

*Water* (2005, written and directed by Deepa Mehta)

An eight-year old child-bride, Chuyia, accompanies her dying husband on his last journey. India, 1938, and traditional Hindu scriptures said “that widows have three options.” Their most virtuous decision would be to “burn with the dead husbands”. If their husband’s family permits, the widow may “marry the husband’s younger brother.” For Chuyia, like most widows, the only option was to “lead a life of self-denial”. Her father abandons her in a widow’s compound where, with a shaved head and plain sari, she will live the rest of her long life in penitence. According to the Laws of Manu, which are sacred Hindu texts and provide the epigram for the movie, “A widow should be long suffering until death, self-restrained and chaste.”<sup>1</sup>

The compound is located strategically near the river Ganges. The theme of water is reprised throughout the film. Water is necessary for both physical and spiritual life. It is simultaneously sacred and profane. “[F]leas and sins [are both] washed away” by it. People bathe in the river, cleanse their bodies and souls, drink it, conduct religious rituals on it, and use it as “holy water”. The ashes of the cremated are set afloat on it, and people drown themselves in it. The river divides the rich from the poor, separates the individual from her desires, and keeps lovers forever apart.

The widow’s compound is run by Madhu Didi, who explains to Chuyia the religious duty of a widow: “In grief, we are all sisters here and this house is our refuge. Our Holy Books say, a wife is part of her husband while he is alive. Right?” The other widows obediently assent. Madhu Didi keeps the oppressive traditions alive and current in the compound. “And when husbands die”, she concludes the catechism, “wives also half die”

But, Chuyia points out, that means that widows are also half alive, and she immediately disrupts the quiet of the compound. Through her, indirectly, the wheels of both tragedy and liberation are set in motion.

The compound is in need of disruption. The widows look and act like concentration camp inmates. While each widow has her own story, we get to know only a few. Madhu Didi gets by with a pet bird for company and by smoking thick wads of ganja, supplied by Gulabi, a eunuch who has access to the compound. She has good reasons for escaping into oblivion, as soon becomes apparent.

Gulabi shapes Madhu Didi’s view of the outside world, passing news and gossip through the barred window. When Gulabi tells her that Gandhi had called the untouchables “children of God”, she is repulsed. Widows were also untouchables. She knows that her survival is intimately connected to the pariah status of widowhood.

The most elderly widow, whose husband had also died when she was young, tells Chuyia that life is unhappiness. She passes the time dreaming about sweets like the ones she had eaten at her wedding and pines for the only physical pleasure she had known. When another widow dies, her sardonic comment sums up the oppression of India’s women and, ironically, the place of religion in this oppression: “God willing she’ll be reborn as a man.”

Another widow, Shakuntula Didi, seeks a spiritual answer for her unhappiness, performing daily rituals and prayers. The Hindu holy man from whom she seeks enlightenment asks her, “Shakuntula, you’ve been doing this service for many years. So many years of sacrifice and devotion. Do you feel closer to self liberation?”

“If self liberation means detachment from worldly desires. Then no, I’m no closer.”

“Whatever happens,” the holy man says, “Never lose your faith. Never lose your faith.”

He represents the religious path that seeks to end the endless cycle of rebirth. In his view, the unhappiness of the world is caused by “ignorance. It’s this ignorance that is our misfortune.”

In a way, he’s right, but he’s looking for answers in the wrong place.

The widows beg for money to pay their rent and to purchase their daily needs. Madhu Didi also prostitutes the women. Kalyani lives alone, upstairs in the compound. She is young, attractive, and her hair is uncut. To Chuyia, she appears as an angel. To Narayan, the young idealistic lawyer and follower of Gandhi, she’s the goddess he discovers, falls in love with, and plans to marry. For Madhu Didi and the pimp, Gulabi, she’s a commodity, ferried across the river to the homes of upper class Brahmins whose wives connive in her prostitution. As one of the characters ironically points out, “The gentry here have an ‘unnatural concern’ for widows.”

Filmmaker, Deepa Mehta, is exposing multiple hypocrisies. Small wonder that Hindu fundamentalists disrupted the shoot, which had to be moved out of India entirely and completed in Sri Lanka. Kalyani lives upstairs, isolated from the other widows. She eats alone because, as one widow points out to Chuyia, “With her uncut hair and ‘clients’, eating with Kalyani would pollute our food.” This food, however, is purchased through her exploitation.

The theme of pollution is pervasive in the film. At the river, a bridal party is performing a ritual when a widow approaches to retrieve water. “Watch it”, she’s warned. “Don’t let your shadow touch the bride.” Even a widow’s shadow is impure and untouchable.

At another time, Kalyani is outside the compound by the river, chasing her runaway dog. She accidentally collides with a Brahmin wife, who, we learn later, is Narayan’s mother. The Brahmin is horrified. “What are you doing?” she demands of Kalyani. “Widows shouldn’t run around like unmarried girls. You’ve polluted me. I have to bathe again.”

To touch her is to be polluted, yet her husband is one of Kalyani’s “clients” and to bring a prostitute to her husband is the duty of a virtuous wife. Confronted by Narayan, his father advises him not to marry a widow but make her his mistress. The holy texts teach that, “A virtuous wife who remains chaste when her husband has died goes to heaven. [But a] woman who is unfaithful to her husband is reborn in the womb of a jackal.”<sup>2</sup>

By this teaching, the father’s selfish actions condemn the widow in the next life. But Narayan’s father supplies a religious justification: “Brahmins can sleep with whomever they want, and the women they sleep with are blessed,” he confidently proclaims. Her touch is polluting; his touch is a blessing.

