

## FILM THEORIES, FEMINIST ISSUES AND THE FILM WATER

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### Abstract

*Fire (1996), Earth (1998) and Water (2005):- these three films by well-known woman director Deepa Mehta constitute famous element trilogy. All these films are based on women's miserable condition, their predicament and suffering in Indian society, be it in pre-independence India or even afterwards. The film Water (2005) closely analyses the divergence created through religion, gender and social discrimination against women. It depicts the harsh reality of the lives of the widow women in pre-independence India. Interestingly, the film ends with an optimistic note, with a hope that the condition of women will certainly improve with the change in society, influenced by Gandhian values and morals, after the independence. This paper proposes to depict femininity in Deepa Mehta's film Water studying it in the light of feminist and film theories, which (Film feminist theorists like Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Linda Williams and bell hooks) consider the films to be the creation of patriarchy where women plays an entertaining secondary role for male audience.*

*Key Words: Feminism Feminist Film Theories Patriarchy Widowhood.*

Cinema is the strongest medium of entertainment in the world and plays a significant part in reforming society's beliefs and customs. Though cinema has made way for new opportunities but still it has given a powerful hold to men. Women are regarded to be unimportant in Cinema and in the Indian Film industry in particular. Hindi Cinema is a male dominated industry where women are seen playing minor roles. The portrayal of women onscreen by male directors promote gender discrimination and women's perceptions and their realities are not reflected. Thus, women's presence in the films remains only to highlight the characteristics of male actor and playing stereotypical roles. Even audience like to watch women in various songs and dance segments, in conventional roles and in designer costumes.

All these issues have become a subject of critical debate among various film feminist theorists like Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis and Barbara Creed. These Film theorists have made a great deal of contribution to feminist film theories by depicting how “film is a feminist issue and why feminist issues are still important in film” (2). Articles in the journal *Women and Film* examine films to be a mirror reflecting the “changing society” but this reflection is somewhat distorted as it is ruled by “a masculine viewpoint” (22). Writers of this journal also believe that when the stereotypes will lessen and when there will be the demand for more women film makers, then the reflection we witness onscreen of the female actresses will be transformed (22). Cinema made by women, for women or dealing with women is defined by various film feminist theorists as “women’s cinema”. Film Theorists Teresa de Lauretis observes that women’s cinema consists of all the aspects of camera, image or character which can identify woman as female, feminine or feminists. She remarks in her essay *Rethinking Women’s Cinema*:

“When I look at the movies, film theorists try to tell me that the gaze is male, the camera eye is masculine, and so my look is also not a woman’s. But I don’t believe them anymore, because now I think I know what it is to look at a film as a woman.”

(De Lauretis 1967:113)

Film Feminist theorists regard that women are shown as objects in movies. Laura Mulvey has proposed a term called *Male Gaze* in her work *Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema* in 1975, which means to portray women onscreen as sexual objects. According to her, women have been playing a secondary role in conventional cinema for male audience for long. She argued that “mainstream cinema is constructed for a male gaze, catering to male fantasies and pleasures” (2). She regards that Scopophilia and Narcissism are two forms describing spectators’ connection with the screen. One is active, (Scopophilia) that is to give various pleasures that are offered by the cinema. She further writes for Scopophilia: “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (pp.16). While in Narcissism spectator relates with the image of their own likeness. Women onscreen are considered valuable in terms of their appearance (her beauty and sexual desirability) while men are shown more in narrative events and powerful roles. In this type of cinema, directors assume how the woman should be looked onscreen by the spectators and places the spectators in a ‘masculine’ position of looking at a woman. The audience forgets that they are watching a film and this creates a convincing illusion where male protagonist act as the spectators representative or their substitute as spectators enjoy the possession of woman on screen by male actor.

Only female directors have shown immense interest in making films where they address problems and hardships faced by women. It has already commenced in Hindi Cinema with directors like Mira Nair, Kalpana Lajmi, Leena Yadav and Deepa Mehta whose films like *Daman*, *Rudali*, *Fire*, *Earth*, *Water* and *Parched* have rejected customary Bollywood doctrine by removing songs and dance patterns and not using designer costumes but rather

taking distinctive actresses and ending stereotypical women roles. Apart from the stereotypical roles played by the women in the movies, the biggest challenge which most of the women directors have to face is to fetch a financier for their films. They have to work in tight budgets and thus lack in marketing too. Even the film distributors are not so keen about selling films made by the women directors because they usually give a feministic agenda to their films. These films address only limited section of the society. The credit of the slow but steady evolution of women's identity as portrayed in the films can be given to bold women directors, who in spite of the odds have in past, and, still are directing films not only showing the predicament of Indian women, but also in the process depicting the challenges posed to them in dealing with the age old conventions, traditions and hypocrisies of Indian society not only as actors but also as women directors.

