

THE SUBALTERN'S ALTERNATIVE REPRESENTATION(S) IN YOUSEF CHAHINE'S  
*DESTINY* AND DEEPA METHA'S *FIRE*

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**Abstract**

*This paper aims at addressing the ways in which the Egyptian and Canadian-Indian directors Yousef Chahine and Deepa Metha offer different, albeit critical, representations of history and women respectively. It pays particular attention to the use of historical material in Chahine's *Destiny* and the combination of sexual and gender (mis)representation in Metha's *Fire*. It, therefore, attempts to explore how the subaltern's own voice renarrates its own history, in Chahine's case, and body in Metha's. This paper aims to offer an analysis of two important films within the context of critical and postcolonial theories, and attempts to engage with the subaltern as awareness of identity, conflict and challenge on intellectual, historical, personal, and communal levels. While the paper inaugurates the debate with close analysis of *Destiny* and *Fire*, the discussion will be complemented by stringing the two films together on threads that bind them as two different forms of cinematic liberation of the subaltern.*

**Introduction**

'Reality', wrote Antonio Gramsci in *Prison Notebooks*, 'does not exist on its own, in and for itself, but only in an historical relationship with the men who modify it' (1986). *Destiny* and *Fire* fall within this Gramscian category, both textually and contextually. It is noteworthy that both films are intellectual products of specific historical moments, and both are produced and directed in two different previously colonized countries. That is to say, despite the gap in time and space, one cannot, in the course of analysing the movies, but compare them to Gramsci's, and even take the comparison further to include their ideological background and orientation. Ideology, within this context, is taken to mean a system of representation—including beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviour patterns—which appears to be "natural" and "normal," but which is underpinned by POWER relations and the Interests of a particular and dominant group --class in the *Destiny*, and heterosexual gender in *Fir*. Both films pose a radical ideological challenge to the dominant groups' notion of the world as it sees it and/or wishes it to be seen. Both class and gender are represented as sites of struggle between opposing value systems and sets of norms, between dominant groups and those who challenge the power they exert. The groups represented in both movies are what Gramsci calls "the subaltern", the peripheralized, due to their restricted access to power and their challenge to The Culture of the society.

What makes the human struggle within the movies unique is that it is transformed into a pedagogical, political, cultural experience that seeks to endow conscious, critical thinkers and women with some new heightened sense of their place in the (pos)colonial world, and, thus, in the global system. That is precisely what Fredric Jameson (1991), in a different context, calls 'cognitive mapping', a process that repeats, adds, and respects very strongly the laws of dialectic. *Destiny* and *Fire* as politico-cultural productions challenge the newly drawn (post)colonial space, in Egypt and India, and hint towards an alternative reality in opposition to the newly fabricated resolution of the fundamental opposition. Put

differently, as artistic products, they formulate an alternative representation of the whole socio-political 'reality' rising at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> C.

### ***Destiny: Chahine Re-Writes History***

Living in Egypt, the leading Arab and Islamic country, where conscious progressive commitment is a necessary condition for producing anti-fundamentalist progressive art, Youssif Chahine directs a movie that asks questions which are motivated by an explicit commitment to Secularism, Rationality and Reason. In a period full of crimes committed in the name of religion--any religion--and the manipulation of tradition in Egypt and Algeria--to mention but two countries--critical consciousness and the capacity to produce revolutionary art go hand in hand. *Destiny* portrays the life and struggle of the twelfth-century Muslim philosopher Averroes, and the influence of his works on not only the Islamic civilization but also Western secularism. What is portrayed in the movie is Averroes's relationship with the powerful Caliph, with ordinary people, and with the fundamentalist groups who manage, through their demagogic interpretation of the Koran, to turn the Caliph against Averroes. It is Averroes's resistance, supported by ordinary people, that we are asked to scrutinize.

