

Chinese Indians in Fire: Refractions of Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality and Citizenship in Post-Colonial India's Memories of the Sino-Indian War

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This article utilises the representation of the Chinese characters in the film Fire (1996) as a strategic site from which to examine the institutional marginalisation of India's Chinese minority community since the Sino-Indian war of 1962. Through a close examination of diplomatic documents and white papers exchanged between the governments of China and India during the 1960's, publications of the Indian government on the Sino-Indian war as well as newspaper articles and film reviews on 'Fire', this article delineates how the film's dehistoricised approach in representing Chinese minority voices and their criticisms against Indian society results in obscuring the legacy of the oppression of the Chinese community in India and in reiterating the state's nationalist construction of the Chinese Indians as treacherous, back-stabbing and irrational 'others'.

INTRODUCTION

The representation of the Chinese community of India or its history of persecution following the rise of anti-Chinese nationalism during and after the Sino-Indian war of 1962 is virtually non-existent in the Indian media, mainstream or otherwise. The notable exceptions to this are the sporadic articles about the Chinese in the newspapers of Kolkata, where the community has a sizeable presence compared to other parts of India, and a handful of popular films from previous decades featuring the Chinese in mostly peripheral or villainous roles. In this context, the inclusion of two Chinese characters—Julie and her father—in Deepa Mehta's film *Fire*¹ (1996), is most

¹ *Fire* was released in Toronto in 1996 and distributed by Zeitgeist. *Fire* is one of the first films, set in an Indian context, which has dealt with intersecting issues of sexuality, gender and same-sex love openly and directly and as such is a landmark site from which to raise feminist questions/criticisms about such

unexpected and as the following analysis will show, deeply problematic. A critical reading of the film illustrates that the Chinese characters in the film serve as convenient props to extend the film's overall criticism against India's socio-cultural hierarchies.

Following the Sino-Indian war, the Chinese community in India experienced physical violence, arson, economic displacement and ostracism from mainstream Indian society. These horrors were combined with state-organised persecutions, such as forced deportation and internment. Although the film is silent on these matters whose repercussions continue to impact the community, it nonetheless features Chinese Indian characters who, in a rather individualised and cursory manner, voice their grievances against contemporary Indian society's negative attitudes towards its citizens of Chinese origin. Thus, despite highlighting the issue of anti-Chinese prejudices in one brief instant via these characters, the film remains problematically silent on the critical historical context of marginalisation and state-sponsored oppression that India's Chinese minorities suffered and have suffered since the war of 1962. This renders the Chinese characters' discontent with racial intolerance individualised and decontextualised, as opposed to being informed by experiences of systematic disenfranchisement. By obfuscating the context necessary for fully understanding the gravity of Julie's father's discontent with ethnocentrism, the film undermines its own feminist critique of hetero-patriarchal institutions (family, marriage and state) and discourses (epic and legend) at large. As a result, *Fire* extends the long silences and erasures concerning the community's experiences of marginalisation. Furthermore, as the article will show, the film's representational approaches ultimately turn out to be in complicity with the very hetero-patriarchal systems/practices it sets out to challenge.

This article utilises the representation of the Chinese in *Fire* as a strategic site from which to examine the history of anti-Chinese nationalism in India and to raise questions about how the film's representational politics individualises minority experiences rooted in institutional marginalisation. The essay covers the following:

- (1) It provides a detailed account of how the Indian state implemented its nation-building practices during the war by systematically racialising and disenfranchising the Chinese Indians in order to place them in a subordinate relationship to the social, political and economic institutions of India.

projects. This film was screened in all the major cities in North America and many other parts of the world. It received extensive international coverage, as evident from the number of reviews in print and write-ups from different quarters of both the academic and non-academic communities in the US, Canada, UK, France, Singapore, etc. It also won several international awards and is often used in the academia for teaching. In India, the film was first screened in 1998 and was immediately at the centre of tremendous national controversy because of its homoerotic theme. Several acts of violence, threat, widespread demonstrations and political interventions followed the film's screening all over the country. The film was initially banned in certain parts of the country and as a consequence, the Supreme Court of India had to intervene to resume its screening. See Kapur (1998).

- (2) It analyses the film and its reviews and responses to identify how the Chinese Indian characters have been repeatedly overlooked and how a critical analysis of the specificities of Chinese disenfranchisement have been foreclosed.

The sources for the article are: diplomatic documents and white papers exchanged between the governments of China and India in the 1960s; publications of the Indian government on the Sino-Indian war; newspaper articles; and film reviews. Before we embark on charting this ground analytically, a general review of Indian films' treatment of Chinese characters is in order.

THE REPRESENTATION OF THE CHINESE IN INDIAN FILMS

As might be expected, the tenor of political relations between India and China has influenced the representation of China or the Chinese in the Indian media, particularly mainstream cinema. Consequently, there is a discernible difference in the portrayal of the Chinese in Indian films produced before and after the Sino-Indian war of 1962. Chinese characters and China-related themes in films prior to the war are generally positive ones, conveying messages of political and/or personal solidarity and friendship with Indians. A representative of this genre would be the Bengali feature film *Neel Akasher Neeche* (Under the Blue Sky), directed by the renowned film director Mrinal Sen and based on Padma Vibhushan Mahadevi Varma's short story, *Chini Firiwala* (The Chinese Hawker).² Released post-independence, this 1959 film is about the lead character Wang Lu (played by the Bengali actor Kali Banerjee). The film depicts Wang as a vendor of Chinese silk products in Kolkata and revolves around his brotherly bond with a Bengali-Indian woman, Basanti, during the politically tumultuous pre-independence India of the 1930s. Wang is cast as a friendly, honest, generous, hard-working and warm-hearted man in his thirties who lives in Kolkata after having left his erstwhile home and farm in Shandong, China, following certain tragic personal events determined by class-based oppressions. This film tells the Indian audience that despite being Chinese, Wang Lu is 'one of us', and projects a sense of solidarity with the Chinese by portraying a set of similarities between Indians and the Chinese in the interpersonal and political/international realms. The film's coverage of China's struggles against imperialist advances in the 1930s is underscored through the juxtaposition of anti-British nationalism in India. Wang's inspirational return to China with the purpose of serving his nation is paired with Basanti's self-sacrifice for the

² There might be numerous other films in different Indian languages, where Chinese characters appear, which could be included in this study. However, the focus here is on those films which portrayed clearly identifiable Chinese characters and were otherwise popular with Indian audiences. The Chinese characters appear on the script for a considerable amount of time or assume important roles by adding to the film's overall narrative.

Indian independence movement. The common theme of anti-imperialist struggles brings India and China on the same platform and emphasises a shared political identification along the lines of national awakening. Moreover, the familiar trope of kinship between Wang Lu and Basanti further brings the Chinese closer to the hearts of Indians. When Wang and Basanti exchange tokens of mutual affection—Wang's sister's necklace and Basanti's rakhee—not only do they become kindred across national lines, they also unite India and China in the stage of post-colonial world politics. This film represents the popularised rhetoric of brotherhood between India and China ('Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai') of the 1950s to the Indian populace.

The 1958 thriller *Hourah Bridge*, directed by Shakti Samanta, also features a prominent Chinese character. The protagonist Rakesh Kumar is on a mission to solve the mystery behind his brother's murder, which leads him to John Chang (played by the famous Indian actor Madan Puri), a Chinese man and one of the central characters in this thriller. This film portrays Chang as a suave and wealthy hotel owner involved in questionable activities, such as smuggling contraband commodities and priceless antiques. Although, it is not made clear how Chang ended up in Kolkata, he is shown to have an established presence in the city. Chang's opulent hotel, richly furnished office and large following of hired goons, spies and intermediaries signify his social status. Furthermore, Chang is fluent in Hindi and is totally at home in Kolkata, which suggests his unquestioned membership in the city's cosmopolitan landscape. Despite being cast as a villain engaged in illegal activities, Chang ultimately comes across as a fair and forgiving man. Overall, the defining features of his character are in keeping with typical depictions of sophisticated dark characters in Hindi films of that era. Chang's Chinese origin, therefore, does not add any specific negative qualities meant to deride China, impart any particular associations with Chinese culture or juxtapose the Chinese against Indians to make a point about one culture's moral or intellectual superiority over the other.

