



Denial for Dignity and Rights of Widows in Deepa Mehta's *Water*

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Abstract

A woman when becomes a widow has to lead a wretched life in the ashram, a life for which she is not herself responsible. Whereas for men, whose wives die there is no such arrangement in the Hindu dharma. The rights of women as human beings when they become widows' are denied and face inhuman treatment in the society. They are not even respected in the society. People avoid them; they do not appreciate their presence in the auspicious events of their family. There is no major change in the living conditions of widows in the present times. And it's because of the myths attached with the widows and religion. Religion is for the comfort of the society. Its misinterpretations are dangerous and harmful to women.

Key words: widow, ashram, religion, dharma, rights

Water is a film by Deepa Mehta. Mehta's *Water* is a drama film written and directed in 2005 and screenplay by Anurag Kashyap. Though the film is written and directed in 2005, it is set in colonial India in 1938. The film is the third and final installment of Mehta's Elemental trilogy. It is preceded by *Fire* (1996) and *Earth* (1998). The film stars Seema Biswas, Lisa Ray, John Abraham and Sarala Kariyawasam in lead roles and Kulbhushan Kharbanda, Waheeda Rehman, Raghuvir Yadav and Vinay Pathak in supporting roles. Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Water* published in 2006, is based on the film by Deepa Mehta.

Deepa Mehta is a popular Indo-Canadian actor, producer, director and writer. The movies which Mehta has directed are *Fire*, *Sam and Me*, *Water*, *Heaven on Earth* and *Earth*. The movie which she has produced is *Earth*. She has acted in movie *Ashiqi*. *Water* was an enormous success. It was nominated for an Oscar for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 79 Annual Academy Awards,

and has been screened at festivals around the world and has won many awards. The Vancouver Film Critics Circle named Deepa Mehta the Best Canadian Director of 2006.

The story of the film *Water* revolves around the life of widows in the pre-independent India of 1938 and is set against the backdrop of Gandhi's struggle for freedom. Chuhiya, a young widow of eight is sent to widow ashram by her parents. Through her life in ashram, Mehta has brought out the miserable life that the widows are forced to live.

In the film, Chuhiya at the age of six is married by her parents to a much older man due to the financial reasons, the marriage which she not even remembers. It was the period when child marriage was common in society. But she is not taken to her husband's house due to her tender age. After two years of her marriage, her husband becomes critically ill and meets death. Her hairs are clipped, her colourful bangles and clothes are

removed and she is made to wear a plain white sari. Chuhiya is then sent by her parents to a widow ashram in the holy city of Banaras. Throughout the story Chuhiya is seen mentioning that one day she will return back to her parent's home, her mother will come to the ashram and take her back to her home. She cannot accept begging in front of the temples. In the film she asks a pertinent question by asking to where the ashram for men widows is. Her question horrifies the widows present there.

In the ashram there are widows of varied ages and Chuhiya is the youngest of all the widows. Shunned by the rest of the community, the widows live in the dilapidated ashram in poverty. In the ashram the women sing religious hymns, beg on the streets for money, and eat a simple one meal a day, sleep on a mat. They are not supposed to eat delicious food. People avoid their presence especially during auspicious functions like marriage, child birth. If someone accidentally bumps them then they would do rituals to purify themselves.

The ashram has heterogeneous group of widows. The senior most and dominating widow is Madhumati (Manorama), then respectable and Brahmin widow is Shakuntala (Seema Biswas) who can even read, a beautiful and young Kamini (Lisa Ray). 'Bua' is an old woman who keeps recalling her wedding for the lavish meals, especially the laddoos which was served then in her wedding and craves to eat laddoos. She tells Chuhiya, "Life is so disappointing". Chuhiya somehow manages to get one laddoo with the money she gets from begging and offers it to Bua. Chuhiya herself wanted to eat that laddoo, but then she offers it to the old woman and watches her eat the laddoo. Bua eats the laddoo and then that day itself she dies. Chuhiya gets frightened upon the death of Bua as she feels she has committed a sin of offering a laddoo to Bua and tells Shakuntala everything. To this Shakuntala consoles her with the words, "Don't worry. Bua will go to heaven after eating the laddoo. And if God wills, she will born as a man in her next life".

Madhumati tells Chuhiya not to feel pain as she is 'half-dead' with the death of her husband. She dominates the ashram. Ironically, the death of her

beloved parrot disturbs her emotionally and she could be seen crying over the death of her beloved parrot and mentioning the futility of hollow religious traditions which makes their life miserable.