Even though the film is about the Muslim scholar Averroes and his intellectual war against the fundamentalism of that time, it is the change in Egyptian social structure after Sadatist policy in the 1970s and its consequences that constitute the major ideological motifs of the film. That is to say, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and its claim to being the only correct source of the interpretation of the Word Of God are ideologically related to the demise of progressive politics of the 1950s and 1960s, and to foreign interference. To put it differently, the proportional relationship between the rise of fundamentalism and imperialist attacks is emphasized in the film. The theological (mythological) justifications behind the establishment of Israel in the heart of the Arab World, for example, are not different from those used by other fundamentalists within and without the film. And the inhuman war launched by the Taliban movement in Afghanistan can never be understood if not related to the American interests in the area in the 1970s and 80s. History in *Destiny* is, then, an allegory that allows Chahine to choose his place in the present society and, hence, enables him to respond to the historical changes taking place in the Middle East from his own particular standpoint and make sense of them in his own realistic terms.

Chahine's commitment to ordinary people is more than just a matter of presenting correct opinion about religion and Reason; rather, it reveals itself in how far he reconstructs his artistic and socio-historical elements and motifs and how he turns passive spectators into collaborators asked to take a position.

*Destiny*, in its explicit condemnation of all kinds of religious fundamentalism, is, then, vitally engaged with the living situations of men and women, here and now, despite the historicity of its subject and plot. The debate between Reason and Religion--or rather the manipulation of religion--is fundamental in any attempt to understand the movie. The movie opens with the burning of a French scholar for his translation of the works of the 12th century's most enlightened Muslim philosopher, Averroes. Averroes, whose work played a very important role in shaping the ideas of the philosophers of the age of Enlightenment and hence the present age, is a scholar who believes in the power of Reason and its ability to question, analyze and make conclusions. Religion, according to Averroes, is not against Reason and rationality. And this leads to the debate with another Muslim scholar, Al-Ghazali, who believes that the Koran can only be interpreted by referring it back to one original interpretation that is beyond Reason. Averroes, on the other hand, believes that with the death of the prophet Mohammed, the interpretation of the Koran cannot be referred back to any particular interpreter or interpretation. In short, it is a debate between vulgar determinism as expressed in Al-Ghazali's *The Incoherence of Philosophers*, and rationality as expressed in Averroes's *The Incoherence of Incoherence* and their treatments of the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. *Destiny* engages in this debate and in its

consequences. That is, it represents the intellectual debate between Averroes and the fundamentalists in the mosque where Averroes lectures, and it portrays the power-resistance binary on the streets of the Andalusian city, Cordoba. Hence the importance of the role of the gypsy poet/singer Marwan, whose songs are not only directed against the fundamentalists, but also against the Caliph himself.

Averroes's ideas are attacked by the fundamentalist groups in Cordoba; they manage to persuade the Caliph El-Mansour to order that Averroes's books be burnt for their "blasphemy." However, some of his books had already been smuggled to France by the son of the French scholar who was burned to death by the inquisition court at the beginning of the film. Other books are copied by Averroes's students and supporters and smuggled to Egypt by the Caliph's son. The end of the movie, like the opening, witnesses the burning of--not a human being--but Averroes's books, a parallel that is very significant if understood in Chahine's last words that appear on the screen: "Ideas have wings; they fly like birds." The French inquisition court that decided that Averroes's ideas must not be translated for their "blasphemy" is not ideologically different from the Muslim Ulama in their dogmatic understanding and interpretation of religion. Whether Christian or Muslim, fundamentalism uses all means to block the spread of progressive ideas. Intellectual oppression is not, then, different from physical annihilation. Freedom of expression is the key term within this context. Ironically, this parallel extends to Chahine himself who was charged, by an Egyptian court, for directing a movie--*The Emigrant*--portraying the life of the prophet Joseph. His attempt to interpret and thus represent the "unpresentable" was considered by many fundamentalists in Egypt a "blasphemy." More ironic is the fact that the same fundamentalists tried to stop *Destiny* from being produced. Representation/discourse is not, then, separate from hegemonic power and resistance to it. *Destiny* is therefore consciously anachronistic in different ways.

