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THE CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY OF PUBLIC SPACE IN DEEPA MEHTA'S ELEMENTS TRILOGY

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Abstract
The following article takes up the representation of heterotopic public places and lived spaces in the visual story arcs of (celebrated Indian-Canadian filmmaker) Deepa Mehta for a closer probe. She has made her mark in the map of world cinema with her outstanding and thought-provoking feminist movies such as *Water*, *Fire* and *Earth*. A spokesperson of Indian women's plight, she leaves no stone unturned in portraying the telling helplessness of Indian women, in times past and times present. This paper also travels across the theories propounded by Foucault, Marc Augé and Ray Oldenburg and frequently seeks its sustenance from the matchless erudition of film-critic, Roger Ebert. The lived experiences of the pivotal protagonists involved in the sad-glad process of lives and times take place more in the public space than in the home space, and therein lies the crux of this proposed investigation. The spatiality of the relationship dynamic that attains fruition in the home space actually finds its fountainhead in the public space abroad. Deepa Mehta's visual rhetoric adduces support to the points driven home in this article.

This is the epoch of space, the epoch of simultaneity and juxtaposition—to reiterate Foucault from his 1967-published treatise on discursive other space, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias". Needless to mention, the French thinker turned out to be prophetic, and we certainly are thriving in an academia today that dwells on social theory, Sojaian postmodern geography and culture studies. Tantalizingly succinct as Foucault had been in his "Of Other Spaces", a generation of academics did not leave any stone unturned to re-assert, re-visit and re-think his thought-provoking heterotopia studies. From there our journey began, and postmodern geography spread its roots across the skeins of humanities, social sciences, media studies and what not. In these following pages we are going to discuss how heterotopic public spaces acquire a pivotal dimension in the Elements trilogy by the celebrated Canada-based filmmaker, Deepa Mehta—Academy Awards nominated for her *Water* and has been regarded as a feminist spokesperson, a voice of Indian plight: our past and present.

We will unravel not only public spaces, but to be precise, the non-places that Marc Augé talked about in his 1995-book *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, and the Third Places, the happy places Ray Oldenburg thoroughly discusses in his 1996-article, "Our Vanishing "Third Places"". How in the films, *Fire*, *Earth* and *Water*, the diasporic filmmaker Mehta exploits the lived experience of her characters mostly in the public spaces to give a voice to the undertow of the plots is the point I seek to drive home. Manifestly, such places marked by their placelessness, devoid of their permanent human abode—shops, restaurants, shanties, gardens, rail stations, crossroads, alleyways, ghats of Benares, even a rowing boat—play a crucial part in the narration of a movie. The most bending and critical turn of the plot arc has been seen to be taking place in such and such non-places, such public places.

Stressing the discursive significance of a non-place or third place one feels tempted to cite Ray Oldenberg from his article "Our Vanishing "Third Places"": "Third places are nothing more than public gathering places…. Life without community has produced, for many, a life style consisting mainly of a home-to-work-and-back-again shuttle. Social health and psychological well-being depend upon community" (6-7). And it goes without saying community strife and gendered body politics have repeatedly been diagnosed as the very nucleus in Indo-Canadian director, Mehta's thought-provoking films. In this context, Marc Augé in his book, *Non-place*, writes that a non-place dispenses with the "usual determinants" of a human being entering it: "He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer or driver. Perhaps he is still weighed down by the previous day's worries, the next day's concerns; but he is distanced from them temporarily by the environment of the moment" (103).

To begin with let us visit Deepa Mehta's first venture in the Elements Trilogy arc, 1996-released film, *Fire*: a movie beset with infidelity, conspiracy, clandestine lesbianism and ineffectual celibacy. In Roger Ebert's (the first movie critic to win a Pulitzer Prize in 1975) words:

> It is of course the Indian context that gives this innocent story its resonance. Lesbianism is so outside the experience of these Hindus, we learn, that their language even lacks a word for it. The men are not so much threatened as confused. Sita and Radha see more clearly: Their lives have been made empty, pointless and frustrating by husbands who see them as breeding stock or unpaid employees. (par. 5)

So, it does not need any further mention that *Fire* is unfailingly a movie upholding the feminist cause by Mehta which happened to be her wonted signature in her next two Elements-films. To speak of the non-places and public places, *Fire* opens in a field of mustard where young Radha had visited with her parents. The field of mustard works as a public heterotopia marked with both placelessness and also acts like a garden—a microcosmic space, juxtaposing several spaces and different environments. The principle plotline of *Fire* opens in Taj Mahal—newlywed Sita (Nandita Das) and Jatin (Javed Jafferi) visit Agra for their Honeymoon, and they are only three days into their unhappy marriage. A.R. Rahman's orginal score resounds as we find them in not only a public place but in a Heterotopia of Time as well, the Taj Mahal enclosing the pastness and the antiquity of the Mughal times in its premise. This is where we find a saddened Sita asking Jatin morosely if he did not like her. Further we see, Jatin barely comes back home at night. He is usually engaged in eager lovemaking with his Chinese mistress, Julie (Alice Poon).