However, these films where women's status has been realistically have created huge controversy. One such movie is *Water* (2005) directed by Deepa Mehta. This film faced lots of objections by various religious and political groups from the beginning itself. On the very first day of the shooting the sets of the film were destroyed by protestors as they believed that the script of the film is defaming the Indian society and because of which Mehta had to shoot the remaining film in Sri Lanka. Mehta as a director was not readily acceptable after seeing her depiction of Indian culture in an unacceptable way and the audacity of a women director to expose the truth about old age customs that has put Indian women in vulnerable position. Deepa Mehta herself remarked in film's DVD:

"What happened with *Water* was incredible. We were not allowed to shoot it even before our first shot and a lot of it has to do with internal politics....our shooting was shut down two days into the filming in a brutal way.....our sets were thrown into the Ganges in India."

Set in the holy city of Varanasi, *Water* (2005) is a period film. This film is a harsh depiction of widows in 1930s India where lives of widows were controlled by many social restrictions. It was a time when widows were considered as bad omen and were sent to widow ashrams to live a life of chastity as their duty to their deceased husbands. The film explores the story of eight-year old Chuiya who is compelled by her family to live in a widow house after her aged husband dies. In the widow house she become friends with a beautiful young widow Kalyani who has been forced into prostitution by Madhumati, the head matron of the widow's *ashram*, Madhumati arranges meetings between Kalyani and her clients in order to earn livelihood for the widow house. Only Kalyani is allowed to keep her long hair while it was obligatory for other widows to shave their heads as a symbol of renunciation. The film also contains a devastating love story of Kalyani and Narayan, a social reformist, Brahmin and a follower of Gandhi. They fall in love and resolve to marry each other. This match between a Brahmin and a widow became a threat to the orthodox Indian society and also to ashram's financial income. On one hand, it is shown that Narayan's mother is shocked when she learns about his intentions to marry a widow and on the other hand, the bewildered Madhumati tries to prevent their marriage by detaining Kalyani and cutting of all her hair to

make her look less attractive. However, Kalyani manages to run away with the help of Shakuntala, the witty and more compassionate of all widows in the house. When Narayan learns that his father is one of Kalyani's clients, he confronts his father who defends his exploitation of women by saying that "Brahmins can sleep, with whomever they want, and the women they sleep with are blessed." This statement not only portrays the patriarchal state of mind but also reflects the casteism moving underline. Brahmin being the highest caste in hierarchy and a man belonging to this caste makes a more assertive patriarchal statement. This statement by Narayan's father portrays that a man's voice is that of a law as he speaks with utmost authority. Film theorist Kaja Silverman in her book *The Acoustic Mirror* (1988) argues about the disparity constructed between male and female voice over, where the sound produced by male voice is commanding and female have no authoritative voice and their speech is identified as "unreliable, thwarted or acquiescent" (45). In contrast to this, women's voice is made audible in the feminist films with the use of irony and the understatements made by the actresses showing the hypocrisy of the society. Teresa de Lauretis in her work *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (1987) writes that the aim of realist cinema is to create an illusion that the spectator is listening or witnessing a real event and an attempt of the feminist director to capture the desires of women to occupy her place in history. For instance, when Chuiya's father informs her that she is a widow now, she asks "For how long?" the director moves the camera on Chuiya focusing on her innocent facial expressions as this honest question put up by her suggests the hegemonic attitude of patriarchal ideology. Through this ironical treatment used by Mehta, spectators connection with the female character enables them to think about women's right and their position in Indian society. Narayan's refusal of his father's opinions can be regarded to be a revolutionary act in a traditional Indian society. He leaves his father's house to marry Kalyani but by that time, overcome by grief and shame Kalyani commits suicide by drowning herself in the water of River Ganges. Chuiya is sexually abused when forced into prostitution by Madhumati who is eager to find a new source of income for the household. Interestingly, the film ends with an optimistic note. Shakuntala takes Chuiya to a gathering where Gandhi is addressing the public. She wants Chuiya to be in the care of Gandhi. Here, she encounters Narayan, she gives the child to him and send her away from the cruelties of the widowhood where her life will be filled with Gandhian values and morals.

Through *Water* Deepa Mehta speaks about the vulnerable position of widows in pre independence India. She has been bold enough to make significant statements about injustices against widows that are carried out in the name of religion. Widows have to abandon all worldly pleasures, live in confinement, obeying the rules regulated by the society. Manju Jaidkain her book *A Critical Study of Deepa Mehta's Trilogy* writes that the conditions portrayed in the film is based on reality, she also uses a statement made by Mohan Giri (a women's rights activist) in a press conference: "Without a man by his side a woman has no respect in Indian society. It is part of a patriarchal culture." Mehta represents this patriarchal

attitude by showing how widows were considered inauspicious and on the other hand they were used to satisfy the desires of rich land owners. This is clearly made evident by Narayan's friend Rabindra who says: "The gentry here have an unnatural concern for widows. My father doesn't even bother with their names, the old one, the fat one, the new one, the young one"(27:47). Mehta also throws light on the economic struggle of widows, where they are not even able to meet their funeral expenses. This is made evident in the scene, after Kalyani's death when Narayan explains Shakuntala that why widows are sent to the widow houses, he says: "One less mouth to feed. Four saris saved, one bed, a corner is saved in the family house" (01:37:25). This remarkable statement made by Narayan illustrates that not religion but society's economical need prohibits widows to live life on their own terms.