This discourse—ranging within a continuum between post-colonial solidarity to a fascination for the somewhat exotic but kind-hearted and what might be called 'part-of-the-Kolkata-landscape' underworld leader of Chinese origin—shifts drastically after the Sino-Indian war in 1962. Chetan Anand's *Haqeeqat* (Reality) released in 1964 and Dev Anand's *Prem Pujari* (Worshipper of Love) released in 1970 are examples of how the political estrangement between the countries resulted in projecting a negative light on China/the Chinese and in casting the Chinese as people whose interests were fundamentally inimical to the well-being of India/Indians. Set against the backdrop of the Sino-Indian war itself, *Haqeeqat* delivers a forceful patriotic message where the Chinese indeed embody the enemy. Likewise, *Prem Pujari* depicts how a peace-loving and non-violent Indian, the protagonist Ram, exposes the wicked Chinese general, Comrade Chang's master plan of destroying India's security. The Chinese characters in *Prem Pujari* are vicious, ruthless and fanatical, with a great measure of disdain for Indians. *Neel Akasher Nichey*, produced during the heyday of

the 1950s 'Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai' rhetoric, casts the Chinese character Wang Lu in a very positive light and brings him closer to the hearts of Indian viewers by de-emphasising his foreignness and by referring to his homeland China as a country with which India shares a common political/national agenda. *Prem Pujari* delivers exactly the opposite message.

Fire does not necessarily belong to the above genres of films, particularly those overtly concerned with China, the Chinese (in India or elsewhere) or the Sino-Indian war. Moreover, although *Fire* is about a North Indian family and was shot in India, it cannot necessarily be considered a product of India's film industry. Yet, the film became a part of India's cinematic landscape as a result of having been based on Indian cultural raw materials, storyline, background and characters/actors. It is important to discuss this film given that: a) its script includes two Chinese characters in the Indian social-political context; b) the film received immense publicity/scrutiny and media coverage both in India and elsewhere (for its feminist politics and focus on a same-sex relationship); and most importantly, c) the film represents Chinese minority experiences in a very problematic way.

HISTORICISING THE CHINESE 'OTHER': COLONIAL LEGACIES, NATIONALIST INSCRIPTIONS AND THE PERSECUTION OF CHINESE MINORITIES IN INDIA

Mainstream India's conception of the Chinese has largely been informed by the range of anti-Chinese rhetoric engendered from the time of the Sino-Indian war. The legacy of British imperial politics, conquests and cartographic disruptions is implicated in the border disputes between India and China, and in their subsequent politics, war, modes of nation-building. It is therefore important that the specific historical processes preceding the war are traced to fully appreciate this particular episode of India's post-colonial nationalism.³ The border between the two countries had been 'porous' in

³The significance of the British imperial presence in the region and upon subsequent political outcomes can be assessed from the numerous references made to import of treaties, events, conquest, policies, laws, cartographic projects and demarcations and their collective outcomes from the time of British rule in India. See, Government of India (GOI) (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA] 1963, 1964, 1966, 1968; External Publicity Division [EPD] 1963, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Publications division [MIBPD] 1963a, 1963b), *Documents on the Sino-Indian Boundary Questions*, People's Republic of China (1960: 1–28) and Lall (1998: 442–56). Liu's (1994: 49–101) examination of the politics of the Sino-Indian war departs from reading the context of post-colonial historical formations alone and analyses Sino-Indian relations from the larger framework of political relations among the United States, the erstwhile Soviet Union and China. Liu argues that Cold War and post-Cold War legacies actively shaped political relations among not just China and India but also Pakistan, thereby simultaneously implicating Cold War politics alongside British imperial designs in transforming and contextualising Sino-Indian relations.

terms of culture, community and movement of people, ideas and commodities.⁴ Referring to relations between people of India and China and the border between the two countries, historian Jagat Mehta (1998: 467) has written that:

[O]ver the centuries, ethnicity, religious faiths, and administrative control straddled and blended across a porous border. The ruling authorities exercised authority in limited ways and that too in small habitats. The idea of a firm line of control came by as a by-product of the Great Game of the rival European empires.

British entanglements in the regional politics involving India, Afghanistan, Russia, China and Tibet and interests in maintaining a hegemonic stronghold in the area, resulted in the creation of Tibet as a protective buffer between British India and its rival Russia, at the turn of the nineteenth century (Liu 1994). These imperial desires shaped the demarcation of a formal border between British India and China, which disrupted the notion of a 'porous' border based on cultural or traditional understandings. They also carved out, territorially and politically, the limits of British India in that region. The future independent Indian state would inherit this imperial border and deploy it to define the nation's territoriality, which was invoked during the war to forge a national identity.⁵ As such, British security interests and imperialist cartography left a legacy for post-colonial territorial politics, which would later be central to the discourse of nation-building and nationalism during the Sino-Indian war. This border genealogy made the war an eventuality of colonial artifacts.⁶ From this political context of the war and historicity of Indian nationalism emerged a discursive space that constructed the image of an ideal Indian nation/citizen, over and against the image of the Chinese 'other' in India. The Chinese community in India is located within the social and political relations engendered by these colonial and post-colonial genealogies, which has informed the discursive space from which the construction of the Chinese as India's internal and external 'others' emerged.⁷

⁴ John H. Grose, a civil servant of the East India Company wrote in his report titled, 'The state of affairs in the Kingdom of Bengal, in the years 1756–1757', that there were 'great many number' of Chinese merchants, among other ethnic and religious groups, in Bengal (1772). See Oxfeld (1993: 71). Other studies on the Chinese in India include Chaudhury and Mukhopadhyay (1975) and Sinha (1978).

⁵ Colonial legacies continue to intersect with the historicity of post-colonial political, economic and social agendas in reconfiguring material and ideological strategies for nation-building. See, for instance, Alexander and Mohanty (1997, xiii–xlii).

⁶ See Gopal Malviya (1992: 7, 21–40). Also, see letter of Chinese premier Zhou Enlai in *Documents on the Sino-Indian Boundary Question* (1960: 1–17). Prior to the outbreak of the Sino-Indian war in 1962, Zhou, in a series of letters written to Nehru, marked the McMahon Line as the legacy of British imperialist desires and made references to those historical realities.

⁷ The project of identifying the Chinese as fundamentally different from Indians was executed at discursive, political, social and legal levels, and this project was necessary to garner participation from the people for nation-building at the time of the Sino-Indian war. Building this nationalism required the representation of China as a threat to India's sovereignty and territorial integrity (external 'others'), which

Following the outbreak of the war, the Indian state machinery and some members of the academia systematically portrayed the Chinese as the enemy, with predictable characteristics.⁸ The Chinese, the erstwhile brothers, were now represented as imperialist and aggressive, as a threat to India's freedom, as violators of international security and peace, and as untrustworthy, deceitful and back-stabbing. China was held responsible for forcing a reluctant India into this war in defence of her newly won independence and sovereignty. The publications divisions of the Ministries of Information and Broadcasting and of External Affairs, Government of India, circulated various reports and information booklets to inform the public about the war.⁹ The Indian Ministry of External Affairs published a booklet showcasing international condemnation for China's aggression against India. News reports from across the world were summarised under subtitles that portrayed the Chinese as aggressive imperialists. Subtitles such as, 'Chinese imperialism', 'Reliance on force', 'China-a trouble maker', 'China's hands full with blood' and 'China's master plan of conquest' suggested the essence of their violent and invasive nature (GOI, EPD 1962b: 1–37). In the opening section of a 1962 publication titled 'Menace to India's Freedom', China was constructed as an 'unabashed' aggressor and 'unscrupulous opponent' that 'invaded [India's] sacred land' (GOI, MIBPD 1962: 1). The Chinese were not only portrayed as the violators of India's freedom and territorial integrity, but also as a threat to the non-alignment movement, 'Afro-Asian solidarity', international law, world peace and mankind in general (GOI, MIBPD 1963a: 7–64, 52). Coverage of world news about the war was summarised under subtitles, such as, 'Chinese threat to mankind', 'Chinese threat to South East Asia' and 'Threat to peace in Asia' to drive home the point (GOI, MEA 1962b: 1–37).

