

Elemental Lovers: An Analysis of Deepa Mehta's **Water**

Extract Running time: 59:30 to 1:04:30

Deepa Mehta's 2005 film, **Water**, explores, and subtly challenges, the religious subjugation of women in India. The film follows the lives of widows in 1938 who are exiled to a bland existence in an *ashram*¹, so as to prevent, as warned by Hindu texts, 'contamination' of society. As the film progresses, the widows begin to question religion, but they struggle with confronting the deep-rooted societal belief of "being responsible for their husband's death" (Corbacho, Barrera) and therefore deserving their cruel treatment. The scene which epitomizes the struggle between old and new ideals is the midnight escapade of Kalyani, a widow, and Narayan, a forward-thinking Gandhian, after their initial meeting. The scene speaks to the film historical and social context – a society where religion was embedded in all aspects of life at a time of change – as well as embodying the film's cinematic techniques – namely, the use of symbolism, composition, characterization and dialogue – to convey ideas of the inevitable resistance to change.

Water is set in 1938, a time when India was still occupied by the British, and Hinduism, the dominant religion, pervaded daily life. Life revolved around the tellings of

¹ Hindu monastery (Wikipedia Contributors)

the Hindu scriptures, which conscripted women to possession by men. Their identity was completely dictated by their male relatives, from father to, upon marriage, husband. This idea of possession extended to the idea that, essentially, a wife was 'part' of her husband, therefore upon his death, she too "ceases' as a person and passes in to a state of social death" (Mukherjee). In their state of "social death", widows lost their autonomy, both personally and sexually. They were banished to female *ashrams* to attempt to live an insipid life in order to achieve salvation, for it was believed it was their bad *karma* which killed their husbands.

The Hindu beliefs of the time act as a stark background to the rise of Mahatma Gandhi, a libertarian thinker. His philosophy of *Sarvodaya*, meaning universal uplift, held a special emphasis on the empowerment of women, in his own words: "Women must not suffer any legal disability which is not suffered by men. Both are perfectly equal" (Gandhi, *Young India*). Gandhi believed this vision of equality could be realized by, first, "awakening in the minds of...women... [providing them] a consciousness of their present condition" (Debnath). Narayan, the male protagonist of the film, and a self-proclaimed Gandhian, attempts to do exactly so: shed light on India's inherently flawed religious system. Narayan tries to reason with Kalyani, a widow, who has not only accepted her grim reality, but found reason in it. The extract of their discussion was selected for this exploration as it best exemplifies the clash between changing times and deep-seated ideals. This scene is marked from Kalyani crossing the river

(pictured: figure 1) to the intimate discussion between her and Narayan (pictured: figure 2)



Figure 1: start of the extract, Kalyani crossing the river (59:30)



Figure 2: end of the extract, silhouette of the couple (1:04:30)

Kalyani and Narayan exemplify religious ideals and progressive views respectively. Their dichotomous beliefs are made clear to the audience through the use of naturalistic symbolism in the sequence selected. The sequence starts with a wide-shot of Kalyani walking with a lit *diya*² in her hand (pictured: figure 3) which is

² A small clay lamp used for prayer.

immediately cut with a wide-shot of Narayan's silhouette playing the flute by the river (pictured: figure 4).



Figure 3: wide-shot of Kalyani with a lit diya



Figure 4: wide-shot of Narayan playing the flute

The juxtaposition of the shots has a two-fold effect. The shot of Kalyani holding a lit prayer *diya* consolidates her adherence to religion, while also associating her with the element of fire, which, in part, harks back to the idea of spirituality for, in Hinduism, fire is a God by its own right (Britannica). Similarly, the shot of Narayan by the river playing music carefree acts as a subtle sign of his self-assured personality. Simultaneously, by framing him near a river, the film's cinematographer, Giles Nuttgens, links Narayan's

character to the element of water, which, too, in its ability to take on many shapes, its flow and its breadth conveys an idea of self-assuredness. Metha, by assigning the couple opposing elements, forebodes the destructive consequences of their relationship, because like fire and water together, ruination is inevitable. This ruination is realized as Kalyani commits suicide later in the film. Interestingly, Kalyani drowns herself in the river, essentially submitting to the element of water (pictured: figure 5); however, this act becomes significant once the multidimensional nature of the symbol of water is considered.



Figure 5: Kalyani drowning herself in the river

Within the sequence selected, to reach her clandestine meeting with Narayan, Kalyani is forced to cross the river alone (pictured: figure 1), thus, the water adopts an identity as a barrier, something she is forced to traverse over to meet Narayan. This idea conjures links to the idea of the then-society, which isolated widows from the normal population. This connection sees the eponymous symbol of the element take on the meaning of societal barriers, for both of them, in some form, prevent the union of Kalyani and Narayan. Given this idea, when Kalyani's suicide is considered, through her

act of succumbing to water, Kalyani accepts defeat to society's constricting laws, culminating in a true tragedy.

What, perhaps, makes the fate of Kalyani more depressing is that, despite the social and ideological barriers stunting their relationship, there is undeniable love between her and Narayan, which is clear through the scene's use of shot composition. In their discussion of the correctness of social expectations, Kalyani and Narayan occupy, roughly, the same space of the frame (pictured: figure 6 and 7, respectively).



Figure 6 & 7: the balanced composition of Kalyani and Narayan

The compositional balance between the two characters, despite representing different ideals, in the middle of the frame and by existing on the same compositional plane conveys an idea of innate equality between the characters. This seems to suggest that, despite what society believes of a widow and a Brahmin³, there is an equality between the two, which, to further reject society's expectations, extends to (as it becomes clear through the film) a profound love. However, Narayan's love is more than just that, he has "a nationalistic desire in him to educate Kalyani and to give her an equal status in society as his wife" (Sengupta), yet it is Kalyani who is hesitant. She, has to a certain degree, accepted the laws of the land, this is clear through the scene's use of dialogue.

