system. For Žižek, exploitation within capitalist system is also a form of violence which should not be ignored as if it is a natural catastrophe which is beyond our reach to rectify. As a violent agent cannot be seen in this form of violence, no one takes responsibility for it. For this reason, Žižek has compared it with "dark matter" of physics, the counterpart to an all-too-visible subjective violence" (*Violence* 2). For Žižek, the next ethical step that can be taken by human beings to deal with systemic violence is to share responsibility for the sufferings generated by capitalist system. Like Walter Benjamin and Georges Sorel, Žižek has defended the use of violence for ethical purposes and has refuted the idea that "the renunciation of violence defines the very core of being human..." (*Violence* 61).

'Ethics of the Real' is a concept developed in the light of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan has perceived human personality as a complex of three orders: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. The Imaginary order signifies a process of identification with an image. An infant's identification of itself with an image is a discovery of its subjecthood. But,



paradoxically, it is also a moment when the infant gets alienated from external environment or (m)other. Identification and alienation happen simultaneously. As Lacan has written, "The real object itself isn't the object that you see in the mirror" (*The Ego* 46). In this way, real self that is alienated can be seen as an opponent of alienating image. Further, the Symbolic order signifies the imprisonment of the subject in the symbolic world. Under the influence of structuralism, Lacan sees symbolic world as a system of signs that controls actions of the subject. The actions of the subject, in this way, are seen in the background of existing social relations; and not as an exercise of the subject's free will. As Lacan has written, "The human order is characterised by the fact that the symbolic function intervenes at every moment and at every stage of its existence" (*The Ego* 29). But Lacan is not a strict structuralist who reduces the subject to an effect of language or symbolic order. He developed the concept of the Real order which resists the Symbolic order. Here, Lacan differentiates 'reality' from the 'Real'. Reality, for Lacan, is just a symbolic reality that seems meaningful through the effect of language. The Real is that excess which is not controlled by the symbolic reality or in other words, it is not understandable by the existing categories of language. As Lacan has clarified, "...it (real) is radically distinguished from the symbolic and the imaginary- the real is the impossible. Not in the name of a simple obstacle we hit our heads up against, but in the name of logical obstacle of what, in the symbolic, declares itself to be impossible" (*The Other* 123).

In this way, Lacan sees human personality not in its complete form but with its irreparable void. For this reason, he signifies the subject with the symbol '\$' and not with 'S'. Žižek takes this concept as a positive one where the subject is not limited to a finite form of symbolic reality but always has an infinite measure of its being. In other words, the subject can free itself from the authority of symbolic reality. By this conception of the subject, Lacan has set an ethical position of the subject not in relation to symbolic reality but in its relation to its desire. Desire belongs to the Real, and thus the ethics of the real are also known as the ethics of desire. Žižek finds this ethical position useful for revolutionary politics as the

ethics of desire negates the law of symbolic reality. Alenka Zupančič, a Lacanian scholar, writes, "The definition of what we might call the 'law of desire' is that desire pays no attention to the 'laws of nature', to how the 'world goes', or to the 'forces of circumstances' " (*Ethics* 119). In the light of this ethical position, Žižek confronts the reigning ideology of multiculturalism and postmodernism which works on the ethical imperative to "love thy neighbour" (*Violence* 64) and in this way, limits the subject to its finite symbolic reality where 'other' has to be always respected. Ethics of the Real, on the other hand, shows the possibility that the subject can free itself from the gaze of the Other in order to show fidelity to its own desire. For this reason, Žižek separates ethics from morality. He writes, "Morality is concerned with the symmetry of my relations to the other humans; its zero level rule is 'do not do to me what you do not want me to do to you'. Ethics, on the contrary, deals with my consistency with myself, my fidelity to my own desire" (*Interrogating* 397). The ethics of the real or the ethics of desire, in this sense, are also the ethics without morality.

