



READING WATER AS FILM AND NOVEL

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Article Received:22/06/2020

Article Accepted: 24/07/2020

Published online:30/07/2020

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.8.3.71](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.8.3.71)

Abstract

Transforming a novel into a film is called 'adaptation' whereas writing a novel based on a film is called 'novelization'. Former is a very common practice while latter is very rare literary activity. *Water*, a novel by Bapsi Mehta is one such example. This uncommon practice of writing a novel based on the film script is called 'Novelization'. Transforming a film (a visual text) into a novel (literary text) is a rarer activity but it is considered by some critics as the scum of literature and is regarded as low grade literary phenomenon. Despite that the writer of Sidhwa's stature wrote a novel based on a film. Both Mehta and Sidhwa have done a commendable job in creating a film and a book. Sidhwa's writing of novel reinforces the idea propounded by Deepa by putting her weight behind Mehta. Both are artists of the common concern, bringing to the surface plight of widows in 1930s of India. However, reading a novel who has not watched a film experiences a derivative feel. It is a well crafted novel which lends beauty to the film from where it is sourced. The book certainly enhances the visual appeal of the film. To transcribe the scenes from a film into the pages is a huge task as it is doubly away from reality. This paper contains a wide range of issues in reading of the film *Water* (a visual text) and the novel *Water* (a literary text).

Keywords: Novelization, adaptation, feminism, widowhood, cinematic tools.

Introduction

Deepa Mehta, the renowned Indian born Canadian film maker made *Water* in 2005. The film was vehemently opposed by Hindu fundamentalists and was stopped before it could start. Not born to be defeated, Mehta made the film in Sri Lanka under the title '*Full Moon*'. Devyani Saltzman in her book '*Shooting Water*' writes about the film: "Water was the final film in what would come to be known as the Elements Trilogy. Set in the holy city of Benares in 1938, the film follows the lives of almost invisible group of women in Indian society-Hindu widows" (6). When the film was released, it acquired global acclaim and was admired by the film fraternity

everywhere. One such admirer was Bapsi Sidhwa. She was so impressed by the film that she decided to write a novel based on this. One year later after the release of the film *Water* she wrote *Water* the novel inspired from the film. It was very unusual to write a novel based on the film. In this regard, Anita Joshua asserts:

"Working the other way round, Bapsi Sidhwa has penned a novel based on the film script. A telling story on the state of widows in India during colonial days, *Water* explores the ills of the prevailing social order. Seen through the eyes of an eight-year-old widow, the

narrative brings out the travails of the widowhood in crystal clear clarity". (6)

This uncommon practice of writing a novel based on the film script is called 'Novelization'. Transforming a film (a visual text) into a novel (literary text) is a rarer activity but it is considered by some as the scum of literature and is regarded as low grade literary phenomenon. But both adaptation and novelization are based on the idea of transformation. Arguing about film and fiction, Keith Cohen, a film scholar, says that the film and fiction go through "dynamics of exchange" (92), the exchange of film to fiction and vice-versa. Former gives emphasis in "showing" while the later stresses on "telling. This paper centers on the proposed texts; the film *Water* by Mehta and the novel *Water* by Sidhwa. Both of them are the artists of immense talent having a very high reverence for each other and their works. Both are genuinely concerned about the women.

Reading of the Film *Water*

The film *Water* is written and directed by Deepa Mehta and is produced by David Hamilton in the year 2005. It is about the politics of religion and explores how religion is used, misused and distorted by the people to suit it for their own benefits. "Water is a dark introspect into the tales of rural Indian widows in the 1930s and covers controversial subjects such as misogyny and ostracism" (filmisland.net).