Shakuntala is a respected Brahmin woman in the ashram. She is a devoted woman who can read as well. She is the one in the film who questions the existence of the tradition of widowhood in the Hindu society. For which there is an answer in the film through the words of Narayan (John Abraham), a staunch follower of Gandhi and a liberal minded young man, when he says about widows being sent to an ashram, "One less mouth to feed, four less saris, and a free corner in the house. In the wake of religion it is all about money". When she comes to know from a religious guru Sadanand (Kulbhushan Kharbanda) that a new law has come that allows widow marriage, she immediately rushes the ashram to unlock the room of Kalyani and free her to marry Narayan. She liberates Chuhiya from the ashram and prostitution by taking her to give her in the custody of Gandhi at Rawalpur station.

Kalyani (Lisa Ray) is a young widow in the ashram who is allowed to grow hairs long simply because she is forced to prostitution and bring some money to the ashram for the sustenance of the widows. She is taken to the rich Brahmin men of the city by a transgender pimp, Gulaabi (Raghubir Yadav). She stays alone in the first floor of the dilapidated ashram. She meets Narayan and they fall in love and intend to marry each other. Narayan's mother becomes distressed upon her son's choice and weeps and says,

Hai Bhagwan! You're serious! How will we show our face to the world?' . . . Gandhi has turned you a crazy! Marry a widow? How can you think of it? It's a sin!

And in the ashram, Madhumati too could not accept the idea of Kalyani's marriage. Traumatized by shock her reactions are, "Who will marry a widow?", "a widow cannot marry, it's madness", "it's a shameless act", "her act will bring disgrace on her and to the ashram as well", "it's a sin on the part of a widow being getting re-married". And she locks Kalyani in her room, so that she do not

run from the ashram and marry. But she herself facilitates to the prostitution of Kalyani for her personal gains. When Kalyani asks Madhumati about that; she answers her that no one, not even Gods can question how a widow makes her survival possible. It only reflects the double norms of the society for the widows. On one side it is expected for a widow to lead a chaste life and on the other she is pushed into prostitution. Finally when Kalyani comes to know that Narayan's father had licentious relationship with her she declines her approaches towards him and returns back to her ashram and commits suicide by drowning herself in the river Ganga. After her death Chuhiya is pushed towards prostitution by Madhumati.

Manu-smriti, also called Manava-dharma-shastra by Manu is the most authoritative book on the Hindu code in India and the text was composed between 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E. According to this text a woman after the death of her husband has three options; she can marry the brother of her husband if the family allows and if there is an unmarried brother in the family, she should lead a self-restrained and virtuous life in an ashram, or she can ascend to the funeral pyre of her husband and end her life along with him. If the widow chooses the ascetic life, then she has to enter an ashram, shave her head, sacrifice her each and every desires, wear white clothes as a sign of mourning to atone for the death of her husband. The beginning of the film quotes from *Manu-smriti*, chapter Five, verse 156-161,

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.

This is how the religion establishes its hold on women.

In an interview, Deepa Mehta has stated,

Water can flow or water can be stagnant. I set the film in the 1930s but the people in the film live their lives as it was prescribed by a religious text more than 2000 years old. Even today, people follow these texts, which is one reason why there continues to be millions of widows. To me, that is a kind of stagnant water. I think traditions shouldn't be that rigid. They should flow like the replenishing kind water. (Jamil)

A woman when becomes a widow has to lead a wretched life in the ashram, a life for which she is not herself responsible. Whereas for men, whose wives die there is no such arrangement in the Hindu dharma. The men from the Brahmin class can enter into licentious relations with a widow, because a Brahmin in contact with the widow will purify her and not pollute her. Therefore, Kalyani is made to satisfy the Brahmin men's sensual desires. But she is not allowed to marry a Brahmin, Narayan. Had she been allowed, she would not have ended her life. Chuhiya has never been to her in-laws house in two years of her marriage due to her tender age, but when her husband is dead she is sent to an ashram. Thus the film exemplifies how the rights of women when they become widows' are denied. They too are human beings, but get inhuman treatment in the society. They are not even respected in the society. People avoid them; they do not appreciate their presence in the auspicious events of their family. Religion is for the comfort of the society. Its misinterpretations are dangerous and harmful to women. All that is needed to prevent their miserable state of being is their inclusion in the mainstream of the society. The final note with which the film concludes is,

There are over 34 million widows in India according to the 2001 Census. Many continue to live in conditions of social, economic and cultural deprivation as prescribed 2000 years ago by the Sacred Texts of Manu.

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