

Document Citation

Title	'Fire' is a daring tale of love in India
Author(s)	Kevin Thomas
Source	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>
Date	1997 Aug 27
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	F5
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Fire, Mehta, Deepa, 1996

'Fire' Is a Daring Tale of Love in India

MOVIE REVIEW

By KEVIN THOMAS
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Deepa Mehta's graceful and daring "Fire" begins with a deceptively tranquil image of some women and a little girl sitting in the midst of a field of flowers. A voice-over tells us that these people have never seen the sea and long to see it, concluding with the remark of a wise old woman, "Sometimes you just have to see without looking."

It's an image that's repeated as a memory of a beautiful but sad woman as she looks out at New Delhi from an apartment above her husband's shop, a fast-food restaurant and video rental store on a bustling thoroughfare. She doesn't know it, but she's about to start seeing "without looking"—as she was advised to do when she was that little girl.

The woman, Radha Kapur (Shabana Azmi), is resigned to her fate. She is unable to bear children, but she is too kind, wise and just plain weary to hold it against her husband, Ashok (Kulbushan Kharban-

da), that—in response to the disgrace of her barrenness—he has become celibate in the thrall of a swami who preaches that "desire is the root of all evil." Radha spends her days divided between working in the shop and caring for her aged mother-in-law, who was felled by a major stroke that has left her mute and unable to walk but still alert.

Sharing the tasteful but small apartment is Ashok's younger brother and business partner Jatin (Jaaved Jaaferi) and his bride Sita (Nandita Das). The handsome Jatin is in the midst of a passionate affair with a Chinese Canadian woman (Alice Pon) too independent to marry into a traditional Hindi family but has succumbed to pressure from his brother and mother to wed Sita.

Thus it is a far from happy family into which the trusting but intelligent Sita has married. Scarcely radical or revolutionary, Sita is in fact a perfectly conventional young woman. She's capable of respecting tradition yet lives in the modern world. Consequently, when she and Radha bond in the face of mutual respect—and misery—it is Sita who is young enough, sufficiently unhappy enough and open-minded enough to act upon the growing sexual

attraction between her sister-in-law and herself.

In the context of the Kapur family and their narrow world, what Sita has done is shocking and an invitation to calamity, just as the film itself was, when it was screened at the International Film Festival of India, where a man threatened to shoot Mehta for having made it.

At last report, "Fire" remains banned in India. That's a shame because, beyond depicting in the Indian cinema the unthinkable—a lesbian relationship—it reveals a tug between past and present beliefs and values that must affect the lives of millions, especially women, entrapped in an oppressive patriarchal society.

As India's longtime preeminent screen actress, Shabana Azmi was understandably apprehensive about agreeing to play Radha, and surely it was no small act of courage on her part to accept the role. In her understated yet inimi-

tably expressive manner, the exquisite Azmi blends right into the flawless ensemble of actors Mehta has assembled.

Heightening the drama throughout is A.R. Rahman's shimmering score. For American audiences "Fire" has an additional plus: It is in "Hinglish"—English seasoned with occasional Hindi expressions.

■ **Unrated. Times guidelines: The film deals with and depicts a lesbian relationship.**

'Fire'

Shabana Azmi.....	Radha
Nandita Das.....	Sita
Kulbushan Kharbanda.....	Ashok
Jaaved Jaaferi.....	Jatin

A Zeitgeist Films release of a Canadian-Indian co-production, a *Trial by Fire* film. Writer-director Deepa Mehta. Producers Bobby Bedi, Mehta. Executive producers Suresh Bhalla, David Hamilton. Cinematographer Giles Nuttgens. Editor Barry Farrell. Music A.R. Rahman. Production designer Aradhana Seth. Running time: 1 hour, 44 minutes.

■ *Exclusively at the Music Hall, 9036 Wilshire Blvd., Beverly Hills, (310) 274-6869; the Town Center 5, 17200 Ventura Blvd., Encino, (818) 981-9811; and the Town Center 4, Bristol at Antin, South Coast Plaza, Costa Mesa, (714) 751-4184.*