As a Marxist thinker, Žižek approaches human condition with the concept of 'ideology'. Žižek has not used this concept in the sense of 'false consciousness' that distorts the truth of material conditions. The Žižekian use of ideology makes the point that ideology is always a spectral support to human life and there is nothing like post-ideological human existence. Here, reality is not contrasted with illusion, but illusion is being perceived as a necessary support to reality. As Žižek has written, "...the main point is to see how the reality itself cannot reproduce itself without this so-called ideological mystification. The mask is not simply hiding the real state of things, the ideological distortion is written into its very essence" (*Sublime* 25). In this sense, ideology materializes in the actions of its subject and cannot be studied in the old naive fashion of recognizable beliefs and values. It means that an intellectual reflection cannot be sufficient to get rid of subjection. For this reason, Žižek admires cinematic art as it stages bodily performances that can help the subject to act differently so as to come out of the existing bodily practices. This function of the art is



short-circuiting in its nature as it affects the existing order of human life.

The 'concrete universal' is the exception to the normal functioning of universality or 'abstract universal'. The confrontation of these two universalities is the aim of short-circuit approach. In Žižek's words, "This, then, is the Hegelian 'concrete universality': at every stage of the dialectical process, the concrete figure 'colours' the totality of the process, i.e. the universal frame of the process becomes part of (or, rather, drawn into) the particular content" (*Fright* 23-24). Žižek here perceives the dialectical process where 'concrete universality' dismantles the functioning of universal order and proves the fragility of the order.

The ritualized life, in Žižekian approach, works under the super-ego figure that is called the big Other which, according to Žižek, signifies, "...the shared implicit set of beliefs and norms that regulate our interaction" (*Fright* 3). This Lacanian term is used to suggest that the interaction of individuals in the symbolic order is under the authoritative gaze. The big Other is the embodiment of the law that forces individuals to function properly and meaningfully. Žižekian approach attempts to perceive the fictional character of the big Other. It means that the big Other exists only if the subjects believe in its existence. The belief is the only substance, otherwise the big Other does not exist.

Žižek has conceptualized the idea of the big Other in relation to *object a* and desire. The big Other's attempt to prove a symbolic order complete remains unsatisfied because of a lost object (*object a*) that drives the subject's desire. In this sense, *object a* is a lack or void that causes the desire. As *object a* is a missing object from the symbolic reality of the subject, it relates to the real. So, the subject's desire has its roots in the real and not in the symbolic reality. In this sense, desire is bound to remain unfulfilled as it attempts to go beyond the symbolic reality. It also signifies that the big Other is bound to remain impotent in satisfying the real desire of the subject.

Žižek's primary interest in the events that prove the non-existence or fictional existence of the big Other that regulates symbolic order is also reflected in his reading of narrative events on screen.

He does not go with the traditional concept of gaze that assumes the spectator with a power to see without being seen, but focuses on the investment of spectators' desire in cinematic narrative. As noticed by McGowan, "The gaze, according to this analysis, occurs not when spectators or camera looks on from a safe distance and remains unaffected by what they see but when the structure manages to make spectators aware of their libidinal investment in the film that exists despite their apparent aloofness" (10). This absorption of spectators in cinematic narrative is called 'suturing' effect of the narrative. For Žižek, 'suturing' is not always final that reaches towards some complete absorption of spectators in the narrative form, but there can be some sublime moments that show the failure of suturing. The gap created by the failed suturing is filled by the 'interface' effect. As Žižek has described in Lacanian terms, "...suture follows the logic of signifying representation (the second shot represents the absent subject-  $\$$ - for the first shot), while the interface effect occurs when this signifying representation fails" (*Fright* 54). Žižek points towards the unbearable failure of signifying chain or the horror of the void in symbolic order. In interface effect, the void of the order is filled by a fantastical object. This fantastical support is provided by the text in a counter-shot or it is constructed by spectators through their own imagination.

