

LA
CINÉMATHÈQUE
FILM CLUB



Indian Film Series
Spring 2020

Deepa Mehta
b.1950

Water
2005

Water

Roger Ebert • May 4, 2006

Article sourced from RogerEbert.com: <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/water-2006>

3 out of 4 stars

Her father asks Chuyia: "Do you remember getting married?" She does not. He tells her that her husband has died, and she is a widow. She is 8 years old. Under traditional Hindu law, she will be a widow for the rest of her life. There are two alternatives: Marry her husband's brother, or throw herself on his funeral pyre.

Deepa Mehta's "Water" is set in 1938. Even then, laws existed in India that gave widows the freedom to marry, but as one character observes, "We do not always follow the law when it is inconvenient." Torn from her father's grasp, crying out for her mother, Chuyia (Sarala) disappears into an ashram controlled by the lifelong widows who live there. Her hair is cut off. She wears a white garment that marks her. The woman in charge is Madhumati (Manorama), fat, indolent and domineering, who is frightening to the little girl.

Then she makes a friend. This is the beautiful Kalyani (Lisa Ray), who alone among the widows has been allowed to wear her hair long, but for a sad reason. Madhumati has an arrangement with the pimp Gulabi (Raghuvir Yadav) to supply Kalyani to wealthy clients, as a source of income for the ashram. Kalyani has a puppy, which they hide and love together. Another friend in the ashram is Shakuntala (Seema Biswas), a wise, thoughtful woman who questions the foundations of the theory of widowhood. It is Narayan (John Abraham), a follower of Gandhi, who supplies the most pragmatic explanation for the ancient practice: "One less mouth to feed, four less saris, and a free corner in the house. Disguised as religion, it's just about money."

"Water" is the third film in a trilogy about India by Deepa Mehta, whose "Earth" (1998) dealt with the partition of India and Pakistan, and whose "Fire" (1996) dealt with lesbianism among traditional Indian women. She is not popular with Indian religious conservatives, and indeed after the sets for "Water" were destroyed and her life threatened, she had to move the entire production to Sri Lanka. That she is a woman and deals with political and religious controversy makes her a marked woman.

The best elements of "Water" involve the young girl and the experiences seen through her eyes. I would have been content if the entire film had been her story. But Chuyia meets Narayan, a tall, handsome, foreign-educated follower of Gandhi, and when she brings him together with Kalyani, they fall in love. This does not lead to life happily ever after, but it does set up an ending as melodramatic as it is (sort of) victorious. We're less interested in Kalyani's romantic prospects, however, than with Shakuntala's logical questioning of the underpinnings of her society. It is interesting that the same actress, Biswas, played the title role in the no less controversial "Bandit Queen" (1994).

The film is lovely in the way Satyajit Ray's films are lovely. It sees poverty and deprivation as a condition of life, not an exception to it, and finds beauty in the souls of its characters. Their misfortune does not make them unattractive. In many Indian films it is not startling to be poor, or to be in the thrall of 2,000-year-old customs; such matters are taken for granted, and the story goes on from there. I am reminded of Ray's "The Big City" (1963) in which the husband loses his work and this wife breaks with all tradition and good practice by

leaving their home to take employment. The husband is deeply disturbed, but his wife finds that, after all, being a woman and having a job is no big deal.

The unspoken subtext of "Water" is that an ancient religious law has been put to the service of family economy, greed and a general feeling that women can be thrown away. The widows in this film are treated as if they have no useful lives apart from their husbands. They are given life sentences. They are not so very different from the Irish girls who, having offended someone's ideas of proper behavior, were locked up in the church-run "Magdalen laundries" for the rest of their lives. That a film like "Water" still has the power to offend in the year 2006 inspires the question: Who is still offended, and why, and what have they to gain, and what do they fear?

The character name "Narayan" is a reminder of R. K. Narayan, the novelist whose works are delightful human comedies about life in India.

Water: Directed by Deepa Mehta

Film Review by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat • 2006

Article sourced from Spiritual & Practice: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films/reviews/view/15543/water>

An extraordinary film which depicts the plight of Indian widows and their yearning for liberation.

Water is the final film in a trilogy by director Deepa Mehta. *Fire* centered around two married women, ignored and neglected by their husbands, who fall in love with each other. *Earth* focused on how the relationships among a group of Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh friends are tested during the partition of Pakistan and India.