The complexities of the intellectual debate between Averroes and the fundamentalists about religion, the Koran, and the "right" interpretation of the words of God and his prophet, amazingly, shadow the contemporary debate taking place in the Islamic world, especially in Egypt. It is history repeating itself, but as a *farce*. In *Destiny*, the *fatwa* to murder the poet/singer Marwan--who is stabbed in his neck in an attempt to cut his throat and stop him singing--parodies the *fatwa* to kill Naguib Mahfouz, Egypt's leading novelist and Nobel Prize Winner for literature. Further, Marwan's later assassination with a spear in the back again echoes the assassination of Farag Fouda, an Egyptian liberal intellectual and a defender of secularism, after he had won a debate with Sheikh Ghazali--one of Egypt's traditional "Ulama," religious scholars. In the case of Mahfouz and Fouda, the young assassins confessed to never having read any of their works. Similarly, in Marwan's case the assassin has never heard him sing. Assassins in both cases, in the movie as in life, merely obey orders from a higher authority. The poet/singer is a marginalized black gypsy who, significantly, rescues the Caliph's younger son from the fundamentalists. Moreover, he is the only one to act: by threatening the life of the Emir of the group and by refusing to bow and ask for mercy. Consequently, he is murdered brutally. The singer's songs are interpretations of Averroes's ideas about life and commitment to songs/ideas even if the singer and the intellectual die. His songs/ideas are sung and spread everywhere--even after he is murdered by the "enemies of Reason and freedom." Averroes's ideas are, then, protected by the people, even those on the margin of society, namely gypsies.

Written history is the official history, that is, the history of the dominant classes, of Kings, Emirs and Caliphs. *Destiny* utilizes this history to reflect (on) the alliance between the Caliph El-Mansour and the fundamentalist groups. The fundamentalists, despite their alliance with the Caliph, plot with the Spaniards against him. Similarly, in the 1970s Anwar Sadat, the former president of Egypt, allowed and supported the fundamentalist groups in an attempt to get rid of the leftists and Nasserites; however, he was assassinated by the same groups in 1981. (Averroes, very significantly, argues that the enemy is "within," rather than "without.")

Parallel to this re-writing of official history is Chahine's portrayal of "popular history," that is, real history that is unwritten and therefore forgotten. He transposes Arabic songs, Spanish dances and "carnivalizes" the film; the songs and dances, led by the gypsies, offer the people--and spectators--an entry into a symbolic sphere of Utopian freedom. Marwan's songs, his wife's dances, and the people's participation, even that of the Caliph's son, are all attitudes toward life that belong neither to the Caliph nor to the Emir, but rather to folk communities and are transmitted among the masses. The movie includes two very meaningful songs about enjoyment of life and commitment to singing/production of ideas; both songs are sung in a carnivalesque fashion that brings together the Spanish/Western folklore dance with Arabic music. The dances and songs, celebrated by the people and supported by Averroes himself, are expressions of popular art as resistance, since art is considered a sin. Like carnivals, which--according to Bakhtin--are the people's "second life," the songs and dances are not celebrated in the Caliph's palaces or the group's desert and dungeons, but rather on the streets and cafes where the gypsies live. Taken further, they are the opposite of oppressive hierarchy in the sense that they are the logic of the "world upside down." They are led by the gypsy singer and his wife, the dancer. The centre of social life is, then, taken by the black, the gypsy, the poor, the woman--all marginalized groups who have never been considered "makers" of history. The movie itself is, then, a work of art turning hierarchy upside down: the Caliph's younger son is in love with a young gypsy whom he impregnates; and the singer, who considers the Caliph's son as his son, is the only one to die for a cause.

Resistance to fundamentalism comes from those who sing and dance--those who "are in love with life"; their culture is an oppositional culture supported by enlightened, conscious intellectuals like Averroes. Whereas the singer refuses to bow to the Emir of the group, Averroes the philosopher addresses the Caliph as "brother" and confronts theological and political authorities with truth. Gramsci's statement that "all men are philosophers" is a valid one in interpreting the relationship between the singer and the philosopher. *Destiny*, as a carnival, then, celebrates life and Reason; it never looks at history from above, but rather from below and thus sees both the gypsy and the caliph, with Averroes taking sides. That is, by taking the people's side and by defending Reason, Averroes reorganizes resistance and thus becomes a vanguard intellectual who makes use of the spontaneity of popular resistance by theorizing it. Thus Chahine takes Bakhtin's "carnavalesque" one step ahead by emphasizing its oppositional politics and by theorizing it into a conscious organized programme that is not separate from the people/masses. The second song in the movie, which is sung everywhere and moves far from its place of origin, emphasizes the importance of resistance in relation to songs/ideas. In fact, it is a combination of singing and collective dancing at the same time:

Raise your voice, Sing,  
 Songs are still possible/available,  
 And we still have much to live,  
 If one day you break down,  
 You must get up,  
 Stand up like a palm tree looking at the sky,  
 No retreat, no defeat, no fear,  
 And no lonesome dream growing in the desert,  
 Your song in the midst of the crowds/masses,  
 Is shaking my throbbing heart,  
 Curing my wound,  
 When you dance, I'll dance; I'll be obliged to dance,  
 Your dream mingles with my dream,  
 No retreat, no defeat, no fear,

And no lonesome dream growing in the desert,  
Raise your voice, Sing

We are then invited to act, exactly like Marwan, who not only sings/theorizes, but also acts. His life is, in fact, a reflection of his songs: "If one moon disappears, a thousand will rise; they will open a new road through the impossible." That is precisely what happens to him: he dies, but never disappears. He and his songs are never co-opted. And neither are Averroes and Chahine.

By carnivalizing and parodying the past and the present, where everything is pregnant with its opposite, *Destiny* implies an alternative politics initiated by the ordinary people. Averroes's books are copied by his followers and his family, and he is accompanied by the gypsies when he is asked to leave Cordoba. The Caliph's sons become popular because of their relationship with Averroes and the gypsies; the intimate brotherly relationship between Marwan and Nasser, the Caliph's son, is undoubtedly an indication of a correct alliance.

Averroes's ideas never disappeared; they belong to human culture now. Despite fundamentalism and the threat it imposes on Chahine and all the actors, they have succeeded--under the influence of Averroes's ideas--in conveying those same ideas, namely Reason, commitment, and enlightenment. Chahine manages to re-write the incoherence of fundamentalism. He is, then, Averroes himself. Chahine's most celebrated movies *Saladin*, *The Land*, *An Egyptian Story*, *The Emigrant*, *the Sparrow*, *Return of the Prodigal Sun*--to mention but a few--are all coherent films pregnant with powerful, challenging and provocative messages against the hegemonic current. Having begun directing in 1950, he managed to assert himself as a skilled technician devoted to his work. It is worth mentioning that he discovered many acting talents among whom is Omar Sharif. Chahine's career is, in fact, a reflection of his socio-political commitment. For example, the nationalist epic *Saladin* (1963) is a depiction of the liberation of Jerusalem; *The Land* (1969) is a portrayal of what happens when a peasant's land is confiscated. He deservedly won the special Jury Prize at the 1979 Berlin Film Festival.

Egypt's leading actor, Nour El Sherif--who plays the role of Averroes--has proved to be a committed actor who, after the attack of, to use Horkheimer and Adorno's term, the "culture industry" against him for playing the provocative role of *Naji El-Ali*, still makes the right choice. After *Naji El-Ali*--which is about the life and death of the Palestinian political cartoonist of the same name, who was assassinated by the Israeli Mossad in London in 1987--El Sherif was accused of being a "provocative actor" who promoted "subversive" movies. The movie was subsequently banned in many Arab countries.

Mohammed Mounir (the singer) is, as he has always been, a glorious Afro-Arab singer; his beautiful songs function as microcosms for not only the movie, but also the world it reflects. All actors and actresses, including the new talents, played a collective "carnavalesque" that deserved to be greeted with the 15-minute standing ovation that it received after winning the 50th anniversary prize at the 1997 Cannes Film Festival. The final victory of Averroes, despite the fire burning his books behind him and despite the assassination of the singer/poet, is a victory of life, Reason and rationality over backwardness, authoritarianism and the manipulation of religions. Chahine/Averroes is thus the organic intellectual--as Gramsci would call him--who unifies theory with praxis.