In disgust, Narayan retorts: “Do you know what Lord Ram told his Brother? Never to honour those Brahmins who interpret the Holy Texts for their own benefit.” Religion, truth, and conscience are at odds. The point, Deepa Mehta suggests, is to reconcile them.

Like Narayan's father, what is considered sin for some is not for others. Through Chuyia, Madhu Didi learns that Kalyani and Narayan plan to marry. She flies into a rage. Madhu Didi well-being depends on keeping control of Kalyani while she is young and preventing her escape through marriage. As Chuyia had been advised, "Even to think of remarriage is a sin." And when Chuyia sought an explanation, the reply was simple: "Ask God"; find enlightenment through faith and religion. Both her religious and pecuniary interests are threatened:

"Shameless," she shouts at Kalyani. "You'll sink yourself and us. We'll be cursed. We must live in purity, to die in purity."

The hypocrisy is palpable to Kalyani: "Then why do you send me across the river?" she demands.

"For survival," Madhu Didi replies. "And how we survive here, no one can question, not even God." To remarry is to sin, she is saying; to prostitute someone is 'survival' and not even God can object. There is a religious text for every occasion.

Yet the lovers' pact is doomed by fate. While being ferried across the river once again, this time not by Gulapi as prey, but by Narayan as his future wife, Kalyani recognizes his house and realizes she had been prostituted to Narayan's father. She demands to be taken back. She can't express the truth, but tells Narayan to simply ask his father,

While Narayan is confronting the old Brahmin, Kalyani returns to the compound, but Madhu Didi intends only to continue selling her. In despair of her plight and apparently lost love, Kalyani drowns herself in the river.

While Kalyani's body is being cremated on the river bank, Shakuntula, the widow who had pursued a spiritual answer, tries to understand through the lens of her religion. "The Holy Texts say all this is an illusion", she tells Narayan, looking out over the river. But his realism is blunt: "Kalyani's death is no illusion."

"Have faith," Shakuntula counsels.

"Why is your faith so strong?" asks Narayan.

Shakuntula can merely answer: "I don't know."

She then asks the big question: "Why are we widows sent here? There must be a reason for it."

There is. Narayan bluntly provides the materialist answer: "One less mouth to feed. Four saris saved, one bed, and a corner is saved in the family home. There is no other reason why you are here. Disguised as religion, it's just about money."

Surprisingly, she had heard a similar conclusion from the holy man. Shakuntula had once asked him, "You have studied the holy scriptures. Is it written, that widows should be treated badly?"

The holy man had first supplied the traditional answer, based on the duties a widow owes her dead husband. But he had then added; "However, a law was recently passed, which favours widow remarriage." He was referring to a secular law, British in inspiration. Deepa Mehta is pointing out that one of the ironies of British imperialism was that it challenged some traditional customs.

Shakuntula had been astonished by the holy man's words: "A law? Why don't we know about it?"

“We ignore the laws that don’t benefit us”, he replied, expressing a realism that would be echoed by Narayan. The holy man had learned something practical from his studies.

This revelation, which answered her search for knowledge unexpectedly, had set in motion Shakutula’s first moment of discovery and self-liberation, realized through action and not contemplation or ritual. She had taken the keys away from Madhu Didi and released Kalyani, who was then free to meet her lover. Shakutula didn’t know that her liberating action would end in a double tragedy. Not only did Kalyani take her life, but Madhu Didi, who had thereby lost her most lucrative widow, turned, instead, to Chuyia, who still wanted to go home. I am like your mother, Madhu Didi croons; you believe me, don’t you? She tells Chuyia that “Gulapi will take you [home]”. Home is Narayan’s father’s bedroom. Chuyia walks in, gapes in astonishment around the rich and imposing room and says, “I’ve come here to play.”

Shakutula realizes too late what has befallen Chuyia and is unable to save her, but she then takes a second action of self-liberation. The holy man had told Shakutula that “Gandhi is one of the few people in the world, who listens to the voice of his conscience.” But when Shakutula had asked, “But, what if our conscience conflicts with our faith?” the holy man had been silent, unable to supply an answer. His silence represented the dead end to which religious speculation leads. Gandhi would later supply the answer.

Shakutula carries Chuyia to the train station, where Gandhi is communing with his supporters during a brief stop. Narayan is on board the train, planning to accompany Gandhi on his mission. Shakutula passes the abused Chuyia to him, telling him to take her to Gandhi, who respects and protects Indian widows. She had listened to Gandhi’s implied answer to the holy man’s silence. His speech had been short and to the point:

“My dear brothers and sisters, for a long time I believed that God is Truth. But today I know, that Truth is God. The pursuit of truth is invaluable for me. I trust it will be the same for you.”

For Deepa Mehta, you do not find truth by seeking enlightenment in religious communion with God; you seek the truth in actions and, once you have found it, you find what spiritual truth there is.

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<sup>1</sup> The Laws of Manu, Chapter 5 Verses 156-161, Dharamshastras, (Sacred Hindu texts). These verses are used as the film’s epigram.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.