Making of the Film *Water*

The film *Water* is set in the pre-independence decade of 1930s in the year 1938 in Rawalpur, a village on the Bihar-Bengal border. It is a poignant and heart wrenching commentary on the pathetic plight of Indian widows at an ashram in Varanasi. The film addresses a very ancient Hindu tradition of widow-burning at the funeral pyre of her dead husband. The film is based on a Manuscript, an ancient Hindu text which says a woman is half dead after her husband's death. After the death of her husband a widow is left with three choices: she can throw herself on the funeral pyre of her husband and die with him; she can marry his brother, if available; or she has to lead a life of complete

isolation and seclusion. The third option forces her to enter in the ashram. She has to wear white clothes, in some cases to shave her head and live in constant mourning to atone for her husband's death. They are regarded as social outcasts. The story is set against the backdrop of India's struggle for independence from the British. It follows the lives of three Hindu widows living in an ashram: Shakuntala, Kalyani and Chuyia. The film got into controversy even before its start. Government revoked shooting orders one day before filming was due to begin. Worse still, death threats were issued to Mehta and actors by protesting Hindu fundamentalists. Shouting 'WATER PICTURE MURDABAD! DEEPA MEHTA MURDABAD!' Not to be out done, Deepa was rock solid not to abandon the project at any cost. In 2004, she started the film again with new location, new name and some new faces.

Re-birth of *Water* as *Full Moon*

Four years since *Water* had been shut down in India, the film resurrected from scratch with new locale and some new faces. Urvi Gokani was replaced by Sarla Kariyawasam, Nandita Das by Lisa Ray and Shabana Azmi by Sima Biswas. Sri Lanka was selected a new alternative location. Changed name *Full Moon*, a name nobody would question, with a new cast started again. Despite all the hurdles, fearless Deepa with an eighty-person crew started shooting *Water* in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday. This is how *Water* was born again in Sri Lanka. The film begins with a text from Manusmriti on the black screen. A stern warning garbed in a religious text appears on the screen. Explaining the meaning of the text which appears on the screen at the onset of the film, Wendy Doniger and Brian Smith writes:

A virtuous wife who remains chaste when her husband has died goes to heaven just like those chaste men, even if she has no sons. But a woman who violates her (vow to her dead) husband because she is greedy for progeny is the object of reproach here on earth and loses the world beyond. (116)

The film was released on November 2005. Mehta offered her audience a movie of an immense quality having a global reach.

The Women Protagonists in Film as Well as in the Novel

Both in the film as well as in the novel there are three important female protagonists. Chuyia (Sarla Kariyawasam), an eight year-old child bride. Kalyani (Lisa Rey), a young widow who is forced into prostitution in order to support the ashram. Shakuntla (Sima Biswas) the third woman protagonist in the film as well as in the novel. Through the lives of the three main characters, *Water* exposes the appalling treatment meted out to women in India.

Chuyia (Sarla Kariyawasam)

Chuyia is the first of the three protagonists in the film *Water*. In the film she played a widow, presenting an outdated, callous and rotten tradition of child marriage and widowhood. Her marriage is arranged by her father though the mother opposes meekly. As the film begins Chuyia is shown as a free and rebellious little girl. She is accompanying her dying husband on his last journey. She is completely ignorant of the situation she is going to face. After the death of her husband she left in the widow ashram with most of the elderly widows. She is forced to wear white clothes. But her silence towards the end of the film is agonizing. Chuyia is tricked to fill the vacuum created by Kalyani's death and is thrown into prostitution. She becomes the victim of lusty hawks. As Manju Jaidka writes: "At the end of the film, she is nothing but an inert mass, violated, drugged and abused" (*Water* 63). But in the end Chuyia's escape from Varanasi in the arms of Narayan (John Abraham) is certainly relieving. Sidhwa delineates the character as she is not bound by the constraints of time, space and budget. As we go through the novel, little Chuyia of the film seems to peep through the pages in the novel. She appears to talk to the readers, running, playing, jumping, fighting in the pages of the book.