Jatin's New Delhi family consists of Sita's brother-in-law, Ashok (Kulbhushan Kharbanda) and his wife, Radha (Shabana Azmi). Biji, who has been rendered speechless because of a stoke is still there under the nursing care of Mundu, who has been a notorious caretaker and an errand boy, an observer of the clandestine lesbian relation that will mellow soon between Radha, bound by duty to her husband who had vowed celibacy because Radha is barren, and Sita, who comes to know that Jatin already is a prey to the predatory affair of skimpy-skirt-wearing Julie. The apparent and underlying tussle in the family between tradition and dissatisfaction results in Sita and Radha's intimacy. Now to the non-places again. In various occasions, we come across the family-run Video store and the restaurant. Here Sita and Radha begin working, and gradually the restaurant kitchen becomes the place where they come closer. It is also in the restaurant that Ashok confronts Radha after knowing about her involvement with Sita from the peeping Tom, Mundu. It is that very restaurant where Radha notes her voice of dissent and vents her mind to break off her tradition-bound, celibacy-pleasing mocking relationship with Ashok.

The restaurant space, although not as intimate as a home space, becomes the site of self-discovery and existence, the site of relationship dynamic and resistance. Stuck in a relationship that does not have a name or coinage in Indian customs, they decide to run off. Sita waits at the Nizammudin while Radha, after recovering herself from the fire that her sari caught on, joins her. The mosque space is where the film ends, and we also find the mustard field in a flashback, to say nothing of the market spaces where Sita and Radha began to know each other as time marched on. It is intriguing how such films abound with non-places burdened with most of the aporia and knot resulting from the conflicts of a relationship. Not to belittle the dauntingly feminist undertow of Deepa Mehta's movie, *Fire* does seem to be deriving most of its spatial sustenance from public spaces than its home space. Again, Sita—who knows that she does not belong in a home where there is neither her mother's love nor her husband's affection—faces the very problematic of homelessness. Her in-law ceases to be a home away from home. Towards the beginning of the movie, when one deciphers why Sita is morose and sad in her New Delhi in-law it comes out that an in-law might always, in an Indian context of arranged marriage, open up as a Crisis Heterotopia—much like those motel rooms, like boarding schools—devoid of the motherly affection, devoid of fatherly security: given, the husband embodies the callousness of Jatin. But this discursive discussion needs a different sociological treatment altogether.

The second film of the Trilogy was Aamir Khan-starring and again, an A.R. Rahman-musical, *Earth* (1998), in which director and co-producer Mehta turned Bapsi Sidhwa's 1991 novel, *Ice Candy Man*, into a heartfelt screenplay. The film generated ripples among the fundamentalist Hindus and almost drew a ban from the extremists. Her life sketch from the website *Encyclopedia of World Biography* reads:

> That film was set in Lahore, in what is now Pakistan. When it had been home to Mehta's parents, however, India and Pakistan were both part of the same British-ruled colonial territory. As India achieved its independence from Britain in 1947, however, majority-Hindu India and mostly Muslim Pakistan were split into two different countries, with large, violence-ridden migrations occurring as adherents of each religion streamed toward the new borders. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed. Mehta's film, plotted through the eyes of an eight-year-old girl, took place against the backdrop of these events and showed the dissolution

> of friendships and romantic relationships under the pressure of religious hatreds. (par. 10)

In *Earth*, the scene in the Lahore platform where Ice Candy Man, Dil (Aamir Khan) waits for his sisters, cousins to arrive from Gurdaspore makes it all the more pivotal and pathetic. Finding raped and sliced open bare bodied cadavers of his sisters, Dil experiences a near-madness, experiences the thrust to join the spree to slaughter Hindus. The rail station becomes that public space where the heart-rending ripple of the partition is felt in the movie the most. Take out the rail station scene from *Earth*, and it all feels like a closet play being filmed. How a non-place renders significant twist and turn into the psyche of the characters engaged in there is writ large on this very scene that also happen to be climactic and cathartic. The masseur, Hasan (Rahul Khanna) is drawn towards the fixed belief that Amristsar is the place to be and Hinduism is the religion to adopt during the cracking of India and Pakistan. Dil Navaz does not flinch to slaughter him like a pig and leave him in a sack out on the streets—a thoroughfare being nothing but a heterotopic public space indeed—for trying to win away Lenny's Ayah Shanta (Nandita Das), for making love to her in Shanta's quarters at night, for helping Sher Singh and his family of three escape to Amritsar, for asking Shanta to migrate with him to Amritsar and marry him, for making up his mind to convert to Hindiusm to save his skin from the murderous Sikhs. The shayari-reciting, heart-warming fellow Dil Navaz does not take time to turn a weather cock and champion the cause of his extremist Muslim views by hook or by crook. Communal riots become the center of the plot after the Gurdaspore train reaches Lahore, dripping Muslim immigrants' blood.