#### **INTERPRETATION OF THE ENDING OF FIRE**

The ending of the film describes the situation of Radha and Sita when their love relationship becomes known to Ashok. After watching Radha and Sita making love, Ashok leaves the room in anguish. Sita tries to convince Radha that this is not a bad event that should make them unhappy rather it is an opportunity to think about a life free from the pain of the existing one. Sita asks Radha to leave her home suggesting that the two (Sita and Radha) should start living together. Radha who is little upset asks Sita to leave first as she wants to have a conversation with Ashok to explain and give him reasons for her decision to leave home. Radha and Ashok meet and argue from their perspectives. Ashok berates Radha calling her a 'whore' and her desires 'sinful'. He asks Radha to shun her desires by taking help from swamiji, Ashok's religious guru. On



the other hand, Radha argues that desires form the basis of life. She expresses her desire to live with Sita. At this moment, Radha's sari catches fire. Ashok makes no attempt to save her. However Radha overcomes the flames, leaves her home and meets Sita at the Nizamuddin shrine. The film ends with this image of their union.

This ending gives expression to the violent aspect of the normalized symbolic reality that represses the voices that are queer to this reality. Repression of queer voices for the stability of patriarchal heteronormative social structure equates queer bodies to what Giorgio Agamben calls Homo Sacer which "belongs to God in the form of unsacrificeability and included in the community in the form of being able to be killed"(52). One relevant example that supports this point comes from the writing of Tara Atluri who has talked about Dr. Sreevinas Siras's case (IJZS). Dr. Siras, after the recognition of his homosexual identity, lost his job as a lecturer in Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh. As Tara Atluri has mentioned, "He later decided to challenge his dismissal, using the repeal of Section 377 to argue that he was unjustly fired. Shortly following this decision he was found dead, with the cause of death being attributed to suicide. There is still a great deal of mystery surrounding the circumstances of his death" (13). The point is not to know whether it was a murder or suicide, but the point here is to realize the existence of those forces that made a queer body disappear from this world.

These forces can be noticed by exploring patriarchal heteronormative imaginative structure that is being normalized by discursive practices in India. Deepa Mehta challenges this normalization by intervening in this discourse with her film *Fire*. The queer bodies in this film are not naively presented for the interest of the heteronormative gaze by focusing on the differences of these bodies from the normal ones; rather these are presented as normal, wise and courageous. In contrast to it, popular media work to support queer bodies as comic characters with ridiculous physical gestures. This representation misses the sensitivity needed to deal with the issue of alternative sexuality. *Fire* challenges this popular media discourse that interests heteronormative order to maintain hierarchy of sexual identities. The

attempt of the popular media to differentiate queer bodies from normal bodies leads towards the violent regulation of these bodies in social space as mentioned by Dr. Siras's case.

Along with popular media, this heteronormative discourse gets expression through social customs and religious practices. Popularized mythical images of Shiva-Parvati, Rama-Sita, Krishna-Radha etc. illustrate this normalization. Social customs like marriage forces human beings to act according to the role assigned to their gender. Any deviation from the assigned role becomes a subject of public hatred and rage. Reading *Fire* in this context makes spectators get clues of objective violence and to feel the spirit of the ethical characters.

#### **SIGNS OF OBJECTIVE VIOLENCE IN THE ENDING OF FIRE**

The hostile spirit of the normalized symbolic reality is signified by the anxiety caused by the revelation of Radha and Sita's relationship to Ashok. Before this, these characters had been hiding their relationship from the patriarchal heteronormative gaze. This attempt to hide oneself reveals the fear of the victims of symbolic reality. Sita's words throw some light on the exclusionary nature of their symbolic reality when she says, "...there is no word in our language that can describe what we are, how we feel for each other." It shows the strategy to control meaning of signifiers for the systemic functioning of life. Her expression shows that they (Sita and Radha) are now inadmissible things in the existing order that violently possesses the signifiers and signifieds. Though, it reveals incompleteness of the symbolic order, yet it points to the normal functioning of life under the unquestioned authority of the big Other. The shot that captures the moment of Ashok's sudden arrival at home to see Radha and Sita on bed displays the effect of authoritative gaze of the big Other (Fig. 1.1). The shot vivifies Radha and Sita being looked at by Ashok. Radha's downcast eyes, silence and her attempt to cover her body reveal the fear and anxiety caused by this gaze. Silence and lighting in fact work rhetorically in this shot. Silence signifies the anxiety created by this event and low-key lighting creates the atmosphere of despair and tension. Also



this shot is deliberately prolonged for have a long lasting impact.

