



Postcolonialism Feminism in the film *Water* by Deepa Mehta

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Abstract

Postcolonial feminist literary criticism deals with the critical analysis of literary works based on the feminist perspective. The foundation for it is feminist theory or the politics of feminism precisely. This paper intends to discuss, describe and analyse the narrative of male domination in comparison to feminist bodies with exploration of social and psychological forces entrenched within literature in the film *Water* by Deepa Mehta. Key words: literary criticism, feminism, postcolonialism, psychological.

It is important to comprehend that there is a clear distinction between feminism and feminist criticism. Feminism surely might be a familiar term but it also needs to be known how it could be applied to analysing literature in the form of feminist criticism which involves looking at literature through the lens of a feminist perspective. This involves analysing the relationship between men and women, the power dynamics, money dynamics, social, cultural and psychological factors and gender-based expectations. So, feminist literary criticism looks at literature and sees how it is formed by feminist theory or more broadly by the politics of feminism.

The interaction between genders is focused on and related to the oppression of women in the system of the patriarchy. Feminist literary criticism uses feminist principles and ideology to critique the language of literature. Critique here does not necessarily mean the negatives. It rather involves reading between the lines of the literature to see how some analysis could be drawn out. This could be achieved by looking at the author's message, the

types of messages and ideologies that could be found in the text and be related to or informed by the dynamics of the genders. The dynamics between men and women, women in their own lives, women with other women should be carefully considered in feminist literary criticism.

There is an undeniable truth that when many people think of feminism, the rights of women and equality for women come to mind. It is rather unfortunate that so many ideas that lay the foundation for feminism are now misplaced amid the chaos of social and political debates over the years. Feminist literary criticism cannot transpire without being aware of its ultimate goal and that being of changing the world by prompting gender equality. Like feminism itself, feminist literary theory portrays thoughts or characters which attempt to question and modify gender norms. Literature is aimed to be reinterpreted from a female point of view and this is accomplished in several ways whereby few feminist critics seek to construe the works of male authors, with particular attention to women characters, in order to discover the moral,

political and social restrictions traditionally faced by women. Other feminist critics opt to evaluate the works of women authors that had previously been overlooked by male critics.

Hence, the intention of this paper is to examine and describe the ways in which literature depicts the narrative of male domination by exploring social and psychological forces embedded within literature in the film *Water* by Deepa Mehta. Mehta is recognised as a transnational artist and a screenwriter, director and producer whose work has been termed as proactive and gutsy. The film explores the heterogeneity of widowhood and how religion is used as a contrivance to manipulate and exploit an entire class of women and the way patriarchal imperatives inform religious belief.

Deepa Mehta's film focuses on the social issue of widows of India in 1938 Colonial India, before the country gained independence. This was a time when men dominated society and were considered superior in comparison to females who were viewed as embodiments of fragility. Women in this era were discouraged from making independent decisions. Many were mostly married off through arranged marriages at delicate young ages to men much older and plunged into a lifetime of despondency.

The Hindu culture at that time harboured the belief that if a woman was widowed at a young age then she had no right to live as her life was indebted to her husband. These widowed women were expected to sacrifice themselves as dutiful wives and as proof of loyalty to their deceased husbands and burn to death on their funeral pyres. This tradition of widow-burning was the 'Sati' custom which deprived widows of their rights to live. The term refers to a chaste woman, an ideal wife and the overall personification of goodness. As such, to follow her husband into the afterlife, strong societal pressure was often exerted on a widow to accept sati as fate. The other available options for a woman were to get married to her dead husband's brother if he had one and to submit herself to him or simply live in isolation, self-denial and devotion with set rules for a lifetime.

Water depicts the problems faced by a community of socially ostracized widows in the society due to the patriarchal beliefs of males being privileged rulers and females on the other hand simply being hushed followers. The point of interest here is not specifically on the sati custom but on the treatment of widows in the society portrayed in the film. It is about the repression and subjection of women who lose their husbands to death and are therefore labelled inauspicious and untouchable only because there exists a stereotyped idea about widows. The film revolves around Chuhiya who with no fault of hers becomes a naive widow at the delicate age of eight. Let alone knowing the reason for becoming a widow, she does not even have any memories of getting married or of her late husband. As per the demands of the society, little Chuhiya's destiny gets attached to an ashram for widows in Varanasi where her father leaves her off to fend for herself saying that the ashram is now her home.

The innocent child widow is seen crying out her to father at the doorstep of the ashram when being taken inside by other widows:

"Baba, baba hum yaha nahi rahenge"
(Father, father I will not live here)."

As a viewer of this particular scene, one's heart is filled with mercy for poor Chuhiya who is robbed of her childhood and forced to lead a life of unhappiness, away from her Amma and Baba. She has her head shaved and is transformed into a socially dead being and made to wear a plain white robe, representing the loss of colours from life and introduction to a life of widowhood and repentance. At the ashram, Chuhiya lives with widows of all ages and sleeps on a thin mat in a room with older and infirm women whose lonely lives have been spent in renunciation. Religious hymns are sung every day and these widows beg on the streets for money. The society avoids them like the plague as it was a commonly held belief that if someone should bump into a widow, they would be polluted and would have to do rituals of purification in order to avoid getting cursed and attaining a place in hell.

On the other hand, Kalyani is a beautiful young widow who also lives at the ashram and is

given the exception of having long tresses and for which the reason later becomes known to the audience. It is revealed that Kalyani is forced to sleep with rich men in order to bear the expenses of the ashram as instructed by Madhumati, the head of the ashram. A widowed Kalyani is displayed as an object of satisfaction for males who have the power of wealth including Narayan's father who have no shame in touching the body of a widow for sexual fulfillment. How ironical it is that these males are the very people who make up the society and see widows as cursed and 'Angels of Death' along with other females but enjoy the youth, bodies and sexualities of these widows and up caressing them behind closed doors in the darkness and stillness of the night.