### **Fire: Indian Women (Re)discovering Their Bodies**

Undoubtedly, more than any other creature, women have been victimized intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, and physically by men and their views of women. As Namoi Wolf argues in her *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (2002), women have been 'eternal' victims of male ploys and --most importantly--as 'subjects'--a fact that is given more credibility with the rise of bourgeois ideology as a necessity for the perpetuation of the capitalist system. Hence the

system of sex-role stereotyping and oppression of women that exist under patriarchal social organization Patriarchy, in its different forms, has tried in many ways to repress, debase and humiliate women--especially through the images represented in cultural and traditional forms (Wolf, 1998)

*Fire* deals with such issues by asking fundamental questions that do not only shake the ideological ground of man's patriarchal role in a traditional society, but also implies the existence of a utopian solution, or rather alternative reality. Put differently, the movie questions whether the role of Indian woman--as a representative of other women living under oppressive patriarchal systems--in relation to culture resistance should be restricted only to their roles as wives and mothers. In such a world, woman's role is limited to reproduction regardless of her own desire and needs; hence her representation as Sita, the mythical figure whose ultimate goal in life is to reinforce man's role and power. She is represented by man because she is his own creation. Of course, what is represented, in the myth, is not the relations which govern the existence of men and women but the imaginary distortion of the world--or rather the ideological distortion that we can observe in class societies throughout history.

While the portrayal/representation of these women, i.e. Sitas, does not correspond to "reality", that is, they constitute an illusion/myth, they do make allusion to "reality". They need only to be interpreted in order to discover the reality of the traditional, conservative world and the reality behind the imaginary and mythical representations of such world; a world that exploits religion, customs, and traditions as a political weapon against women's advancement.

*Fire* explicitly deals with such realities and with what lies behind them. In other words, it deals disturbingly not only with discourse, but also ideology; with representation and reality, and with a fragmented world that claims to be eternal and holistic. The movie, then, poses fundamental questions--not to say challenges-- to the social order as to why such (dis)order needs to defend itself by ostrich-like means, that is, by effacing the fact that women have bodies and by reducing them to what the heroine, Rhada, calls "machines". As Michel Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish* (1979), the human body is the site of the inscription of justice. Accordingly, woman's body has always been demystified by a male presupposition that such a body, with the desire it holds and evokes, is "the origin of all evils." It should be effaced since it is the site of sense and sensibility. Put differently, the body is supposed to be more distanced from the displays of emotions. Woman thus becomes alienated from her own body and from her perception of it because she adopts man's powerful ritualistic and mythical perception of her. Her ultimate goal, then, becomes the mythic purity of Sita.

What comes under speculative pressure in *Fire* is the opposition between ideological appearance--represented in a mythic and metaphysical understanding of the material world--and reality--represented in the material oppression of women and low castes, and their sexuality. Thus *Fire* deconstructs that which is taken for granted: the sacred, the traditional, and the ideological. What is taken to be relatively 'stable essence' turns out to be unstable; what exists is not a fact but a patriarchal ideology; not a sacred, eternal Truth, but truths that are forced to disappear.

*Fire* is the story of two women (re)discovering their bodies through a new rebellious perception in opposition to the traditional, "sacred", male-oriented perception that they have been forced to adopt "willingly". When Rhada, the heroine, is asked by her husband whether she is happy, she responds "yes"! Paradoxically, the movie opens with a scene of a 'paradise' with a "holy Family" and the sentence "once upon a time" read by a mother to her young daughter who is trying to see the "ocean"; the ocean which turns out to be the unattained goal of this young girl who grows up and becomes a "typical" Indian wife. After the first scene the camera moves, in a self-reflexive fashion, from a dark room to the famous Taj Mahal. We are then introduced to a newly married couple who have nothing in common. The young woman whose name, very significantly, is Sita has "accepted" an arranged marriage and moves with her dissatisfied husband to New Delhi to live in a "joint family" and a joint

business with “a joint bank account”. Her life, with that of her sister-in-law, centres around cooking, cleaning, and reproducing children. However, the sister-in-law, Rhada, who turns out to be the child of the opening scene and who still cannot see the ocean, is barren and thus loses her most important role. In this environment, she is made an object that evokes desire, but whose desire is denied. Sita, whose husband has a mechanical sexual relationship with her, turns to Rhada for love. Inevitably, this relationship is doomed to failure and condemnation by a society that denies the right of sexual desire to exist as a desire unless it is organically connected to reproduction: “Desire is the origin of all evils.” The development of this ‘unfamiliar’ relationship witnesses the rediscovery of Sita’s and Rhada’s bodies; or rather the emergence of their bodies from “disappearance” to “appearance”. That is to say, the disappearance of their bodies, in the kitchen and the bedroom, is covered with a religious and mythical justification; thus, antithetically, the appearance of their bodies is accompanied with rebellion.