Water is as poignant and moving as the other two, and as controversial in India. Set in 1938 in the holy city of Benares, India, it focuses on the deprivations experienced by Hindu widows, still an issue today in a country with 33 million widows. When Mehta started making this movie in Benares, Hindu fundamentalists protested, claiming that the film was anti-Hindu. She was forced to shut down the production and start over a year later in Sri Lanka.

The Manusmriti, an ancient Hindu text, says that in life a woman is half her husband and if he dies, she is half dead. A widow has three choices: she can throw herself on his funeral pyre and die with him; she can marry his brother, if one is available; or she can live out the rest of her days in isolation and seclusion. If she chooses the latter, the ascetic path, she enters an ashram, shaves her head, wears white as a sign of mourning, and tries to atone for her husband's death.

In the film, Chuyia (Sarala), an adorable eight-year-old, has just been widowed. Her marriage, which she doesn't even remember, was arranged by her family for financial reasons. But no matter what her circumstances, Hindu law says she must now leave society, and so her parents take her to a decrepit ashram where widows of all ages live together. The little girl's hair is clipped, and she is dressed in a white robe. She sleeps on a thin mat in a room with older and infirm women whose lonely lives have been spent in renunciation. They sing religious hymns every day and beg on the streets for money. People avoid them like the plague; many Hindus believe that if they bump into a widow, they will be polluted and must do rituals of purification.

Although Chuyia wants to return to her mother and doesn't really understand what has happened, she begins to adapt to the dreary rhythms of her days. Shakuntula (Seema Biswas), a devout Hindu, takes the little girl under her wings. Chuyia's heart goes out to Patiraji, an old crone whose fondest memory is of eating sweets at her wedding when she was a child. She tells her, "Life is so disappointing."

Then Chuyia meets Kalyani (Lisa Ray), a beautiful young widow who has been forced into prostitution by the head of the ashram, Madhumati (Manorma). She is the only one who has been allowed to keep her long hair, and the other widows shun her. But the money she brings in keeps the place afloat. The eunuch Gulabi (Raghuvveer Yadov) regularly takes her to the homes of rich Hindu gentry, many of whom are married. Kalyani befriends Chuyia and invites her to visit the second floor of the ashram and play with her dog.

Through Chuyia, Kalyani meets Narayan (John Abraham), a law student from a wealthy Indian family who is an ardent believer in the civil disobedience campaign of Mahatma Gandhi. This religious leader has begun to speak against the harsh treatment of women and the caste system, angering Hindu fundamentalists. But to the widows and other outcasts, he is a beacon of hope.

Narayan falls in love with Kalyani who yearns for a lover who will respect her. She sees herself as a lotus untouched by the filthy water it grows in and dares to imagine a better future. Their romance plays out against the backdrop of the rain water and the sacred water of the Ganges where people bath, do rituals, and send the ashes of the dead. Shakuntala is one of those who spends most of her time by the Ganges. When she learns from her guru a law has been passed allowing widows to remarry, she realizes that there might be a future for Chuyia other than her constricted and sad life.

In an interview, Deepa Mehta 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 2,000 years old. Even today, people follow these texts, which is one reason why there continue 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 of water."

Water is one of the best movies of the year. It depicts the terrible damage that can be done to the human spirit when chauvinistic religious rules and texts are treated as sacrosanct. The inhumane treatment of widows in India by Hindu fundamentalists is similar to the subjugation of women by fundamentalist Christians, Jews, and Muslims elsewhere. It is appalling to see religion used to deny the dignity and rights of women. Deepa Mehta has done all women an immense service by making this extraordinary film about the liberation their sisters yearn for with their hearts, minds, bodies, and souls.

Filmography as Director

- 2 episodes of **Little America** (2020) TV series
- 2 episodes of **Leila** (2019) TV series
- **Anatomy of Violence** (2016)
- **Beeba Boys** (2015)
- **Midnight's Children** (2012)
- **Heaven on Earth** (2008)
- **Let's Talk About It** (2006) video documentary
- **Water** (2005)
- **The Republic of Love** (2003)
- **Bollywood/Hollywood** (2002)
- "Benares" segment of **The Adventures of Young Indiana Jones: Journey of Radiance** (2000) video
- 2 episodes of **The Adventures of Young Indiana Jones** (1999) TV series
- **Earth** (1998)
- **Fire** (1996)
- "Greece" segment of **The Adventures of Young Indiana Jones: Travels with Father** (1996) TV movie
- **Camilla** (1994)
- 1 episode of **The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles** (1993) TV series
- **Sam & Me** (1991)
- 4 episodes of **Danger Bay** (1989-1990) TV series
- **Martha, Ruth & Edie** (1988)
- **K.Y.T.E.S: How We Dream Ourselves** (1986) documentary
- 4 episodes of **Spread Your Wings** (1978-1981) TV series
- **At 99: A Portrait of Louise Tandy Murch** (1976) short