Anurag Kashyap and Deepa Mehta, the film's screenwriters, use dialogue not only to shed light on to Kalyani's philosophy, but their choice of Hindi words demonstrate the misguided nature of her thinking. When Kalyani mentions it is abnormal for a man of Narayan's age and caste to be unwed, he replies, "*the times are changing. All the old traditions are dying out*" (pictured: figure 8a). She challenges him, "*what is good should not die out*" (pictured: figure 8b). He asks her then, "*who will decide what is good and what is not?*" (pictured: figure 8c). Kalyani replies without hesitation: "*you*", (pictured: figure 8d).

³ It is established earlier in the film that Narayan is from the Brahmin caste. The Brahmin Caste is the highest caste in Hinduism.

 <p>- The times are changing. All the old traditions are dying out.</p>	 <p>- What is good should not die out.</p>
<p>8a: “समय बदल रहे हैं. पुराने परंपराओं...टूट रहे हैं।”</p>	<p>8b: “जो अच्छे चीजें हैं उनको तो नहीं मरने चाहिए।”</p>
 <p>- Who will decide what is good and what is not?</p>	 <p>- You.</p>
<p>8c: “और कौन तय करेगा, क्या अच्छा है, क्या बुरा?”</p>	<p>8d: “आप”</p>

Figure 8: Stills of the conversation between Kalyani and Narayan

Kalyani's simple reply conveys a profound message, Kalyani is convinced by societal norms. She believes a Brahmin man not only holds the power, but deserves the power, to make decisions about how to control the lives of others, especially as the film focuses on, the lives of women. This idea is consolidated by the knowledge that, historically, the Brahmin caste was tasked with “maintaining sacred knowledge” (Szczepanski) and thus in the early 20th century, were the only people ‘certified’ to be priests. The priests are the ones thought of having interpreted the holy texts in a way that deliberately subjugate widows (Szczepanski) . Therefore, Kalyani, by deeming

Narayan fit to make rules about traditions, is, to a certain degree, condoning the act of Brahmins in subordinating widows. This acts as a commentary on privilege at the time: the arbitrary process of being born in to a particular caste or a capricious event, such as widowhood, dictate the autonomy of individuals and their ability to make a change. However, Deepa Metha and Anurag Kashyap align their personal opinion on the issue with Narayan by diminishing Kalyani's credibility, and they do so through the particularities of the Hindi language used in the screenplay. When referring to Narayan, Kalyani uses the Hindi word "आप" (aap, 'you') instead of "तुम" (tum, 'you'), though the words have the same English translation, the usage of "aap" is considered more formal and used typically in conversations between an adult and a child. This insinuates that between the two, Kalyani's opinions are more childish and juvenile and, thus, invalid compared to Narayan's mature view. This idea, in fact, extends itself to the socio-historical consideration of how education was withheld from women at the time (Williams), rendering them unable to fully comprehend and, thus, challenge complex social structures. This idea of Kalyani's illiteracy, in part, contributes to her stunted thoughts and therefore her naivety. This naivety is almost childlike, and its effect is furthered as in the selected scene she refers to a elder widow in the ashram as "दीदी" (didi, 'big sister') which is a term used exclusively by children (pictured: figure 9).

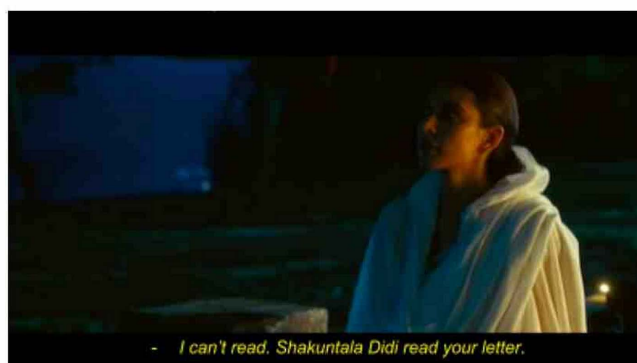


Figure 9: Kalyani using the word “didi”, suggesting her naivety

Interestingly, not even Chuyia uses this term when referring to the elder widows. Through this deliberate diction, Mehta and Kashyap subtly downplay the credibility of Kalyani and therefore the archaic ideals she follows.

This scene in Deepa Mehta's **Water** is nuanced with commentary about resistance to change and internalized subordination. It touches upon the theme of star-crossed lovers who are unable to overcome the societal restrictions, as, nature has deemed them dichotomous and, in part, they have accepted this. However, in the scene, we also see the societal restrictions challenged by the characterization of Narayan. The film, as a whole, masterfully explored these ideas and was, foreseeably, met with critical acclaim – it was described as a film of “extraordinary richness and complexity” (Thomas). However, its success in its home countries varied. In Canada, the film was celebrated, even representing the nation during the 2007 Academy Awards for best foreign language film. The reason for this success, provided by Mehta herself, is because **Water** “is so completely tied down to Canada’s idea of diversity and

inclusion" (TIFF). On the other hand, in India, even before its release, **Water** incited rage for, according to some, "depicting Hindu culture in a poor light" (ABC) to the point that some even threatened a suicide-bid to cease production (The Hindu). In response, Metha moved to Sri Lanka, delaying production from 2000 to 2003. Despite the eventual 2005 release of the film, the movie only opened in India in 2007 due to further resistance. However, as an Indian, I believe it is our duty to confront the reality of how religion berated women to the point they were convinced they deserve that form of treatment, especially when this reality is far from history.

Word Count: 1738

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