Moreover, the Chinese were represented as untrustworthy people who took recourse to 'using falsehood' to garner international support and were accused of deception and of lying (GOI, MIBPD 1963b: 17). The border dispute between India and China was attributed to the, '...result of the peculiar Chinese habit of saying one thing and meaning something different. As long as this continued, one never knew where one stood with China' (GOI, EPD 1963: 14). The Chinese government's politics was conceptualised under headings, such as, 'Chinese double talk', 'False charges', 'Chinese falsehoods', 'Chinese deceit', 'Callous betrayal by China', 'Chinese duplicity' and 'Insult to world conscience' (see, for example, GOI, EPD 1963: 24–107). Other references to the role of the Chinese in the war were encased in phrases, such as, 'Crisis of China's own making', 'China "runs amuck"', 'China's "distortion of facts"',

was further reinforced by institutionalised acts of internment, deportation and disenfranchisement of Chinese immigrants based on the 1960s' newly revised legal definitions of national origin (internal 'others').

⁸ See research published by Institute of Social Sciences (1964), about Agra city's reaction to the war.

⁹ See the list in the reference section of Indian government publications dealing with the Sino-Indian war.

'Friend turned robber', 'Who will trust China', 'The Chinese trap', 'A pretext and a lie', 'Pre-meditated attack' and 'Unprovoked attack' among others. These have been instrumental in portraying the Chinese as deceitful, back-stabbing and unreasonable (see, for example, GOI, EPD 1962c: 1–37). Chinese claims in the dispute were regarded as baseless and 'weak'. Indian evidence to claims on the border, as might be expected, was regarded as valid and historically accurate. India was also portrayed as an exemplar in terms of being 'traditionally dedicated to the ways of peace' (GOI, MIBPD 1963b: 18, 21, 24).

Repeatedly, China was constructed as the 'ruthless enemy' that India was fighting to defend its hard-won independence and sovereignty (GOI, EPD 1963: 27). The hegemonic construction of China as an imperialist aggressor in Asia set the tone for representing India's position as the defender of peace and freedom, in the following way,

China appears to have decided, in 1959, that it was about time that something spectacular was done to 'cut India down to size', deflate her importance and prestige in the eyes of the world including in particular the Afro-Asian nations, and thereby to leave the field clear for China as the Asian giant to which the smaller nations of South-East Asia must pay respectful homage.... Communist China's record in its relations with neighbours shows that the present rulers of China are out to revive the vanished glories of Chinese imperialism. The difference is that, unlike the earlier Chinese imperialism, the present-day Chinese regime is seeking to hide its subterfuge behind loud professions of friendship and goodwill.... Basically, the Sino-Indian conflict is a clash between the Indian way of life and the Chinese Communist ideology. As Prime Minister Nehru has put it, Indian policies represent a way of life which is anathema to the ruling Chinese ideologists with their faith in power and violence as an instrument of benevolent change. (GOI, MIBPD 1963a: 47–51, italics in original)

Nationalist images—of India and the Indian way of life rooted in timeless practices of non-violence, democratic equality, benevolence, honesty, adherence to traditions and respect for others' boundaries and rights—were thus underscored in numerous government publications. India's earnest abstinence from lies, deceit, aggression, cruelty, doubletalk and departure from compromising the national culture, emerge out of this discursive space. By invoking the acts and thoughts of a 'nation aroused', answering the motherland's call in 'one voice' (GOI, MIBPD 1962: 26–36) at this particular 'turning point in Indian history', the image of Indian unity was further solidified (GOI, EPD 1963: 30–31).

A hegemonic notion of invincible national integrity, equality and Indian nationhood—irrespective of class, caste and other differences—was simultaneously developed through infinite examples of Indians' generous, brave and patriotic deeds in the face

of China's 'brutal aggression'. The excerpt below shows how the Indian government sought to represent the nation during the time of war.

From every part of the country, and from all ranks of people, came solemn assurances of the people's will to fight the aggressor. Differences of all kinds vanished in the hour of trial. If China had counted on finding a docile people, what it found was a nation vitally united to defend its freedom. Political parties called off whatever agitation... Trade unions ended strikes and called on workers to treat their factories as the arsenals of the country's freedom.... Workers came to do overtime.... Teachers and students declared their readiness for any sacrifice. Brides and housewives gave away ornaments. Sadhus from their hermitages, patients from their beds, and prisoners from their jails offered to join the fight for the nation's independence and integrity.... There was not one man or one woman in the country not impelled by this surging desire to serve the motherland.

From every part of India the young and the not so young have come forward to join the fighting forces. In every city the army recruiting office has become a place of pilgrimage.... Everywhere the people have given money, gold and jewellery to Government to help it to buy arms and otherwise speed up defence [sic] arrangements. ...A school teacher in a convent in Kashmir was explaining to her class why this year the Diwali festival should be celebrated in an austere fashion, when a little girl got up to tell her: 'I know. Mother has said that father is fighting at the front. That is why we won't have any lamp burning in our home'. There was a hush in the class. The teacher fought and failed to hold back her tears. The next day she volunteered for front-line nursing.

A seven-year old boy handed over his gold ring to the principal of his school in Delhi with a letter: 'I hear that China-men have attacked our country. I want to defeat the enemy. Please send my ring to the Prime Minister.'

...The heroic reaction of the women of India to the Chinese attack deserves special mention. They had a great part in our struggle for freedom, and they are playing an equally outstanding part in the struggle to retain that freedom.

...China's invasion of our territory has, in the words of the Prime Minister, 'occasioned almost a new birth of the Indian spirit'. (GOI, MIBPD 1962: 26–36)

The conceptualisation of a 'new birth of the Indian spirit' and by extension, national identity, citizenship and renewed realisation of the 'essential nature of national integration' (GOI, EPD 1963: 72–82) were embroiled in the rhetoric of 'pre-meditated and brutal invasion' of 'sacred Indian territory and freedom' by the 'double-talking and deceitful' *China-men*. Nehru, addressing the Lok Sabha on 8 November 1962, said,

This peril we have to face is a grave menace. This challenge may be converted into opportunity for us to grow and to change the dark cloud that envelops our frontiers

into the bright sun not only of freedom but of welfare in this country. (GOI, EPD 1962a: 152)

Innumerable examples, invoking claims of national 'growth', of record enlistment and heroic deeds, of labourers working overtime, foregoing vacations and contributing their wages, of blood donations and pledging of lives for freedom, and of unprecedented corporate sacrifice, were juxtaposed against China's betrayal of friendship and goodwill. In this way, the Chinese were constructed as the definitive 'other' of the entire corpus of values, meanings and ideals attributable to a timeless Indianness. This Indian-ness was simultaneously imagined to be bereft of any inequalities based on differences in class, caste, gender and religion, as evident from the vision of 'nation aroused' and 'responding in one voice' for the same patriotic cause.¹⁰

This nationalist project of propagating anti-Chinese ideologies was simultaneously reinforced through state-sanctioned harassment, violence and discrimination against Chinese residents in India during and well after the war. Large-scale internment, unwarranted arrests, stripping of citizenship status, repatriation, deportation and violation of civil liberties were the material realities of the Chinese in India. These acts of disenfranchisement of the Chinese, regardless of their citizenship status (as many ethnic Chinese were Indian citizens), exposes India's post-colonial nationalism's deep intersections with the discursive and real exclusion of the Chinese. All people of Chinese descent living in India, including those who were *Indian citizens*, were systematically constructed as India's external and internal other.