Earth also portrays all the friends of the diversifying group of DilNavaz at the mosque-garden where Shanta brings eight-year-old Lenny for a stroll. The group consisting of a friendly Sikh, three Mohammedans, a Hindu and a Parsi little child become the most welcoming face of the film towards the opening. They meet at the garden, at dhabas where they take their lunch, at crossroads. Here, in such public spaces, we find them exchanging communal views, airing their views on the partition that is looming large on the Indian subcontinent. It is an undeniable fact since *Earth* closes with Mehta's note: "Over one million people were killed in India's division. Seven million Muslims and five million Hindus and Sikhs were uprooted in the largest and most terrible exchange of population known to history." Manifestly, when the friend circle meets in public places on different occasion, they serve as what is known as choric characters. They provide the audience with a choric background study of what was happening all around them. The public space meetings turn out to be a communal and political dialogue of the masses disguised in friendly humour. Not only humour, we have also seen the Butcher abusing Sher Singh's blood-thirsty Sikh Gurus. Undoubtedly, such non-places carry with it the burden and responsibility of authorial commentary in a film like *Earth*. Let us re-visit Roger Ebert's review of *Earth* in this connection:

> The film is based on the novel *Cracking India*, by Bapsi Sidhwa. It is said to be partly autobiographical. She remembers the last moments of harmony among the groups, in particular a day spend on rooftops flying brightly colored kites. A few weeks later, from the same rooftops, some of the same people watch Hindu tenements in flames (the "firemen" spray gasoline on them) and a Muslim man torn in two by a mob that ties his arms to two automobiles. At home, little Lenny and her brother tear her favorite doll in two, and the ayah tearfully tries to stitch it back together. (par. 5)

The rooftop also serves as non-place since it is not exactly the home space that we take it granted for. Not only does rooftop open up as a site of watching the happenings around the characters but in the film, *Fire*, it was the rooftop where we see Radha and Sita meet again and again—now to share their pent up feelings at night, now to get away from the surging problems and boredom that gnaw at them from the home space downstairs, now to persuade and convince each other of their clandestine intimacy's legitimacy. The spatiality of the non-place is summarily significant while a story uncoils itself—be it as domestic as *Fire*, be it as communal as *Earth*.

An eight year old newly-widowed girl, Chuyia (Sarala), comes under the domineering charge of Madhumati, frightening and indolent. Madhumati (Manorama) happens to run an ashram for the lifelong widows like Shakuntala (Seema Biswas), Kalyani (Lisa Ray), Chuyia, 'Auntie' Patiraji and the like. *Water* was forced to be filmed in Sri Lanka as Deepa Mehta received death-threats for shooting the movie in Indian soil (Benares). To appropriate the 1938-set gendered blasphemy of Indian Hindu customs, Roger Ebert writes in his review:

> The film is lovely in the way Satyajit Ray's films are lovely. It sees poverty and deprivation as a condition of life, not an exception to it, and finds beauty in the souls of its characters. Their misfortune does not make them unattractive. In many Indian films it is not startling to be poor, or to be in the thrall of 2,000-year-old customs; such matters are taken for granted, and the story goes on from there. [...] The unspoken subtext of "Water" is that an ancient religious law has been put to the service of family economy, greed and a general feeling that women can be thrown away. The widows in this film are treated as if they have no useful lives apart from their husbands. They are given life sentences. They are not so very different from the Irish girls who, having offended someone's ideas of proper behavior, were locked up in the church-run "Magdalen laundries" for the rest of their lives. (par. 6-7)