Kalyani (Lisa Ray)

Kalyani is another young widow residing in the ashram. Her role is played by beautiful Lisa Ray. "She is the prized possession of the ashram: the beautiful, young, fair-skinned Kalyani who is allowed to keep her hair long and sleeps in special room on

the second floor of the ashram" (hehefnet.com). Only she is allowed to spare her hair as to look beautiful and attract customers. Describing her, Jeannette Catsoulis writes: The limpid-eyed Kalyani (Lisa Ray) the only widow whose head has not been shaved-is forced into prostitution by ashram's domineering housemother. Employing a sly eunuch as go-between, the housemother sells Kalyani's services to a wealthy Brahmin on the other side of the river. (*The New York Times* 28 April 2008) A chance encounter with Narayan, who is a Gandhian, makes her believe about some possibility of marriage that would take her away from the life of ashram. She rebels against the rules and breaks the tradition. She is forced into prostitution by Madhumati to support the ashram. Narayan falls in love with Kalyani and determines to save her. But ironically his father has been using Kalyani as a prostitute. He is such an evil that after Kalyani he turns to Chuyia. When Kalyani comes to know that Seth Dwakanath is Narayan's father, she drowns herself. After her death the void is created which needs to be filled to run the ashram. The economics of survival comes into play. The inmates of the ashram are to be fed and clothed. The only bread-winner, Kalyani is no more. The other fitting candidate is no other than an eight year child Chuyia..

Shakuntala (Seema Biswas)

Shakuntala is another woman protagonist in the film. She is another widow in the ashram. She is a sensitive middle aged widow who is like a mother figure for Chuyia. Though she plays a peripheral role in the film. The focus lies on Kalyani and Chuyia. But in the final scene she emerges as final protagonist. Chuyia and Kalyani stirred Shakuntala to ask question about her faith in religion as the film approaches to its end. She ensures a safe passage of Chuyia from Varanasi. She performs an act of kindness and generosity by saving Chuyia from Widow's ashram. Her act of defiance is also one of religious defiance against a set of powerful beliefs she had lived with her entire life.

Madhumati (Manorama)

Madhumati, another important character in the film, played by Manorama deserves attention. Not all the inmates of the ashram are exploited,

Madhumati is an exploiter. The evil in the society is perpetrated not only by men but women too are responsible. Madhumati is one such example. She too joins the institution of patriarchy in exploiting women. She acts like a lazy but ruthless seal to demean women. But Sidhwa depicts her quite sympathetically. She delineates that Madhumati too is the victim of patriarchal forces.

Reading of the film *Water*

The film is set in 1938 pre-Independent India in the backdrop of Gandhi's influence. *Water*, takes on the issue of religious politics. In this regard, David Burton opines: "Mehta's film makes it clear that the male hegemony seeks to rationalize the mistreatment of widows by appealing to the authority of Hindu scripture; the film opens with a translation from The Laws of Manu which gives unambiguous construction about the dharma of a wife whose husband has died" ([digitalcompos.unomaha.edu /jrf](http://digitalcompos.unomaha.edu/~jrf)). The film takes on the issue of ancient concept of Sati. Unlike a novelist, the filmmaker has different tools to express his or her ideas. In a novel, a story teller is generally identified as either first person or an omniscient narrator. In case of film the point of view is told by the camera position and sometimes voice-over narration too is employed.

Watching of Film *Water*: A Visual Literacy

To understand the visual composition of the narrative, the focus needs to be on the techniques while creating the moving images. Clary W. Carleton says that watching films is like getting visual literacy. Being a multi-sensory technology, film is endowed with innumerable meticulously crafted visual and auditory details which need to be read by viewers. *Water*, the film is a very powerful cinematic narrative which takes into account the women struggling against age old rotten cultural tradition in India. Though the film is set in 1930s, yet the ill-treatment of widows is still prevalent in India and world over. It is an issue of urgent global concern.