Following the outbreak of the war, a series of ordinances and laws severely curtailed the civil liberties of the Chinese in India, which reconfigured the terms of their membership in Indian society for decades to come. Persons of Chinese descent were required to report to Indian authorities for 'registration and classification' and residency requirements for non-citizen Chinese were made more stringent (Cohen and Leng 1972: 272). The definition of foreigners in Indian laws was extended so that Indian citizens of Chinese origin could be targeted by the new wartime laws and ordinances meant to curtail the civil liberties of persons considered 'aliens' from an enemy nation; in effect, meaning the Chinese. When relationships between India and China were congenial prior to the conflict, the Chinese living in India were reassured about their Chinese citizenship. Following the border dispute, these people suddenly became visible and vulnerable, as according to the new promulgation, these people found themselves to be nationals of an enemy country—and therefore, enemy aliens themselves (Cohen and Leng 1972: 274–75). The durable legacies of these laws survived through the decades, profoundly affecting the Chinese residents' experiences in India, experiences which get erased in the script of the film *Fire*.

¹⁰ Also see article in *The Times of India* (2 November 1962: 1), 'Delhi Demonstrator is Dragged and Beaten', for the statement by Mr. Jagjivan Ram, the Minister for Transport and Communication, about how India 'stood like one man against the Chinese aggressors'.

Mainstream India's nationalism, regrettably, included brutal assaults on the country's Chinese minority, which represented a population that included Indian citizens and/or long-term residents living in India for generations. As part of a wider response answering the nation's call for united action and fight for freedom against the Chinese, mainstream Indians attacked Chinese nationals and damaged their property, establishments, shops and restaurants.¹¹ Many Chinese schools and press were ordered to shut down (GOI, MEA 1966: 113, 129–130). People of Chinese origin lost employment, as Indians no longer trusted them. Faced with widespread anti-Chinese sentiments, many Chinese residents from various parts of India extended their support, loyalty and friendship to the Indian cause, contributed to India's defence funds and condemned the acts of the Chinese government. These expressions of solidarity were received with severe mistrust (*The Times of India*, 15 November 1962). The suspicion and contempt with which India's Chinese minority was perceived are revealed in an Indian parliamentarian's disparaging words, in reference to the community's pro-India stance in the war efforts: 'The whole question, however is, even if he becomes a citizen of India, if his parents or grandparents belong to a country which is at war with me, I have no faith in such a person.'¹² This fear and disdain for Indian nationals or residents of Chinese origin were central to their systematic disenfranchisement by means of formal legislation. When juxtaposed against the corpus of anti-Chinese policies and legislation of the time and the enormity of their consequences on the Indian Chinese then and for decades to come, the above comment can hardly be taken as an isolated instance of personal bias having no bearing upon the wider socio-political framework of the Chinese people's life and community.

The binary opposition between Indians and Chinese was formalised tangibly with the large-scale internment of about 2,165 Chinese residents in a permanent internment camp at Deoli, Rajasthan, beginning November 1962. About 900 of these internees were Indian citizens at the time of their internment.¹³ Many others were arrested and sent to various local jails and still more were served 'Quit India' orders to leave the country within a month. Some of these Chinese people failed to raise travel expenses, which caused them to be imprisoned. Forced deportation of Chinese residents in India (in the name of national security) continued to occur as late as in December of 1967, five years after the outbreak of the war. The government of India repatriated

¹¹ See news article in *The Times of India* (2 November 1962: 1). This article describes an anti-Chinese demonstration held in New Delhi where 15,000 people gathered, carrying placards with signs that said: 'Chinese, go back', 'Hands off our frontier', 'Choke the opium eaters' and 'We will crush the yellow rats'.

¹² Quote in Cohen and Leng (1972: 276). Comment made by Trivedi, on 14 November 1962, as cited by Cohen and Leng from the Lok Sabha debates, 3rd Ser./3rd session 9: 2266 (1962).

¹³ The internment of Chinese residents in India was carried out following the promulgation of the Foreigners (Internment) Order of 3 November 1962. See, details of Lok Sabha Debates, 3rd Ser./4th Session 13: 1141 (1983) as cited and discussed in Cohen and Leng, 1972. Also, for references to the 'Central Internment Camp' and another camp at Nowgong, see note given by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs to the Embassy of China in India on 4 September 1963 (GOI, MEA 1964: 65–66).

about 1,665 Chinese internees along with their 730 dependants to China by September of 1963 (GOI, MEA 1962–68). Between 1962 and 1967, about 7,500 people of Chinese origin, who were not forcibly deported or repatriated, left India for China, Hong Kong, Pakistan, Taiwan, Japan, Australia, UK, US and Canada among other places (Gauri Chatterjee 1996; Dhar 2000; Oxfeld 1993; Sengupta 1993). As a result of these arrests, detention, internment, repatriation and forced deportations, the families of thousands of Chinese were violently broken apart and their lives irreparably disrupted. The Indian government denied all ‘allegations’ from the government of China regarding the mistreatment of those interned or of any person of Chinese descent for that matter and stressed the extent to which the internees were being treated benevolently in accordance with the Geneva Convention (GOI, MIBPD 1963a: 60–62).¹⁴ The last group of internees from the Deoli camp was released as late as 1967.

AN OUTLINE OF OMISSIONS IN A FEMINIST SCRIPT

Fire has been received as quite a radical film, in many ways, for dealing with the issues of compulsory heterosexuality and social hierarchies of class and gender in India. It is a story about the relationship between two sisters-in-law, Radha and Sita, in an urban, middle class, extended family in India. Radha’s husband, Ashok, devoutly pursues vows of physical chastity during the later years of marriage. Family pressures drive Ashok’s younger brother, Jatin, into marriage with Sita. Jatin disregards his newly-wed wife and openly continues with his relationship with his girlfriend, Julie, who is shown to be of Chinese origin. Over the course of time, Radha and Sita develop a deep emotional bond with each other, which transforms into a sexual relationship. Eventually, Radha’s husband discovers the relationship and a dramatic confrontation ensues. At the end both women leave the house.

Fire challenges hetero-patriarchal norms by centring the homoerotic relationship between two women in a joint family. By extension, this also raises a critique of the patriarchal nation which relies on certain ideologies of gender and femininity. Speaking about nationalist projects that seek to enforce compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchal family by disciplining women’s sexual and reproductive labour for nation-building, Jayawardena (1986: 15) has stated that:

The objectives of the reformers are twofold: to establish in their countries a system of stable, monogamous nuclear families with educated and employable women

¹⁴ The Indian government denied all charged of ‘wholesale arrests’ of Chinese nationals. It also stated that the internment camp was visited by the Delegate-General of the International Committee of the Red Cross for Asia. It also made comparisons between China’s alleged ill-treatment of Indian soldiers with

such as was associated with capitalist development and bourgeois ideology; and yet to ensure that women would retain a position of traditional subordination within the family... The bourgeoisies of the Third World, as part of their strategy for achieving economic growth, 'civilization', and reform, also began to propagate the concept of a family system based on strict monogamy for women, monogamy in theory (if not in practice) for men, and the abolition of 'feudal' extended family relationships.¹⁵

Jayawardena (1986: 14–15) has also noted how Indian social reformers and politicians' attempts at reconstructing a glorious historical antecedent to the Indian nation have systematically relied on references to prominent female characters from Indian mythologies, where these women's high social status and value are contingent upon their ability, highly gendered virtues and sacrificial actions. Feminist readings of the state, patriarchy and the family have thus deliberated, as has *Fire*, on how nationalist projects, mediated through ideologies of ideal femininity, have demanded loyalty from women towards the heterosexual family and by extension, to the nation. The hegemonic understanding of Indian women as the reservoir of sexual and familial loyalty and chastity towards the husband/patriarch and his family/nation, is reminiscent of the legendary female protagonist's unadulterated devotion to her king-husband and his kingdom in the epic *Ramayana*.¹⁶ Mehta's work, falling within this critical trajectory, challenges the normativity of Indian hetero-patriarchy. This critique gains further momentum when the film refers to the epic's continued relevance in Indian society, where women are held responsible for maintaining the sanctity of the family and nation, by extending unquestioned loyalty and labour through sacrifice, sexual piety and obedience.