In the film, women are subjugated, but there are women like Madhumati who enforces subjugation. For instance, after learning from Chuiya about Kalyani's marriage she criticise Kalyani and says: "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" (01:14:57). This statement shows her orthodox belief of protecting the dignity of their deceased husbands by safeguarding their chastity. However, taking advantage of such religious belief Madhumati is shown breaking the rules by enjoying privileges that widows are constrained from. Mehta represents how other widow of the ashram accommodates themselves under these rigid social structures. When Chuiya asks Shakuntala "where is the home for widow men?" this upsets other widows and they say: "Whata terrible thing to say. God protects our men from such a fate. May your tongue burn. Pull out her tongue and throw it in the river" (32:02). This innocent question of Chuiya shows the hypocrisies of Indian society (which she is unaware of) that allow man to enjoy all freedom even after the death of his wife but a woman is made to live a life of social outcast and ostracism and also clearly depicts how widows have internalised and blended the old forms of belief in their lives that they never find it wrong to live in the confinements of widowhood. Men cannot only be blamed for this wretched condition of widows but through character like Madhumati, Mehta wants to tell that women are not only the sufferers but they are also the evildoer, for their personal advantage they don't mind oppressing other women. In fact even their nature of endurance makes them a victim. Mehta wants these women to overcome such atrocities and gain self-identity within this patriarchal structure. This raises many important questions; for instance as to why women under the influence of patriarchy, support the practice of widowhood and widows willingly themselves choose to live this kind of life? The possible answers can be that women's like Madhumati, who once was a sufferer herself finds it beneficial to subjugate other widows (like to enjoy all freedom restricted for widows), while those voluntarily choosing to face such vulnerability either accepts this as their destiny or their firm belief in religious notions and traditions bounds them to do so. Though all these women may understand what the child is feeling, but they also understand that the world they live in does not offer them any other option. Deepa Mehta also focuses on the world of politics, where Gandhi is fighting for



India's independence and Raja Ram Mohan's struggle for reformation of women. ManjuJaidka asserts in her book *A Critical Study of Deepa Mehta's Trilogy*:

"Mother India, for whom Mahatma Gandhi fights his battle, is thus equated with woman, or to be more specific in this case, the widow woman who needs to be set free of shackles that bind her. In a world that is rapidly changing, the nation and its women coalesce into one image by the side of the Holy Ganga" (68).

Mehta's depiction of mistreatment of widows on the very same bank of the river Ganga which has holy significance created controversies. Mehta was criticized for defaming Indian society as her film dealt with the corruption associated with the treatment of widows in India. Apart from this, her courage as a woman director to make a period film dealing with the subjects of female subjugation and discrimination disturbed the patriarchal ideology. Even British film theorists like Claire Johnston and Annette Kuhn observe that cinema is a creation of patriarchal ideologies portraying women as objects rather than showing their realities.

There are various other factors resulting in the failure of women centric cinema. One of them is that audience are more fascinated in watching glamorous stars on the screen rather than unconventional actresses. According to bell hook, objectification of women onscreen cannot be classified only in terms of gender, but also in terms of the resistance faced by black women onscreen by the spectators. Furthermore, Linda Williams in her work *When the Woman Looks* (1986) mentions when a woman turns herself from passive recipient of the Gaze into the active look, she is usually punished for her revolutionist act. The American film feminist theorist Mary Ann Doane in *Film and Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator* (1982), claims that the female spectator also plays a vital role in judging movies, as "women function as the image, resulting in the failure between spectator and screen" (41) so the female spectators either become over identified with the actress onscreen or emotionally over involved with the actress and in both cases the spectator fails to connect with the onscreen image of her likeness. Basically, Mulvey initiated that spectators are compelled to identify with the image of a male hero giving rise to a gathering of *female spectators*, creating contradictions to the female desires expressed in the films. According to Doane, women oriented movies of 1970s encouraged female spectator to identify with the male character and use them as "the object of her Gaze" but she failed to identify herself with this Gaze as her desires carried no power (This was a reversal of Laura Mulvey's *Male Gaze*), so the theory of over identification was incorporated so that their active desire could be turned into the passive desire to be desired.

Interestingly, the concept of "Third Cinema" can be applied to it. *Third Cinema* expresses resentment against structures of power, who through the means of discrimination against caste, creed, and gender and in any other form tries to oppress the victims. This type of Cinema tries to bring possible change by trying to liberate the oppressors.

Thus, the films with women centric issues and subject depicts the evolution of women in acquiring modern identity from conventional identity that disturbs the patriarchal power structure and it prevents them from changing their situation. Deepa Mehta's film *Water* is not only a strong critique of traditional practices and culture enforced by the patriarchal society on the women as a class but also she gives voice to their repressed female aspirations that is oppressed by patriarchy.

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