As history teaches us, patriarchs have always kept all concrete powers in their hands. Since the earliest days of patriarchy, woman has been kept in a state of dependence. Man’s codes of law have been set up against her, especially her body and the way it is represented. Thus woman has been established as the “Other”. Either, like Sita, she appears as an impersonal opposition, or, like Rhada, she submits passively to the patriarch’s will and allows assimilation, so that he can take possession of her through consuming her as a commodity or through destroying her by making her deny her own desire. In *Fire*, the patriarch of the family owns the restaurant which is basically run by his wife in the kitchen and by their servant--not to say slave. Of course, this arrangement suits the patriarch’s economic interests. Through the representations and practices of everyday life he can inscribe his metaphysical male-oriented ideology. At the end of every working day he distributes wages to his servant, wife, and brother. Part of his profit is given to “his Swami”--holy man. Since his wife has “no eggs”, and since she is an object of desire, she is justifiably used at night to evoke his desire which he wants to fight in order to get closer to God/the Truth. Significantly, when she asks about her own desire, she is told that her happiness lies in making him happy!

In an explicit condemnation of the way Indian women are (mis)represented, the role of Sita--the mythical figure--is portrayed by a man, as a play within the movie. According to the myth, Sita is asked to walk through fire in order to prove her purity. Although she is able to do so, she is still condemned to exile. However, Sita in the movie, that is, in “reality” is a rebellious woman who questions the role of the mythical Sita. Moreover, when Rhada’s *sari*, at the end of the movie, catches fire, it burns and her husband does not offer help because she has broken the taboo and did not beg him to forgive her--that is, because she has discovered her body. The juxtaposition between “essential reality” represented in the myth, and the artistic but basic reality of the movie poses the fundamental unavoidable question: What is “essential reality” if not a distorted ideology and misrepresentation? Caught committing the ultimate sin, Rhada and Sita decide to leave the house and confront life--a worse sin. However, Rhada decides to confront her husband before leaving. She tells him that she ‘desires Sita, desires her body, and desires life’. That is, to ignore one’s desire, by claiming that one is in the process of reaching the Truth, is a mistake that has to be corrected by reaffirming desire and thus the representations of one’s own body. To leave her home and to love another woman--for which there is no equivalent word in Hindi--and to burn by real fire is what Rhada chooses. And that is precisely the moment when Rhada, the child, tells us that she can see the ocean. Put concretely, to get burned is to die, but Rhada, like the Sphinx, emerges from her ashes to find Sita waiting for her. This is the first step towards a Utopian world where one, especially women, chooses what one wants rather than what one is expected to want, and where women write their own stories.

The fire is, then, not only destructive but also reconstructive; hence the open ending of *Fire* where we are left free to choose an alternative end. Nothing is imposed on us except the fact that *Fire* is a mirror reflecting our own ugly fragmented image. Having led us in a non-didactic mood and through the

form-content dialectic, to observe how, in the absence of conscious action the patriarchal class system overcomes the contradictions that are characteristic of it, and how it simultaneously retains its essential determinant, that is alienation, *Fire* ignites a fire in our sleeping consciousness.

### Conclusion

The “pessoptimistic”—to use a term coined by the late Palestinian novelist Emile Habiby-- outlook of Yousef Chahine, in *Destiny*, and Deepa Mehta in *Fire*, contradicts the exaggerated optimistic view marketed by the dominant 'culture industry' in the (post)colonial world, namely in Egypt and India. This is a contradiction that reflects the qualitative historical change that the whole colonized world has passed through. Both films are expressions of what Gramsci would call “the pessimism of the intellect,” but coupled with “the optimism of the will.” (1986)

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### Filmography

- Destiny (El-Maseer)*, 1997. Director: Youssif Chahine; cast: Nour el Cherif, Mohammed Munir, Leyla Elwi.
- Fire*, 1996. Director: Deepa Metha. Cast: Shabana Azmi, Nadita Das.