As a film that challenges compulsory heterosexuality, centres women's sexual autonomy and raises questions about Indian prejudice towards the Chinese minority in the way of making a critical statement about the hetero-patriarchal nation, *Fire* might be called what Shohat (1997) has described as a 'post-Third worldist' feminist film.

its own humane treatment of Chinese internees. The Indian government even published details of the daily monetary allowance and rations provided to the Chinese internees, cataloguing information about each food item, its quantity and calorific value per ounce. See GOI, MEA, White Paper IX (1963: 131).

¹⁵ See Partha Chatterjee (1993: 116–57) for an extended reading on Indian nationalist resolution of women's location and import in the nation and family through the 'material/spiritual' dichotomy. In the nationalist imaginary, the home or the inner world and also the domain of women, represents that very sphere where timeless Indian cultural and spiritual superiority, and therefore the very ontology of the nation, has been preserved unmarred by any effects of colonialism. Particularly see chapters 'The Nation and its Women' and 'Women and the Nation' (116–57). I return to this critique of nationalism later in the article.

¹⁶ Partha Chatterjee (1993: 130–32) locates the exaltation of Indian women as goddess or mother figure within the genealogy of a dominant middle-class culture that unmistakably inherits that ideological construct from nationalist inscriptions which serve to erase women's sexuality in the public sphere.

Shohat (1997) has discussed how a new wave of Third world feminist filmmakers have challenged both Third-worldist/nationalist discourses and Eurocentric feminism by disrupting and displacing monolithic constructions of nation, gender, sexuality, and by rendering visible intersecting axes of inequality. Speaking about this feminist cultural formation, Shohat (1997: 196) has elaborated that:

While most Third-Worldist films assumed the fundamental coherence of national identity, with the expulsion of the colonial intruder fully completing the process of national becoming, the postnationalist films call attention to the fault lines of gender, class, ethnicity, region, partition, migration, and exile.

Following this, one might argue that by presenting voices from the marginalised Chinese community in India, Mehta created the possibility of yet another space for examining the nationalist practices of the same Indian state/society. This film, being one of the rarest instances where India's Chinese minority characters were not only visible in some mentionable capacity but were also somewhat vocal about their experiences, did have the potential of revealing the history of the various forms of oppression faced by the community. This opportunity, unfortunately, was entirely lost in *Fire*.

Julie and her father are the two Chinese Indian characters in the film. Julie is portrayed as a young, beautiful and independent woman. Although she works at a beauty salon, she has personal ambitions of building a career in Hong Kong's film industry. Her boyfriend Jatin is portrayed to be emotionally and sexually devoted to her. Julie appears only three times in the film in very brief scenes where Julie's views on sexuality, marriage, love, career, etc., are revealed. In other instances, we hear from Jatin about Julie's rejection of marriage into an Indian extended family and potential role as a 'baby-making machine'. In another scene, Jatin mentions Julie to his wife Sita and describes Julie's beauty in orientalist terms. The audience sees Julie for the first time in the scene that begins with Jatin painting her toes with red nail polish at the 'Darling Beauty Salon'. Here, Jatin tells Julie that if she had agreed to marry him, she would not have to work as a hairdresser. To this, Julie voices her preference for sexual autonomy and tells Jatin that she does not want things to become dull between the two of them.

Later we see Julie for the second time at a scene with Jatin at the same salon. Here she tells Jatin that she is planning to go to Hong Kong, where she wants to be a heroine in Kung-Fu movies. Julie adds that if Jatin behaves like a 'good boy', he could become her manager. Jatin tells her that she is a dreamer. Next, we see her for the third and the last time at a Chinese restaurant, feeding Jatin with chopsticks during a meal at which her father and brother are present. Julie does not say much in this scene. Julie's father is the main speaker in this scene and carries the script towards a brief critique of Indian society's discrimination towards Chinese minorities. He expresses his disappointment with his working-class parents settling in India. According to him, unlike most bright and forward-thinking Chinese who went to Australia or Canada

after the Cultural Revolution, his parents made the poor decision of immigrating to India. Pensively, he says that he hates it in India. Immediately after this statement, he goes to say that it is the stupid lavatories that Indians insist on using that he finds most repulsive. He expresses his disgust by saying that Indians squat and that the issue of comfort during this daily hygiene ritual is absolutely lost on Indians. Following this, he asks his son about the names he is called at school. At this prompting, the son recounts that he is called a 'Chinki'. Julie's father repeats the word and says that because India has promoted itself from a developing country to a developed country, the people think that it has become 'number one' and that there is no place for minorities there. He goes on to say that Julie has the right idea, since she is preparing herself to make her debut in Hong Kong's film industry. He revels at the prospect of his daughter's career in Hong Kong and applauds her quickly-gained proficiency in the American accent. He asks Julie how long it took her to perfect her accent and Julie proudly replies that it took her only six months. Julie and her father exchange looks and Julie goes on to feed Jatin. Jatin takes a small bite of food and says that Indians are very complex.

Mehta's script refers to a variety of social inequalities. Sita and Radha raise questions about women's sexual agency and choice, while Julie's father disrupts any notions of a monolithic nation by unveiling its racial prejudice against minorities. Unfortunately, however, neither the film nor its numerous reviews accommodate or interrogate the institutional marginalisation of the Chinese within the institutional hierarchies and hegemonic discourses in question. In the case of the Chinese characters, references to individualised ethnocentrism draws attention away from the systematic nature of the Indian state's oppression of the Chinese delineated earlier. This misplaced critique also precludes the interrogation of the long history of orientalist stereotyping of the Chinese as being untrustworthy, fanatically violent and threatening to India's nationhood.¹⁷

Her independent ways and radical interpretations of marriage and sexuality notwithstanding, Julie signifies a threat to the Indian family. Jatin does not seem to be able to release himself from Julie's charms, which results in pushing his otherwise heterosexual wife¹⁸ towards her sister-in-law for emotional and sexual fulfilment. Given how a significant portion of India's national identity has been anchored in casting the Chinese as treacherous, back-stabbing and irrational aggressors, the film's representation of Julie's personal/sexual autonomy recasts and reinforces the construction of the Chinese as the internal and external 'other' threatening the sanctity of India's institutions. This lapse or slippage becomes possible as a result of not being

¹⁷ Here, I use Edward Said's (1979) theoretical interventions presented in *Orientalism*. Particularly, I deploy the idea of Orientalism as a generative discourse, operating within relations of unequal power and domination, which ideologically and ontologically produces the Orient as an integral yet oppositional ingredient to construct the West.

¹⁸ The reader will note that as a newly-wed woman, Jatin's wife Sita expressed concern about her husband's lack of interest in her and that during their honeymoon she actually asked Jatin whether he liked her.

provided with any references to the history of the Chinese in India. The film's representational politics, despite its feminist orientation and criticism of hetero-patriarchal hierarchies in India, thus, not only fails to challenge the systematic disenfranchisement of Chinese minorities but also parallels and continues the overall marginalisation that this community has been subjected to for decades by the same Indian state/institutions critiqued in the film.

