

Stefano Mercanti***In Deepa Water: Mehta's latest elemental move.***

Abstract I: Like the other films in Deepa Mehta's elemental trilogy, *Water* pushes the boundaries of India's male-dominant cultural narratives beyond patriarchal predicaments by questioning the religious tradition and the constraints on widows in a male-dominant society. The paper aims at showing how Mehta's characters move toward more salubrious scenarios by portraying a more nuanced world-view in which human beings can live and interact fluidly and unpredictably, thus overcoming the rigid discourses imposed by dominator hierarchies.

Abstract II: Con *Water* Deepa Mehta completa la trilogia dedicata agli elementi con l'intento di oltrepassare i confini di un'India animata da sistemi di valori culturali patriarcali e mettere in luce le profonde ingiustizie della condizione sociale delle vedove perpetrate in nome della religione. Questo saggio intende mostrare come i personaggi riescono a dar vita a scenari più ampi in cui i valori della cura dell'altro e della cooperazione prevalgono su quelli imposti da gerarchie basate sulla dominanza.

Following the audible uproar generated by the screening of her previous controversial movies, *Fire* (1996) and *Earth* (1998), Deepa Mehta's *Water* debuted last year at the Toronto International Film Festival and posed yet another unequivocal challenge to the dominant cultural narratives of (neo)colonial India as well as of the world's marginalized cultural spaces at large.

Since the beginning of shooting in Varanasi in February 2000, the Indo-Canadian director and her crew were attacked by religious fundamentalists who allegedly read the script and deemed it anti-Hindu for it clearly questioned the religious tradition and the constraints on widows in a male-dominant society. Pieces of the set were thrown into the Ganges river and effigies of the director were torched. As the protests intensified into death threats, the production was forced to shut down, and the film-maker took a number of years before considering the project again. Alarmingly, the Uttar Pradesh government

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withdrew the film's location permits as right-wing RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) and Shiv Sena extremists stormed the *ghats* (sacred bathing areas) along the Ganges. These auxiliary organizations, headed by the Bharatiya Janata Party, jointly promote the ideology of Hindutva, an ideology that seeks to establish a monochromatic Hindu state in India with its own fascist theory of racial exclusivity (Sharma, 2003). However, the perpetrators were left unpunished as many people involved in the protests were found to be party leaders and relatives of government ministers. Mehta eventually went to Sri Lanka to finish the filming in secret under the title *Full Moon* to avoid further attacks.

Set in the 30's during Mahatma Gandhi's Independence Movement, *Water* revolves around the life of Chuyia (Sarala), an eight-year-old child-bride who is abandoned at a widow's colony in Benares after her fifty-year-old husband dies. According to a patriarchal reading of Hinduism, upon the death of their husbands, Indian women - usually from the upper caste - must be forcibly separated from their families and confined to a widow colony, where they 'physically' live out their days in a state of social and civil death (Chakravarty, 2003: 82). Mehta's visual choice in conveying the cruelty of such an institutional marginalization is powerfully portrayed in the opening scenes of Chuyia being tonsured, her bangles violently smashed and then dressed in a long white homespun cloth. Reminiscent of shorn Jews during Nazism, the close filming of the razor being scraped across her scalp suddenly takes the viewer to Chuyia's abrupt descent into widowhood and sets the tone for the stringent existence in which she must now live. The old woman, Madhumati (Manorama), sternly reigns over the ashram with the help of Gulabi (Rajpal Yadav), a eunuch (*hijra*) who arranges evening meetings between widows and rich men in order to financially support the widow colony. Unwilling to resign to her fate, Chuyia challenges the oppressive restrictions of the ashram and invariably creates a change in the lives of other widows such as the beautiful widow-prostitute Kalyani (Lisa Ray) and Shakuntala (Seema Biswas), a middle-aged widow who is the only one capable of taming the old tyrannical Madhumati. Kalyani meets Narayan (John Abraham), a young upper-class Gandhian idealist whose love for the beautiful widow poses a threat to the social and moral order of the ashram. Yet, despite the strict dissent the couple meets from both their communities, they continue to meet until Kalyani discovers that she used to visit Narayan's father as a prostitute and decides to end the relationship. This, and the rejection from the ashram because of her disobedience, pushes her to commit suicide. Madhumati finds a substitute for prostitution in Chuyia who is taken away to a client by Gulabi. It is too late when Shakuntala finds out, yet, knowing that Gandhi and his followers are visiting the city, promoting his ideas of peace and a cast-less society, she courageously resolves to take Chuyia away from the colony and gives her to Narayan as his train departs, confident that the child will be taken care of.