Reaction of the big Other for the violent regulation of queer identities is visible in the reactions of Biji and Ashok. In the next shot, Biji spits on Radha's face. It is a sign of hate and anger of the old for the new. It reveals the imaginative structure of established reality that equates queer identity to evil and ugly one. This equation leads the believers of the big Other not to tolerate any appearance of queer bodies. Radha's expressions captured by a close up shot expose the signs of torture of this symbolic reaction (Fig 1.2). Dr. Siras's case as mentioned earlier is a concrete example of the impact of this type of symbolic torture.



Fig. 1.1 Patriarchal Heteronormative Gaze

Fig. 1.2 Inadmissible Face

The role of the language to exclude queer bodies is displayed in the dialogue between Ashok and Radha. The master-signifier that controls Ashok's imagination is 'religious spirit' uncorrupted by desires. As the master-signifier is not questioned, Ashok accepts the meaning of the other signifiers ordered on the command of this master-signifier. His calling Radha a 'whore' and her desires 'sinful' reveals his attempt to violently impose the order of his master-signifier on Radha's spirit. Distinguishing a woman as a 'good woman' from a 'whore' is an

ideological stratagem to trap woman in the patriarchal structure. The use of the word 'whore' shows that the distinction of private and public space as accepted by liberal thinkers is not a clear distinction. The language that is active in the public space can be invoked for the regulation of woman's body in private space. Žižekian reading of this use of language in the private space becomes important for those theorists who believe that the demand of a safe private world can solve gender problems. The important thing is not to demand a safe private world and to leave the public space as it is, but to struggle in the public space so that the private space could be made better. A woman's acceptance of the distinction between 'good woman' and 'whore' in the public space becomes a cause of her own enslavement in the patriarchal structure. A woman's fantasy of 'good woman' supports her symbolic reality. In order to challenge this symbolic reality, there is a need to overcome the fantastical support of the reality. In Ashok's case it is 'religious spirit' and in Radha's case it is the fantasy of 'good woman' that relates them to the symbolic reality. Ashok's use of the word 'whore' is an attempt to make Radha believe in her old fantasy of 'good woman' and to save the reality supported by this fantasy.

Radha's name itself suggests violence of language that tries to reduce a woman from a complex human being to the simple role of a devoted wife. The popular religious myth of Radha and Krishna projects Radha as an ideal woman for her devotion to Krishna. This external code of ideal woman is internalized by the discursive practices in religious institutions. Ashok's expectations from Radha that she should help him in his practice of celibacy are the effect of these discursive practices. Radha's words, "I am finished with my penance" suggest the pain she had been feeling for years. This is an expression of objective violence. In a similar manner, Sita can be perceived as a victim of this social code of ideal woman preserved by religious myths.

The violence inherent in the order is expressed through the symbol of 'fire' in the next shot. This shot captures the moment when Radha's sari catches fire. A reverse shot showing Ashok's face reveals the position of the big Other that wishes to



exclude queer identity from its order. Sari is a symbol of cultural identity that makes a woman identify herself with her subject position and to function accordingly in the given social structure. Burning of the sari symbolizes loss of cultural identity that was linked to the order of the big Other. Ashok's passive reaction in this shot shows the attempt of the big Other not to tolerate queer bodies. Ashok's action of holding Biji and to let Radha burn reveals his choice to hold onto tradition and to make dissident suffer. This moment was a shocking moment for Radha that made her see the intensity of violence inherent in the structure she was living in (Fig 1.3). This moment is the moment of disruption of her symbolic reality. Non-diegetic sounds intensify the atmosphere of this scene. The musical notes of *sarangi* heighten the tragic experience of Radha, while the sound of distant drums signifies the moment of her struggle and resolve.