THE CHINESE IN *FIRE* AND THE CONTINUITIES OF NATIONALIST INSCRIPTIONS ON RACIALISED/GENDERED 'OTHERS'

The specific episode of India's anti-Chinese nationalism, characterised by the construction of the Chinese as invasive and threatening to the newly sovereign nation, is of critical importance in historically placing *Fire* and its reviews. Images of the Chinese as India's 'other' persist stubbornly in the national imaginary of Indians and continue to impact the experience of the Chinese living in India. Oxfeld (1993), in exploring the ways in which the Hakka Chinese are viewed by the mainstream Indians, has argued that Indians' conceptions of the Chinese in India is critically influenced by the Sino-Indian conflict of 1962.¹⁹ The image of 'untrustworthy' and 'back-stabbing' Chinese has remained rooted in the contemporary Indian psyche and nationhood. Indians view the Chinese as people who 'stabbed [Indians] in the back', as people 'who stole Indian territory, so the Chinese can't be trusted' (Oxfeld 1998: 158–59). Furthermore, many Indians do not even clearly differentiate between the Chinese who live in India and those of the People's Republic of China (Oxfeld 1993). Oxfeld has also observed that even people born long after the war or who were too young to remember the event, continue to be profoundly affected by the nationalistic rhetoric produced and circulated about the Chinese since 1962. While the Chinese interviewed were vociferous about their marginalised status in India, few Indians had any knowledge of the history of detention camps, deprivation of citizenship rights or hostilities that the Chinese were subjected to (Oxfeld 1993). This amnesia of the severe exploitation and disenfranchisement of the Chinese in the name of nationalism, coupled with a durable orientalist memory of the Chinese in the national collective, is emblematic of the ways in which the state managed to systematically consolidate and maintain nationalist hetero-patriarchal hierarchies, within which the Chinese have historically had an unequal positioning. This Indian nationalist legacy makes an incursion in *Fire*, just as it informs the reviews and responses to the film.

By casting a Chinese man to voice flat criticisms of Indians' interpersonal (and therefore, individualised) racial prejudices in predictable terms or of their hygiene

¹⁹ See, Ellen Oxfeld (1993). China's image as massive invaders with premeditated designs of dominating India continues at the turn of the twentieth century. See, for example, Banerjee (1990: 77–81), Kaul (2000: 74–75) and Malviya (1992).

habits ('Indians squat') while occluding the history of how the Chinese in India have been mistreated and seen as deceitful and ruthless, *Fire* makes mere props/accessories out of Julie and her father to singularly further the film's overall project. This cursory method of underscoring matters of critical socio-political importance, for both minority and majority communities, has had a tremendous impact on how the Chinese cause has been interpreted. Chatterji (1997), one of the extremely few reviewers who engaged with Julie's father's position by devoting a few lines to the Chinese characters, wrote that he expressed the 'pathos and anguish of belonging to a minority race.' Yet, for the handful of reviewers who did delve into the matter beyond identifying Jatin's girlfriend as Chinese, the father's discontent with Indian society has remained difficult to fathom. One can find an example of this in Kishwar's (1998) response to the film. In her critique of *Fire*, Kishwar, an eminent feminist writer, seems puzzled over Julie's father's outrage against Indians. Kishwar's bewilderment, however, is not misplaced, given that Mehta provides no references to the anti-Chinese exclusions in India and misguides the interpreter with regard to the father's anger by attributing it to his disgust of Indians' toilet habits. Kishwar (1998: 9) thus accuses Mehta of inventing 'an ingenious reason for his hatred and contempt for India.' Unfortunately, Kishwar herself does not probe into the historicity of Chinese exclusion, internment and forced deportation and without that context, her critique of Mehta's treatment of the father's anti-Indian outrage remains superficial and incomplete. Kishwar, continuing her assessment of the Chinese characters, took up the question of anti-Chinese racial slurs and wrote that:

His [Julie's father] son is teasingly called 'Chinki' by his schoolmates. That is reason enough for him to conclude that 'there is no place for minorities here' since 'these bloody Indians have fooled themselves into believing that they can transform themselves from a developing country to a developed one.' (1998: 9)

It is worth noting that only a systemic denial, perpetuated to the point of ignorance regarding India's anti-Chinese nationalism, can sustain this incomprehension of the father's indignation *and* confer a measure of benign impishness ('teasingly') to the deeply objectionable racist term, 'Chinki'.²⁰

It has become nearly impossible to envision how the injustices that Julie's father expresses are directly linked, in the cultural present, to the Indian state's project of nation-building constituted by historical exclusion and projection of the Chinese in India as an internal and external 'other'. During an interview with Malhotra-Singh (1999), Mehta mentioned that the Mumbai Youth Association (MYA) petitioned

²⁰ Note here the resonances of Oxfeld's (1993) observation, that although the Chinese were painfully aware and vocal about their oppression, Indians had virtually no idea of the history of Chinese discrimination since 1962.

the Supreme Court in India to cut the scene where the Chinese character 'abuses' Jatin. To the MYA, it was not homosexuality but the Chinese character abusing Jatin and calling Indians 'dogs' that was 'highly objectionable and unacceptable vulgarity' (Malhotra-Singh, 1999). Interestingly, among all the texts that could be located about the film for review for this article, the one above was the only instance where Mehta speaks of the Chinese characters' presence in the film. Mehta's reference to the Chinese characters was limited to her comment about the MYA and she did not venture to discuss the characters further in this interview. In the published or internet-based interviews available, Mehta was not asked about the Chinese characters in her film and neither did she speak of the Chinese characters in elaborating her vision for the film or its narrative, characters, symbolisms, etc.

Although Mehta has been careful, as she herself mentions in many interviews, about Indian socio-cultural contexts in capturing women's experiences and the politics of sexualities, she adds Julie's character without giving adequate context to her presence or to the representation of her sexuality. Talking about her purposeful use of metaphors from the epic *Ramayana*, Mehta explicitly states the necessity of providing adequate contexts from which to make sense of different hegemonic images' persistent relevance in forming notions of traditional womanhood in Indian society. She also emphasises that without proper context, the film's depiction of the tension between tradition and desire for personal voice could not be meaningfully conveyed. It was, in other words, crucial for Mehta to frame societal expectations of Indian women within a historical and cultural context. We see, therefore, how throughout *Fire* the many references to the epic situate the ways in which notions of Indian women's chastity and sacrifice for the family and nation persist, which suggest how women are still expected to play their roles in the traditional terms. Mehta, invoking the epic's continued social significance, mentioned during an interview,

... [the] historical context—that there are certain expectations of Indian women, there are certain historical contexts in which they are recognized... that we, I, the actors understood where they were coming from, why it was important for me to do the kind of film I was doing. (Kamani 1997: 9)

Unfortunately, a comparable insistence on context and history, which in the case of Julie and her father would be the context of the Sino-Indian war and anti-Chinese nationalism, is absent from the way in which the Chinese characters are represented. The script does not explore how Indian citizenship and membership get constructed through the very process of marginalisation and how the act of revoking citizenship had itself been a nationalist/patriarchal act of delineating the content of nationhood based on Chinese exclusions. This project of nation-building—bolstered by anti-Chinese patriotism mediated through the rhetoric of security/defence, inclusion/exclusion, citizen/citizenship—gets completely hidden under decontextualised and

predictable complaints of racial name-calling and vague references to Indians' toilet habits. By ignoring the critical political link between the state-legislated oppression of the Chinese community with that of the specificities of forging a national identity for a post-colonial state and citizenry, the film fails to situate Julie's father's statements in its broader critique of the hetero-patriarchal state.