A film like *Water* needs no summing up since its popularity, its impeccable aesthetics and the controversy that abounds it have nominated Mehta's film for the Academy Awards in Best Foreign Language Film category in 2007, apart from another sixteen awards from around the globe. Since the movie primarily takes place amongst the happenings in ghats, village roads, an ashram space and closes in a railway station space, it happens to be a discursive ground to unravel the suggestive potential of public spaces and their effectual impact on a story arc this deep. The buffalo-driven cart on a village path is where the film opens and we find Chuyia, only a wee little child now, losing her husband. Her life is set to be doomed. Despite the law that gives a widow free reign to marry after she is widowed, her father leaves Chuyia at that ashram for the lifelong widows near the ghats of the river Ganges. An ashram for widows is a place that happens to be both a Foucauldian Crisis Heterotopia and a Heterotopia of Deviation since like asylums, cemeteries and rest homes, such an ashram in 1938-India housed individuals whose behavior threatened to fall outside the norms of the religious customs. It was a curse to be a widow. To remarry was to subject one's dead husband to the depths of fiery hell. These ashrams were kept so that the widows were kept in thrall according to the Ancient Texts of Manu. Not freely accessible to the public—as we see Narayan (John Abraham) trying vainly knocking at the door to see Kalyani and Chuyia only to be turned down by Shakuntala—the ashram also happens to be a Heterotopia of Ritual and Purification because it certainly is used to enforce religiosity onto the misfortunes of a gendered domesticated society.

It is interesting that Chuyia meets Narayan, who turns out to be her foreign-educated Gandhian saving grace, on the streets while chasing the runaway puppy that Kalyani pets. Kalyani meets Narayan for the first time in the steps of Ganges either. It is also the steps of Ganges where Narayan learns from Ravindra (Vinay Pathak) that a hijra procurer prostitutes younger widows to their fathers, the Seths. Now, later on, it is revealed that the pimp Gulabi (Raghuvir Yadav) helps Madhumati generate money from all those wealthy Seths by sending Kalyani on night trysts with them. The boat that is being used while voyaging to those Seths acts as one of those Foucauldian 'moving heterotopias'. It was on that boat that Kalyani learns that Narayan was unfortunately a son to Seth Dwarkanath with whom she had to spend nights on various occasions. The ending of the film is primarily based on what transpires on the boat between a disheartened, demur Kalyani and Narayan.

The ghats were also sites of cremation, and of the pundit Sadananda (Kulbhushan Kharbanda). It is from good hearted Sadananda, Shakuntala learns that there had been a law levied that lets the widows re-marry. But she also hears from him an unpleasant truth that we do not always follow the law when it happens to be inconvenient for the religious consumerism and a patriarchal hegemony raging in the 1940s India. Kalyani has her death by drowning herself in the river stepping down from the ghats, a protest of resignation and heartbreak. Her self-immolation does not go in vain, as we see Shakuntala running after the train which brought Gandhi in their town to somehow send Chuyia away—Chuyia, who was already being dragged into the dark claws of child prostitution so early in her age by both Madhumati and Gulabi. The rail station space shows us Gandhi. Shakuntala was already present there, tearing out of the shackles of her nonchalant widowhood, an unconscious Chuyia in her arms. After Kalyani went missing, Narayan devotes himself to the Gandhian movement and it is he who, on board the running train, takes Chuyia from Shakuntala to look after her.

It was only on the streets and on the roadside stalls that Narayan would wait for Chuyia to come out from the ashram so that he could send in his messages to see, to meet Kalyani. So, it is evident how the public non-places play such an undoubtedly central role in a film like *Water*. Mehta was born in Amritsar, and eventually migrated to Canada around 1973. Due to her Elements Trilogy she has faced intense invective, has been burned in effigy. But the daunting hindrances apart she has always made it a point to uphold the voice of Indian women, their unspeakable plight across ages. One feels tempted to quote from the webpage on Mehta from *The Encyclopedia of World Biography* again: "Looking back on the violence she had faced, Mehta told Bob Longino of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* that "It was a horrific time, but later I could put it in perspective. I thought about the relationship between politics and art and freedom of expression and what that means and what drives extremists. I realized it really wasn't about me."" (par. 15).

Before I conclude, I seek to stress the importance of such non-places, such heterotopic public spaces once and for all. Marc Augé writes that a 'place' cannot be completely erased, while a 'non-place' can never be totally completed. Similarly home space and public space turn out to be "like opposed polarities". He further says: "[t]hey are like palimpsests on which the scrambled games of identity and relations are ceaselessly written. But non-places are the real measure of our time; one that could be quantified—with the aid of a few conversions between area, volume and distance—by totalling all the air, rail and motorway routes […]" (79). Therefore, in closing, I have, until now, humbly tried to investigate how all such non-places act as the palimpsests of the cultural geography of lives and times of the suffering multitude, how the spatiality of the public spaces become the real measure of the time that Deepa Mehta seeks to

portray in her screen stories with her wonted genius to re-tell the poignancy and agony of our pastness and our presence.

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