Fig. 1.3 Disruption of Symbolic Reality

### ETHICS OF THE REAL IN *FIRE*

The emergence of the Real in the familiar reality disturbs the existing symbolic co-ordination that had been making the characters of the film interact meaningfully. The Real reacts back to the authority of the big Other. This is in a sense a counter violence where the Real relates itself to the reality in a dialectical way. This dialectical relation in action is well described in a scene where Ashok is shown sitting on the threshold of his home and struggling with himself to face the queer identity of his wife. At a more subtle level this scene reveals that he was more upset with his own identity. Ashok who had been practising celibacy for the last thirteen years and whose consciousness was being ruled by the master-signifier 'religious spirit' now faces a threat to

his own sense of 'self'. His realization that his own desire got invested in the image of woman's naked body is also a realization of a failed symbolic castration of his 'self'. On being excited, he closed his legs and cried. In Žižekian terms, this scene describes Ashok's lament on the impotence of the big Other that could not close on him completely. The disturbed sense of 'self' is also signified by non-diegetic sounds. The sound of thundering signifies this disturbance in Ashok's mind. A sense of suspense is also created by a sharp haunting sound that points to Ashok's surprise and fear on this discovery of split 'self'.

The gap or void opened in the symbolic order is the site of struggle where the big Other attempts to fill the gap and the ethical character tries to widen this gap to transform the order. In the next shot, Ashok tries to fill the gap by forcing Radha to help him in his practice of celibacy, to feel ashamed of her desires, and to touch his feet. This was an attempt to restore the authority of the big Other that was challenged by Radha and Sita. A clear refusal by Radha to accept Ashok's words is an ethical gesture as Radha seeks no compromise with the authority. It is a sign that Radha is no more a subject of symbolic reality but she is a subject of her own desire. Radha describes herself as a subject of desire as, "You know that without desire, I was dead. Without desire, there's no point in living." This is an opposition of law and desire, reality and the Real, morality and ethics. Radha finally presents herself as a symptom of the Real that is not symbolically castrated by the patriarchal heteronormative morality and law. An important point to note here is that Radha uses the word 'desire' in the sense of 'desiring'. From her perspective, to desire means to live. This position is appreciated in Lacanian theory. Lacan has related desire with the void or lack of the symbolic order. It means the object of desire is absent from the symbolic order or in other words, the desired object is the object that the big Other fails to provide. For this reason, Lacan called the object of desire *objet petit a* where 'a' signifies an absent object. The subject of desire in this sense is bound to transgress the symbolic order in search of the desired object. Radha's decision to leave Ashok for Sita is an ethical position that is transgressive by nature.



To follow her desire, Radha overcomes her finite world and cuts herself from all moral, rational and pathological roots. She rejects the moral position that forces woman to respect her husband. She rejects Ashok's reasons to follow swamiji so as to get rid of the sinful desires. Finally, she cuts herself from the pathological roots by refusing to accept words like 'shame' and 'whore' for her spirit. These moral, rational and pathological elements were once part of her spirit. To free oneself of one's own 'self' is an ethical gesture as this opens the possibility of change in the symbolic reality.

In the previous shot in which Radha and Sita are talking about leaving their home, Radha asks Sita to leave first. It signifies two different positions. On one hand, Radha wishes to give reasons to Ashok for her decision to leave. In other words, she is still connected to her symbolic reality by the rational pull. Her wish in this way is her attempt to give herself a rational comfort. On the other hand, she is spiritually out of her own 'self'. Her decision to ask Sita to leave first is the declaration that she is an alien to her own 'self'. Letting Sita to leave first is to let her spirit search for a foreign land. Radha's 'self' is an 'other' now that is not feeling at home. Žižek has described this situation by the metaphor of "mobius strip" (Žižek, Santner, Reinhard *Neighbor* 174). If the subject moves on one side of the strip, he will find that he is already on the other side of the strip. In a similar way, ethical subject finds itself on the other side of its symbolic identity.

The minimal link with her symbolic identity is shown to lose its hold in the next shot in which Radha's sari catches fire. Sari as described earlier is the symbol of woman's cultural identity, limitations and finite existence. Burning of the sari cannot be read pessimistically as the suffering of woman in symbolic reality. On the contrary, it offers an optimistic reading where the ethical subject loses her identity that bound her to her subordinate position in the symbolic reality.