The act of marking, in the film and in texts that discuss the film, a Chinese minority woman's autonomy in terms of her sexuality and her economic independence in terms of her desire to emigrate from India (supplemented by perfunctory references to prejudice) are anchored in two interrelated and equally problematic discourses. One is the liberal political discourse and the other is that of Indian nationalist resolution of ideal womanhood. The liberal discourse, marked by tropes of individual and personal freedom, agency and depoliticised differences,²¹ is a generative site that foregrounds dehistoricised personal choices/agency.²² In this case, such a discourse helps to overlook the long history of unequal relations arising out of the political and legal restrictions on the Chinese within nationalist formations.

Julie's refusal to involve herself in the patriarchal eventualities of marriage in an Indian extended family (in which Sita and Radha are confined) invokes an alternative woman-centred independence. In this representational stance, Julie's liberated status is predicated upon her decisions regarding sexuality, indifference towards Jatin's offer of financial security and determination to emigrate from India for an acting career abroad. This has engendered a pattern of interpretations/readings of Julie's character which has equated Julie's autonomy and assertiveness with her sexuality.

John and Niranjana (1999), for example, have marked Julie's autonomy in sexual terms and interpreted her rejection of Jatin's offer of marriage as her agency. To these critics, Julie's declaration of her 'decision to leave India for a better life in Hongkong, [is] suggesting that her sexual independence has no future here [in India], not even in the heart of the capital, but requires the more liberated space of an east Asian modernity.' Chatterji (1997), in elaborating how 'Mehta takes great care to flesh out every single character in the script' has also interpreted Julie's sexual autonomy as 'brazen permissiveness' that serves as 'a defence mechanism against her marginalization in Indian society'. To those uninitiated into the history of the Chinese in India, it does appear that the characters are well-contextualised. Furthermore, not only does the question of what this particular marginalisation might have entailed go unexplored, there is, once more, the very problematical coupling of agency and marginalisation with sexual permissiveness/promiscuity.

²¹ Here by difference I refer to the ways in which Julie seems to be different from Radha and Sita in terms of clothing, deportment, career choices, language and employment and in terms of her ability to reject marriage and to exercise sexual freedom outside of marriage.

²² Julie's desire to go to Hong Kong for a professional career, away from her stereotypical occupation as a hair-dresser, must be understood in institutional terms and not in individualised terms of personal, rational choice, given the history of internment, forced deportation, repatriation and large-scale emigration of Chinese people from India due to harassment, violence and disenfranchisement.

Given the persistence of orientalist visions about the Chinese in India as traced before, the gravity of this confluence is significant. Furthermore, because the Chinese have been cast as India's 'other' (discussed earlier) and because women who express sexual assertiveness are marked as the nation's 'other' women (P. Chatterjee 1993), such an equation is indeed disturbing. These markers of difference in *Fire*, as indexes of liberation that are able to subvert extant hetero-gender power imbalances, emerge out of a liberal feminist discourse that informs the disavowal of the history of racialised exploitation and the set of unequal relations that Indian nationalism enacted for the Chinese. If we read the heterogeneity that Julie is deployed to embody in the film instead in the context of her social positioning intersected by asymmetrical power relations—in terms of gender, citizenship, Chinese ethnicity and Indian nationalism—then the neat liberal markers of autonomy referring to departures from oppressive patriarchal destinies get violently disrupted. The liberal language of personal choice and sexual independence, represented by her decision, for example, to leave India for a better life in Hong Kong, obscures the underlying issues of disenfranchised resident status, discrimination and economic constraints that compel the Chinese to emigrate (Kin 1988).²³ The reference to Julie's desire to leave India gestures towards a romanticised political fiction of individual choice that denies the history of forcing Chinese immigrants into internment camps, deportations and haphazard repatriation to China which violated Chinese families and the community in India.²⁴

The film's promise of inclusion, through unexamined and superficial representation, not only fails to contextualise material inequalities emanating from legal and social disenfranchisement, but also precludes a critical reading of the historical and nationalist formations that continue to intersect with Chinese lives today. The dehistoricised and decontextualised heterogeneity assigned upon Julie, not only masks but also reinforces her positioning as a particularly racialised, sexualised and gendered subject often recognisable in India's nationalist discourse regarding the nation's Chinese 'other'

²³ Kin's (1988) interviews with Chinese residents in Kolkata clearly articulate the economic constraints and lack of meaningful employment that the community experienced under the shadow of anti-Chinese sentiments after the Sino-Indian war. Also see articles by Braude (1997), G. Chatterjee (1996), Dhar (2000) and Sengupta (1993) for recent coverage on issues faced by Chinese residing in Kolkata, home to the largest Chinese community in India.

²⁴ Following changes in the Foreigners Act, many Chinese residents in India were rendered stateless. Oxfeld (1993) mentions how Chinese residents in India have to renew papers yearly at the Foreigners Registration Office. Sengupta (1993: 47), examining the reasons for emigration of the Chinese from Kolkata, refers to limited economic opportunities. She ends her article with the idea that those members who have the means are emigrating to other countries, such as Australia, Japan, UK, USA and to places in the Far East, but those without such economic strength, are left to struggle to make ends meet in Kolkata. The economic hardship faced by many Chinese is often taken for granted as a reflection of economic hardship in the Indian economy. The article ends with the idea that the Chinese population in Kolkata would gradually decrease and perhaps in the future become non-existent (Chatterjee 1996: 28; Sengupta 1993: 47).

and its 'other' women. The visual and script inform us that Julie is sexy and independent. She has also been read in the print media as sexually available, aggressive, opportunist, foreign, ambitious and responsible for the adulterous life of a good Indian male citizen. In the reviews on *Fire*, Julie is typically apportioned, when at all, a line or two as part of the overall film summary that underscore the following aspects about her: her relationship with Jatin; her sexuality; and, her Chinese ethnicity. Film reviewers and academics in India (John and Niranjana 1999; Ramesh 1999; Gopinath 1998; Verma 1997; Mehta 1997; Kapur 1998; Ramchandani 1998; Upadhyay 1998; Mahajan 1998 and Mullick 1998 as respectively cited below)²⁵ have referred to Julie as: '[Jatin's] girlfriend, a Chinese hair-dresser', 'his Chinese girlfriend, the eternally pouting Julie', 'his Westernised Chinese girlfriend', 'his exotically other Chinese girlfriend', 'Chinese girlfriend', 'Indian-Chinese girlfriend Julie', 'Indian Chinese woman', 'Jaffri's Chinese hairdresser girlfriend', 'Chinese mistress Julie', 'Chinese lover' and 'Chinese girl'. Julie's 'defence mechanism' against oppression, imagined to be mediated through her racially coded unabated sexuality, is problematically implicated in threatening the sanctity of a heterosexual patriarchal family. Continuities of Indian nationalist and orientalist constructions of the Chinese as essentially deceitful, unabashedly aggressive, running amuck as ruthless invaders of sacred Indian land with a master plan of conquest, all make clear incursions in the ways in which Julie is represented and narrowly read through her racialised sexuality that seems to threaten the sanctity of an Indian heterosexual family. Thus, Julie has been marked simultaneously in racial and sexual terms and yet, has remained decontextualised historically and socially in terms of her presence or subjectivity in India.