Under the Heel of Britain and the Thumb of Hindu Law in 'Water'

Jeannette Catsoulis • April 28, 2006

Article sourced from The New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/28/movies/under-the-heel-of-britain-and-the-thumb-of-hindu-law-in-water.html>

Set in 1938 in the twilight of colonial India, "Water" focuses on a group of women condemned by Hindu law to spend the rest of their lives in an institution, or ashram, on the banks of the Ganges because they are widows. While the devout Shakuntula (Seema Biswas) spends her days assisting a local holy man, the limpid-eyed Kalyani (Lisa Ray) -- the only widow whose head has not been shaved -- is forced into prostitution by the 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 arrival of Chuyia (Sarala), a bewildered 8-year-old whose husband has just died, creates turmoil in the ashram. The child's impudence and high spirits encourage Shakuntula to question her fidelity to a religion that turns widows into penniless outcasts. Kalyani too is inspired to rebellion and begins a love affair with Narayan (the Bollywood star John Abraham), a handsome law student on fire with Gandhian idealism. But when Narayan's wealthy parents are informed of the relationship, the couple's defiance of religious and cultural taboos is an invitation to tragedy.

Written and directed by Deepa Mehta, "Water" is an exquisite film about the institutionalized oppression of an entire class of women and the way patriarchal imperatives inform religious belief. Serene on the surface yet roiling underneath, the film neatly parallels the plight of widows under Hindu fundamentalism to that of India under British colonialism. Though Gandhi and his followers are an insistent background presence, the movie is never didactic, trusting the simple rhythms of the women's lives to tell their story.

Mustering a whole spectrum of luminous blues and greens, Ms. Mehta and her cinematographer, Giles Nuttgens, paint a vibrant world of lambent light and indigo shade. The lushness and texture of the ashram's surroundings are in stark contrast to the widows' unflattering white robes, which hang from their bodies like dirty bandages; but here even images of deprivation gleam like gold. Never has the Ganges (played here by a river in Sri Lanka) looked so inviting.

Shifting between romantic melodrama and spiritual inquiry, "Water" flows with the simplicity of a fairy tale. The lovers' struggle may be the heart of the film, but Shakuntula's awakening is its soul. In the triumphant and moving final scene, her selfless act of bravery offers hope to Chuyia and India alike.

"Water" is rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned). It contains a suggestion of prostitution and some brief drug use. Written (in Hindi, with English subtitles) and directed by Deepa Mehta; director of photography, Giles Nuttgens; edited by Colin Monie; music by Mychael Danna, with songs by A. R. Rahman, lyrics by Sukhwinder Singh; production designer, Dilip Mehta; produced by David Hamilton; released by Fox Searchlight Pictures. Running time: 114 minutes. WITH: Seema Biswas (Shakuntula), Lisa Ray (Kalyani), John Abraham (Narayan) and Sarala (Chuyia).

Elements Trilogy

Article sourced from Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elements_trilogy

The *Elements* trilogy is a trilogy of films by Indian film-maker Deepa Mehta, dealing with controversial issues of social reform on the Indian subcontinent. *Fire*, the first release in 1996, dealt with issues of arranged marriage and homosexuality in the patriarchal culture of India. *Earth*, released in 1998, dealt with the religious strife associated with the partition of India and formation of Pakistan in the mid-20th century. *Water*, released in 2005, was the most critically successful of the three, and dealt with suicide, misogyny, and the mistreatment of widows in rural India.

Some notable actors that have worked in Mehta's *Elements* trilogy include Aamir Khan, Seema Biswas, Shabana Azmi, John Abraham, Kulbhushan Kharbanda, Rahul Khanna, Lisa Ray, and Nandita Das. A. R. Rahman composed critically acclaimed soundtracks for all the three films. These films are also notable for Mehta's collaborative work with author Bapsi Sidhwa. Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India*, (1991, U.S.; 1992, India; originally published as *Ice Candy Man*, 1988, England), is the basis for Mehta's 1998 film, *Earth*. Mehta's film, *Water*, was later published by Sidhwa as the 2006 novel, *Water: A Novel*.