The next shot that shows Radha in her childhood saying, "I can see the ocean", clearly illustrates the state of an ethical subject after losing her finite form of life. 'Ocean' is a symbol of what Alain Badiou would call 'infinity of being' that is "the recognition of the infinity of situations, the

supposition that the count-as-one concerns infinite multiplicities" (145). The ethical subject embraces this infinite possibility of being by following her desire. The symbol of 'ocean' expresses this sense of infinity that resists control of life in a finite form. This symbol signifies the nature of desire that is unlimited. Lacanian desire is related to *object a*, an object that is missing from the symbolic reality. This object keeps the subject desiring and thus introduces her to infinite possibilities of being. The flashback shot shows Radha standing in a field full of flowers all around. There is no clear object in her vision (Fig. 1.4). This depiction signifies Radha in relation to infinite possibilities of being that is the home of the subject of desire.

The last scene shows Radha in a burnt sari meeting Sita at the Nizamuddin shrine. Nothing in this situation seems comfortable. It is raining at night and the two women are alone without any hope of safe future. This state signifies an important aspect of ethical character that can be described in Alenka Zupančič's words, "It is not that pleasure is forbidden to the ethical subject but rather, that it loses its attractive power for such a subject; it is available and accessible, just no longer desirable" (8). Comfort was available for Radha and Sita but on a condition to accept the authority of their finite world. A desire of freedom and the decision to embrace infinite possibility of being makes the ethical character transgress the smooth functioning of life even if it is painful. Radha and Sita in this sense, qualify to be called ethical characters.

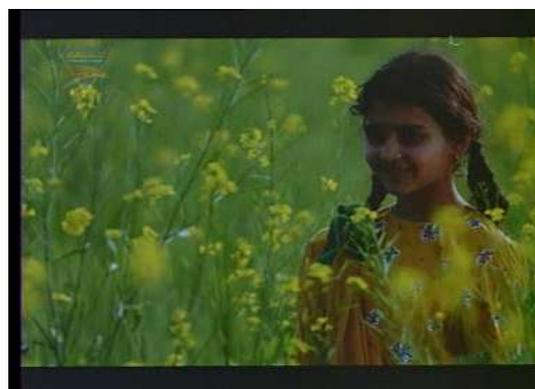


Fig. 1.4 A Flashback Shot



Fig. 1.5 A Žižekian Gaze

The ending of the film illustrates Deepa Mehta's use of cinematographic techniques so as to put an impact on spectator's mind. The shot in which Radha is shown in charred sari and looking at the camera (Fig. 1.5) can be understood through the Žižekian concept of gaze. This close up shot focusing on Radha's face makes spectators feel as if they are being looked at. It seems as if woman as the object of spectators' gaze reflects back the gaze to prove its failure of reducing her to the position of an object. This shot signifies the failure of patriarchal heteronormative gaze.

Another notable artistic expression is the final shot, a high angle shot, that makes spectators view Radha and Sita at the Nizamuddin shrine (Fig. 1.6). The upward movement of the camera makes the characters small and the shrine big in size as if spectators are supposed to focus more on the shrine of the famous Sufi saint. This movement of the camera from the characters to the shrine is an attempt to make spectators focus on the message that Sufi saints have been giving for centuries, the message of love and humanity.



Fig. 1.6 A High Angle Shot

A Žižekian reading of this shot goes a little deeper and focuses on the darkness all around the shrine. It is still night and the day is yet to come. This darkness is indicative of the Real ground that will be cut into symbolic reality by interface effect. The shot presents no fantastical support to any reality. There is no interface effect as such in the ending of the film. Spectators are left to create reality out of this state. Will it be the fantasy of fundamentalists who will try to restore finite form of life by excluding the queer bodies or will it be the fantasy of liberal thinkers where the queer bodies will get a safe private space or will it be the Žižekian fantasy where the abstract universal controlling public space will be radically changed? The film gives no clue and ends in darkness where different fantasies will struggle to structure a symbolic reality.

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