In film reviews published from major cities in the US and Canada by authors with non-South Asian names (Miller 1997; Bond 2000; Baumgarten 1997; Baron 1998; Brennan 1997; Kayn 1997; Berardinelli 1997; Carr 1997; Sherman 1997; Taylor 1998; Quinn 1998; McCardle 1999; Chase 1997; Gerstel 1997; Griffin 1997; Morris 2000; Stack 1997; Hornday 1998), Julie is commonly referred to as: 'Chinese girlfriend', 'vivacious, Westernised girlfriend from China', 'hip young Chinese girlfriend', 'hip Chinese girlfriend', 'ambitious Chinese woman' and extremely significantly, as 'Chinese mistress', 'his mistress', 'sophisticated Chinese mistress', 'long-term mistress', 'Chinese girlfriend, who gets kicks by making him lick her toes', 'lusty Chinese girlfriend' and 'Chinese lover'. One US-based reviewer has written that Jatin is 'openly involved with his coy mistress, a Chinese coquette with a bigoted anti-Indian father' (Ringel 1997). As these phrases suggest, Julie is repeatedly seen through intersecting images of 'westernised' womanhood and Jatin's sexual desires. Needless to say, orientalist reductionism of the non-western and/or woman in sexual and racial terms is indeed a transnational phenomenon. The version applied to the Chinese in India,

²⁵ The list includes authors with South Asian names who published their work in periodicals or journals in North America or on the internet.

however, is mediated further by the wide range of anti-Chinese discourses and practices delineated throughout this article.

The liberal discourse, that which has erased the historicity of state-mandated oppression of the Chinese in India, works in intimate collaboration with the nationalist discourse of ideal Indian womanhood, constructed over and against the image of westernised and working-class women. These women have been constructed as promiscuous and brazen. Partha Chatterjee (1993) has explicated how the Indian nationalist resolution of ideal femininity has created the hegemonic construction of Indian womanhood. As religious, pious, loyal, essentially spiritual and non-promiscuous, women have been seen as the knights of the domestic/inner space of home. This space has been imagined as the domain that resisted the western coloniser's influences and preserved the timeless essence and cultural superiority emblematic of the Indian nation's spiritual ontology. Simultaneously, this discourse has ascribed the sexuality and morality of working-class or westernised women as promiscuous and loud and therefore, has ostracised them as a threat to the sanctity of the family and nation. This rhetoric, therefore, has idealised women who conform to the hetero-patriarchal mores of tractable femininity, sexuality and morality. In the reviews of the film, both in India and abroad, Julie is persistently read in terms of her sexuality and her westernised deportment. Given the terms of nationalist imagination/construction of ideal Indian women, Julie, marked as Chinese, westernised and sexually articulate *at the same time*, gets positioned outside the bounds of acceptable femininity. As such, Julie embodies a fundamental threat to the sanctity of that very space that anchors and shields the nation's cultural superiority and spiritual identity, that is, the inner sanctum of the home, family and honourable women.

The deployment of Julie's character as Jatin's girlfriend, whom he is unwilling to abandon even after marriage, makes Julie the cause of Jatin's disinterest in his wife, preceded by resistance to marriage.²⁶ The majority of reviewers have interpreted the husbands' inability to provide emotional and sexual satisfaction to be the key factor that brings the two women together. Julie, distinctly read as Chinese, westernised, and sexually and economically autonomous, resurfaces as threat to the sanctity of the Indian nation, both externally as the Chinese were constructed as a threat to the Indian nation, and internally as the westernised/working-class women were imagined as a threat to the inner domain of the family/home. The nationalist apprehension of an external political threat from China to India's sovereignty and freedom and an internal socio-cultural threat to the sanctity of the patriarchal status quo of unequal gender/labour hierarchies within compulsory monogamous heterosexuality, finds a unique intersection within Julie. The discourse of liberal-pluralism, discussed before, thrives in its intersection with Indian nationalist constructions of ideal womanhood,

²⁶ This observation is based on my study of numerous film reviews and commentaries on *Fire*. One of the most recurrent themes in these reviews is that of Jatin's rejection of his wife because of his involvement with Julie.

which is informed by the construction of the 'other' women who, because of meaning imputed upon their sexuality, behaviour, social class, etc., get placed outside the dualistic perimeters of ideal femininity. The constellation of meanings/memory that Julie personifies through the representational politics of the film—at the same time being a subject situated within the historicity of the Indian state and its discursive imaginations of the westernised, sexualised and racialised Chinese outsiders—demands that any invocation of the experiences and subjectivities of the Chinese in India or their relations with Indians be understood within the framework of Indian nationalism and the Sino-Indian war's socio-legal legacy that speaks to that nationalism.

The film's numerous readings remain stubbornly centred around the experiences of the Indian characters, while Julie and her Chinese family go unexplored. On rare occasions, Julie receives cursory references in one sentence as part of the plot summary. With the exception of a handful of reviews or articles about the film, most of the analyses or discussions about the film's narrative, messages, characters or social significance are strikingly silent about Julie and her Chinese family or about the Chinese community in India. Incisive analysis and elaborate interrogations on other aspects of the film, such as choice of language, dress, names of lead female characters, portrayals of Indian rituals, references to the *Ramayana*, portrayal of the servant and the elderly widow, are available in great numbers. In that context, the omission regarding the portrayal of Julie and the Chinese community is stark. In sparse instances where Julie's character is discussed at some length, the authors (Chatterji 1997; John and Niranjana 1999; Malhotra-Singh 1999) do not critically or extensively engage with the representations of the Chinese characters or with the historical and social specificity of the Chinese minority in India. The silence in the film's narrative about the historicity of anti-Chinese prejudice and the oversights in exploring the significance of the Chinese characters or contexts of their portrayal in the readings about the film, are in themselves indicative of the marginalisation of the community. These critics, in their very brief references to the portrayal of the Chinese characters, do not abandon the tropes westernised/modern and liberation/freedom in their reading of Julie, nor do they ask why this particular woman, after all, is Chinese.²⁷

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article emerges out of an interest with the ways in which Indian nationalism dealt with the Chinese in India to further its own nationalist/hetero-patriarchal agendas

²⁷ The deliberate move in the film to cast two characters as Chinese has never been analysed. It is also quite interesting to note how viewers have often been confused about their nationality. For example, one of the reviewers, Thomas (1997) somehow imagined Julie to be Chinese Canadian. Similarly, Baumgarten (1997) has mistaken Julie to be from China, instead of being Indian Chinese. This confusion and misreading regarding Julie's nationality are informed by the film's decontextualised portrayal of India's Chinese minority.

and how that history erupts unexamined in the representational politics of *Fire* and its readings. There are no references to the Sino-Indian war, to anti-Chinese nationalism embedded in the war's hegemonic rhetoric behind forging national unity and to their historical continuities in Mehta's script or in the texts about the film. The interactions between the same Indian state's involvement with the larger nationalist projects surrounding the Sino-Indian war and concurrent disenfranchisement of the Chinese living in India are rendered dangerously invisible in the film. This method of placement and deployment of the Chinese characters by the filmmaker and reading by the reviewers/authors is consistent with the state projects, which enforce hetero-patriarchy by violent erasures. Thus, this representational discourse about Chinese subjectivities cannot refer to how Indian nationalism, that which prescribes a hetero-normative patriarchy, also integrally operates through the consolidation of an anti-Chinese nationalism that continues to shape experiences of the Chinese community in India.

As a result of these blind spots regarding those chapters of Indian nation-building that are intricately about the Chinese people in India, Julie and her father become mere accessories in a larger liberal critique about family, gender, sexuality and available choices for women. Despite sensitivity to the plight of the Chinese, a sensitivity that derives solely from referring to individualised ethnocentrism on the part of Indian nationals towards the Chinese, this very act of accessorisation compromises Mehta's feminist critiques of family and nation. This representational discourse reproduces the marginalisation of the Chinese in India in a way that appropriates Julie's and her father's voices. This suggests that although *Fire* provides a feminist critique of nation, gender and sexuality in a post-Third-worldist cultural context,²⁸ its dehistoricised treatment of Chinese minorities raises new questions about feminist responsibility with regard to the politics of representation.

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²⁸ Here, I return to Ella Shohat's (1997: 183–209) arguments about the ways in which post-Third-worldist feminist filmmakers have challenged nationalist discourses and Eurocentric feminism by raising questions about gender, race/ethnicity and nation.

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