Fire (1996)

The first film in the series, *Fire* (1996), is set in contemporary India. It was a highly controversial film among certain conservative quarters in India due to portrayal of lesbian characters.

Earth (1998)

Earth (1998) (released in India as *1947: Earth*) tells the story of the partition of India in 1947 from the vantage point of a young Parsi girl. *Earth* was the Indian nominee for the 2000 72nd Academy Award for Best Foreign film, but was not included among the final five nominees selected by the AMPAS.

Water (2005)

Main article: Water (2005 film)

The final film in the trilogy, *Water* (2005), is set in the 1930s and focuses upon the difficult lives of an impoverished group of widows living in an ashram. *Water* was nominated for the 2007 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, making it Canada's first non-French-language film to receive a nomination in that category. The song *Aayo Re Sakhi* was included in the final list for Oscar nomination.

Controversy

Mehta had originally intended to direct *Water* in February 2000, with the actors Shabana Azmi, Nandita Das and Akshay Kumar. Her earlier film, *Fire*, however, had previously attracted hostility from some people in the Hindu community (who objected to her depiction of Hindu culture) and had organized attacks on cinemas that screened that film. Thus, the day before filming of *Water* was due to begin, the crew was informed that there were complications with gaining location permits. The following day, they learned that 2,000 protesters had

stormed the ghats, destroying the main film set, burning and throwing it into the Ganges in protest of the film's subject matter.

The resulting tensions meant that Mehta struggled for many years to make *Water* and was eventually forced to make it in Sri Lanka rather than India. She eventually made the film, with a new cast, and a fake title used during filming (*River Moon*) in 2003. The struggle to make the film was detailed in a non-fiction book, *Shooting Water: A Mother-Daughter Journey and the Making of the Film*, written by Mehta's daughter, author Devyani Saltzman (whose father is Canadian producer and director Paul Saltzman, son of pioneering Canadian weather forecaster Percy Saltzman).

Critical responses to Mehta's work surfaced also during the release of *Fire* in 1998 because members of the Hindu Shiv Sena party felt it was an attack on Hindu tradition and the institution of marriage. Members of the party engaged in mass protests against the film at cinemas in Mumbai and Delhi. After the movie's release, Mehta spent nearly a year under 24-hour police protection while traveling through North America and Europe. Mehta and others, including feminists who took issue with the film for other reasons (see "Criticism"), engaged in counter demonstrations to prevent the censorship of the film.

Criticism

Indian feminist authors Mary E. John and Tejaswini Niranjana argued in 1999 that *Fire* reduces patriarchy to the denial and control of female sexuality:

Control of female sexuality is surely one of the *ideological* planks on which patriarchy rests. But by taking this idea literally, the film imprisons itself in the very ideology it seeks to fight, its own version of authentic reality being nothing but a mirror image of patriarchal discourse. 'Fire' ends up arguing that the successful assertion of sexual choice is not only a necessary but also a sufficient condition--indeed, the sole criterion--for the emancipation of women. Thus the patriarchal ideology of 'control' is first reduced to pure denial -- as though such control did not also involve the production and amplification of sexuality -- and is later simply inverted to produce the film's own vision of women's liberation as free sexual 'choice.' (Economic and Political Weekly, March 6–13, 1999)

Other critics have argued that Mehta overlooks the complex politics of post-colonial India in her films, particularly when she portrays "oppressed" women and confirms Orientalist stereotypes about the "exotic" and "strange" nature of Indian culture, as in her film *Water*. Some critics have suggested that in the current geo-political context of imperialism that often relies on narratives of "saving women" (e.g. the U.S. War on Terror utilizing the "oppressed Muslim woman" narrative to morally justify war), Mehta's characters are too easily read by the audience as passive victims who need to be saved rather than agents in their own history.

Madhu Kishwar, then-editor of *Manushi*, wrote a highly critical review of *Fire*, finding fault with the depiction of the characters in the film as a "mean spirited caricature of middle class family life among urban Hindus". She claimed that homosexuality was socially accepted in India as long as it remained a private affair, adding that Mehta "did a disservice to the cause of women... by crudely pushing the Radha-Sita relationship into the lesbian mould," as women would now be unable to form intimate relationships with other women without being branded as lesbians.