Reading of the Novel *Water*

Water the novel by Bapsi Sidhwa is a unique work. Sidhwa did a commendable job as a novelist to write a novel based on a film. Here the book

adapts film, and the source material is provided by Deepa Mehta's screenplay. Commenting on Sidhwa's *Water* Sunil Patil concurs: "Bapsi Sidhwa raises her voice against archaic Hindu Laws like child marriage, the caste system, the barbaric acts of Sati, the problems of young widows who spend their rest of time in Indian ashrams to make compensation for the sins in their previous lives"(2). Both Mehta and Sidhwa have done a commendable job in creating a film and a book. Sidhwa's writing of novel reinforces the idea propounded by Deepa by putting her weight behind Mehta. However, reading a novel who has not watched a film experiences a derivative feel. It is a well crafted novel which lends beauty to the film from where it is sourced and not the other way round. The book certainly enhances the visual appeal of the film.

Sidhwa's Reasons to Write the Novel *Water*

It is interesting to uncover what would have made Sidhwa write a novel based on a film? Some reasons for the same can be inferred as follows:

- It may be to show her seriousness about the issue undertaken in the film. Both are avid supporters of women's rights especially in the Indian sub-continent.
- Novelization helps to elaborate and extend the histories of various characters while the film fails to do so because of time constraint. All the missing links are filled by Sidhwa in her novel
- Novelization makes the film coherent. Novel that is the mode of an excess unlike that of a film is copious whereas film isn't. Novel makes the film clearer from where it has been novelized and says what was unsaid.
- Another aspect of novelization is that it makes the film clearer.

Water the Film versus *Water* the Novel

Both the film and novel are two different entities. Both have advantages and disadvantages associated with them. These are discussed as follow:

Economic Implication

Writing a novel being inspired from a film involves lesser economic implications. Film on the other hand is purely subjected to its commercial aspect. It is subjected to the laws of market. Novel on the other hand is not influenced much by the laws of economics. Selling of few thousand copies make a substantial profit. Novel is created through a pen which is not an expensive device.

Use of Colours in the Film *Water*

Colours are used to create or manipulate a particular atmosphere or mood. Film *Water* is replete with colours which are used extensively especially blue and white. Widows in the ashram are forced to wear white clothes perpetually which makes the colour look oppressive. All the widows are draped in white including Kalyani who looks stunningly beautiful in whites. There is also ample display of blue colour. In Hindu tradition water symbolizes feelings, intuition and imagination which interestingly are associated with femininity.

Element of Sound and Song in the Film *Water*

Besides colour, sound and songs also play a vital role in the film. Films have three important components by which it is created: visual, aural and linguistic. Introduction of songs and music accentuate these elements. Keeping in mind the Indian audience, Deepa Mehta introduced song sequences in her film *Water*. The song sequences in the film are: 1. *Bhangari... marori...* 2. *Nainaneer...* 3. *Piya ho...* 4. *Sham rang de rang de ...* 5. *Vaishnavajanato...*

Conclusion

Despite having faced many hurdles in making the film *Water*, Mehta made a wonderful film. The screen play is very crisp and well knit. Shrugging aside all the difficulties and controversies, Mehta made a movie which was a commercial success. "*Water*, the movie has already made waves as it proved a commercial success in Canada and has gathered critical acclaim in the U.S." (moneycontrol.com). The film is focused on the main theme and does not divert at all. The dialogues in the film are amazing. The Chuyia-Kalyani, Chuyia-

Shakuntala, Kalyani-Narayan conversation is superbly crafted and cinematographed. Music in the film seems to blend into scenes beautifully. Sarla, representing Chuyia is faultless. While watching the film one loses the emotional grip because of the Lisa Ray's average acting in the film. She seems more refined than is needed in the film especially in the later part of the movie. John Abraham in the role of Narayan, the Gandhian has not done the justice to his role. Seema Biswas in the role of Shakuntala is simply outstanding. Manorama in the role of Madhumati is also amazing. She has been able to create a sense of awe and fear in the ashram. RaghuvirYadhav is a heartless eunuch. Kulbhushan Kharbanda in the role of Sadanad is commendable. But reading a novel after watching the film is certainly more absorbing.

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