

**NOT OUR MOTHER'S CHOLI<sup>1</sup>**  
Film, Identity and Transforming Borders  
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*“...we learn identities by watching films and imbibing the social and political statements imbedded in their visual narratives; the films themselves act as metaphorical mirror after which we pattern ourselves.”*

- Rahul Gairola

We will examine how women's bodies are represented in film and how these roles reflect their place in society as well as their struggle to claim their own identity. The following four films will serve as examples of the power that crossing borders along geographical and gender lines can have on one's journey of self-acceptance regardless of societal norms.

Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* (1996) presents two women at the centre of a love story. Their desire for each other crosses boundaries of gender and societal norms. The two meet as daughters-in-law living in a joint family both in unfulfilling marriages Sita, the newlywed, and Radha, the elder and barren sister-in-law.

The storyline challenged both domestic Indian and international audiences not accustomed to seeing same sex relations on screen or kissing for that matter.<sup>2</sup>

When *Fire* was released in India, it was criticized as blasphemy and theatres where it was playing were firebombed

*Gadar* (2001) is an epic romance set in Punjab, against the backdrop of the 1947 partition of India. Tara Singh is a truck driver who comes to the aid of a young Muslim woman, Sakina when she's separated from her family during an attack while crossing towards the new border of Pakistan. Director Anil Sharma, has created a complex film that successfully bridges the political divide into a story of two individuals falling in love despite their religious differences and warring factions.

*Bend it like Beckham* (2002) by Gurinder Chadha is a coming of age film set in a contemporary setting in London, England. Jesminder (Jess) is girl who would rather play football (or soccer) than become proper young mother wishes her to be. Jess sees own identity as one apart from parents' background. Her best friend is young white Briton and the young man she desires is her coach and he's Irish. *Bend it like Beckham* was a huge

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<sup>1</sup> Choli - a short-sleeved blouse or bodice, often exposing part of the midriff, worn by women in India.

<sup>2</sup> It is uncommon for Indian cinema and Bollywood to depict physical affection such as kissing or sexual relations. Nudity is also censored. Even now in 2007 top actresses, like Aishwariya Rai decline Hollywood roles because of sexual content for fear of repercussions from their Indian fans.

mainstream hit in the UK both for its portrayal of South Asians and its soundtrack. It also crossed to please North American audiences the following year.

*Lajja* (2002) was released the same year as Chadha's film but was geared towards a Bollywood audience in India. Director Rajkumar Santoshi used the goddess Sita's trial by fire allegory to represent the struggle of women in contemporary Indian society. We see the film through Vaidehi's eyes as she escapes her Indo-American selfish husband for her native India and encounters the faces of female oppression while on her journey to free herself and her unborn child. Santoshi was able to secure high profile actors and actresses to create a message film that was entertaining, honest and heartbreaking.

These films display how crossing border lines, aids South Asian women in their pursuit for power, desire and sexuality. When they cross these geographical borders what occurs is a realization of their bodies in performance. For example, when Vaidehi, in *Lajja*, comes to the realization that she is pregnant her body becomes the site of power. She does not go back to America, but rather she treks deeper into India only to find women who are able to aid her in her quest for freedom. In *Gadar*, the lovers cross the border between Pakistan and India in order to further their pursuit of desire for each other. When Sakina realizes that her Muslim family will not accept her as a Sikh she crosses the border in order to maintain her identity and desire for her Sikh husband. In *Fire*, the two women cannot remain in their homes and share their love. They choose love over societal and family acceptance. And finally in *Beckham*, Jess does confess to her family her true self she leaves to pursue her dreams, which cannot be realized at home. The change is accepted and the family adjusts, this definitely the happiest ending of the four films presented. Why does movement across deepen one's identity and provide an opportunity for change. It's as if the border acts as a curtain through which women can shed the cultural constraints that bind them.

A common thread in all four of the above films is that of borders. The borders exist in the physical, that of geography; the spatial, that of society and culture; and the personal; that of sexuality and gender. The lines drawn by others are ones in which the women must cross to achieve autonomy. However, the endings of each of the stories cited find the women in exile to achieve their goals of freedom. While these films have been significant forces of storytelling and cinematic achievement in the last decade it's the impact on culture that will truly manifest change. If cinema is indeed a reflection of society then what happens next in how global society deals with the movement of women in exile in their own cultures will determine the next wave in film narratives.