Moreover, the notion of the colour white in the film and lives of widows is associated with mourning and also with purity. This makes it a particularly oppressive colour since the lives of widows are as good as being dead due to religious instruction to remain chaste out of respect for their deceased husbands. The concept of purity is aligned in the film with religious hypocrisy intended to keep the widows subservient since doing otherwise would mean having to care for them and maintaining economic costs. This was deemed too much of a burden in the societal sphere as a widow's life had no purpose and was a waste after her husband's demise.

It is Narayan, a follower of Mahatma Gandhi in the film played by John Abraham who provides the best explanation for Shakuntala, a respected Brahmin woman's question on the foundations of the theory of widowhood and why widows are sent off to live at the ashram:

"One less mouth to feed, four less saris, and a free corner in the house. Disguised as religion, it's just about money."

These few lines speak volumes of the treatment of widows firstly by family members and then the outer sphere which is the society which does not believe in the just treatment of widows. *The Laws of Manu*, one of the influential Hindu texts is quoted at the very beginning of the film with a

black background and font colour of white with the source of these lines provided in the fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh lines in white.

*"A widow should be long suffering until death, self-restrained and chaste".
"A virtuous wife who remains chaste when her husband has died goes to heaven".
"A woman who is unfaithful to her husband is reborn in the womb of a jackal".* (The Laws of Manu, Chapter 5, verse 156-161, Dharamshastras, Sacred Hindu texts)

Mehta showcases the pitiful plight of widows detested by the society only because they are considered 'Husband Eaters' which logically is not their doing. The society in the film which is surely based on the non-fictional one of that time fails to realise that death is the inevitable cycle of life for which nobody should be held accountable for unless proven guilty. Had a man's wife died then he would not have to go and call an ashram home, get his hair shaved off and wear white clothes. This would not have been done for the ultimate reason of him being the advanced gender in a patriarchal setup who was not created to lead a life of atonement but rather one of pride.

Thus, Deepa Mehta's efforts in rendering the liberation yearned for by the widow community with their hearts, minds, bodies, and souls is an eye-opener for the patriarchal society which shuns the rights of widows to live a decent life after their husbands die. The marginalization of women in the society speaks for itself in the film about the problematic existence of dominating patriarchal value system in India which is an ongoing tragedy even in the 21st century. The punishment for being a woman and a widow in India is still given and this most probably explains why Mehta chose the narrative of the social construction of widows to show to the world through a feminist perspective so the subject could start a dialogue and provoke discussion in a society which so often talks about gender equality.

Along with the focus on social forces present in the film, Deepa Mehta also sheds light on the colonization of the psyches of widows due to the

influence of religious scriptures. This is foremost told of through Madhumati whose character is greatly influenced by religious scriptures. Her matriarchal domination in the ashram imitates the patriarchal domination and one such example is when she learns of Kalyani's remarriage and asks her, "Have you gone mad? Nobody marries a widow. Shameless, you'll sink yourself and us. We'll be cursed. We must live in purity, to die in purity" (Mehta). This statement of Madhumati tells of her deep-rooted orthodox belief of widows living in dedication to the memories of dead husbands. The ideology in a male dominated society is for widows to remain loyal to their no longer living husbands by remaining chaste and devoted in the name of religious rituals.

Other widows living in the ashram accept their journey of widowhood as fate and conform to religious beliefs and principles. This is evident when little Chuhiya asks Shakuntala of the whereabouts of the residence for male widows and other widows express deep concern by saying that "Rama, what a terrible thing to say. God protect our men from such a fate. May your tongue burn. Pull out her tongue and throw it in the river" (Mehta). However, Chuhiya, Kalyani and Shakuntala are three prominent female characters in the film who desire a better and fulfilling life rather than silently accepting the culture of the ashram and widowhood.

Another instance of the patriarchal society belief that is widows in the film are to adhere strictly to the brutal dietary system and restrict all food which may reheat their bodies. This is imposed so that the sexual desires and appetites of widows are denied and their journey of widowhood does not become impious and irrelevant and they fail to forget their position in the society. It was imposed on their psyches that consumption of certain foods would mean committing a sin for which they could never be forgiven by society and the Gods. This norm of repressing the sexual desires of widows with the denial of the pleasures of food is depicted through Pitiraji's character. In the first meeting with Chuyia, Pitiraji called Bua by Chuhiya asks her whether she has mouth-watering sweets with her. Later on it is

seen that Bua breathes her last after eating a laddoo and through which viewers realise that her whole life had rested on the hopes of devouring at least one laddoo before embracing death. Moreover, on the same line, Madhuri Chatterjee argues that "The socio-moral code of religion excludes women not only from power structures and social constructs but also from her own body, the idea of a self and her sexuality" (Chatterjee). This illustrates how the minds, bodies and desires of widows are detained through religious normative systems and rituals.

Social and psychological forces are undoubtedly deep-rooted within literature as narrated in the film *Water* by Deepa Mehta. Mehta chooses to showcase the institutionalized oppression of the female gender that present patriarchal Hindu attitudes through the widow community. The systematic violence enacted on women's identities and sexualities by social normative systems has profound impact in the construction of self and identity of women. These notions are presented through the widow characters in Mehta's film and how a lifetime is spent in accepting widowhood as fate and the helplessness to revolutionize and break free from the rules and regulations which chain them under the tactic of religious ideologies.

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