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Like the other films in Mehta's elemental trilogy, *Water* pushes the boundaries of India's male-dominant cultural narratives beyond patriarchal predicaments by portraying a more nuanced world-view in which human beings can live and interact fluidly and unpredictably, thus overcoming the rigid discourses imposed by hegemonic hierarchies. The potential for expressing love and cooperation is what moves Mehta's characters toward more salubrious scenarios even though some of the protagonists are left utterly defeated. Whereas *Earth* depicts a tragic love story set against the backdrop of the violent Partition of India, *Fire* examines the complex tensions within a stifling Hindu joint family fuelled by spiritual queries, existential bitterness and 'different' sexual choices which led many Hindu revivalists, along with many bigot viewers, to summarily label the work as a lesbian movie. More convincingly, *Water* manages to deeply question the stark misinterpretation of religious prescriptions framed to subjugate women, especially widows, in order to fulfill the economic and sexual needs of a male dominated society. Over this very inflammatory critique of enforced women's human degradation - and religious fundamentalisms at large - Mehta ingeniously pours enough water to temper the liberal outrage that would naturally emerge in front of such a debasing confinement. By choosing an eight-year-old child as a pivotal character of the story, the blind logic and the uniform static institution of enforced widowhood is passionately destabilized by Chuyia's innocent force and rebellious character from which the bonds of a caring, almost motherly, relationship with Kalyani and Shakuntala develops. Within this nurturing relationship, Chuyia subversively mediates between Kalyani and Narayan, and gains the affection of Shakuntala who eventually sets her free. As Gandhi's train passes through the city, the chance of overcoming the punishing misguided Hindu traditions appears feasible and Chuyia is freed from the bleak oppression of the widow colony. It is even more significant that the movie is set against the historical rise of Mahatma Gandhi who not only led India to independence, but also sought to improve the marginalization of many alienated communities such as the widows and the untouchables. To this very extent, the significance of the movie lies not so much in the mere representation of a widow's life in penitence, as it poignantly evokes the meaningful empathy, understanding and caring relationships that can develop between human beings when the hope of a peaceful realization of the highest human potentials is never lost even when confronted with the most demeaning violence.

Water is also the latest novel written by Bapsi Sidhwa, a Parsi of Pakistani origins and one of the finest South Asian fiction writers in English who has already collaborated with Deepa Mehta in the 90s in *Turning* her novel *Cracking India* (1988) into the movie *Earth*. This time, Sidhwa wrote her novel based on an early script of Mehta's *Water* and provides a further articulation of women's institutionalized oppression against Gandhi's theology of Truth and non-violence. Interestingly, her five novels share the same concerns about dominant cultural discourses and the hidden strength of women summed up in Deepa Mehta's

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cinematic trilogy: *The Bride* (1983), her first novel called *The Pakistani Bride* in India, is based on the tragic story of a young girl who was married to a man of a poor tribal community and then murdered as she ran away from her husband's home; *The Crow Eaters* (1978) is set during British rule, *Cracking India* (also published as *Ice-Candy Man*) depicts the bloody Partition of India and the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh violence that followed, as seen from an 8 year-old Parsee girl's perspective; *An American Brat* (1994) focuses on rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the 70s.

The Hindi-language film, internationally distributed by Twentieth Century Fox, has recently been released in Italy by Videac-DE and Warner Bros. Pictures Italia, following the bestowal of the Taormina Arte Award for Cinematic Excellence. The dubbing have been directed by Ida Sansone for the International Recording of Rome with whom I collaborated as script consultant.

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Stefano Mercanti completed his doctorate on Raja Rao's short-stories at the University of Udine (Italy) and is currently working on a funded research project on partnership and multiculturalism in post-colonial literatures for the same university. As an Indian Council for Cultural Relations scholarship recipient, he has also obtained a further Ph.D. on Indianness in Raja Rao's novels at the University of Bangalore.

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