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Widowhood as a Socio-Cultural and Religious Construct: A Critical Study of Deepa

Mehta's *Water*

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Abstract

This research paper examines widowhood as a social construct in Deepa Mehta's *Water* (2005). The film has a 1930s colonial Indian setting, which criticizes the orthodox Hindu customs that ostracize widows, depicting them as burdens for society. This study critically examines the key issues: gender, religion, and patriarchy, to observe how widowhood is socially enforced. Thus, this paper focuses on the way *Water* tells us what/who is a widow and why/how one becomes a widow. The study attempts to answer how *Water* portrays the construction of widowhood and what are the ways of constructing a widow? The research objectives of this study are to find out how *Water* portrays the construction of widowhood and to uncover the ways used to construct widowhood. A qualitative research methodology is used to analyze the elements of film, such as actors, narration, dialogue, symbols, etc., to meet the objectives of this paper. Employing feminist and sociological frameworks, the study argues that the film not only sensationalizes the predicament of widows but also offers a rebellious narrative that demands the deconstruction of old cultural norms. The paper fills a gap by addressing how widowhood is constructed through intersecting institutions of religion, patriarchy, and tradition. Findings of the study explain the procedure of constructing a widow, which is done on two levels: body and mind. Appearance, food, and shelter help in constructing the body, whereas naming, chanting of mantras, teachings (*Pravachan*) of Saananda (the priest), bhajan, and kirtan help construct the psychology of a widow. The implication of this study is that it will bring the issues associated with widowhood into visibility, and it will be an insight for the researchers interested in films and literature dealing with social, cultural, and religious issues.

Keywords: cultural norms, feminism, Hinduism, patriarchy, social construct, widowhood

Widowhood as a Socio-Cultural and Religious Construct: A Critical Study of Deepa Mehta's *Water*

In traditional societies, widowhood is not just an individual loss; it is a social label frequently consequential in ostracization and systemic marginalization. The situation of widows has traditionally been governed by strict religious and social rules. Instead of taking widowhood as an individual condition signified by the demise of a husband, it is often transformed into a social identity regulated by patriarchy. Widows are socially excluded, economically deprived, ritually restricted, and psychologically marginalized. Widows' bodies, desires, and identities are often regulated through social, cultural, and religious codes. These codes equate widowhood with austerity, renunciation, and social invisibility. "The socio-moral code of religion excludes women not only from power structures and social constructs but also from her own body, the idea of a self..." (Chatterjee, 2007, p. 81). This exposes how religion, culture, society, and patriarchy operate to maintain gendered power relations.

Jasbir Jain asserts that the film, through its visual image and fluidity, is a closer approximation of reality (Jain, 2007). *Water* exhibits the reality and interrogates the ideologies that perpetuate suffering. Ancient legal and religious scriptures, such as the *Manu Smriti*, prescribed strict codes of conduct for widows, emphasizing celibacy, self-denial, and *moksha*. The continuation of widowhood exhibits that it is not a private tragedy, but it is socially constructed.

For feminists, widowhood is intersectional, which involves gender, class, religion, caste, and sexuality. As "the auspicious Hindu wife implies taking into account her societal counterpart-the inauspicious and ill-omened Hindu widow" (Chadha, 2007, p. 87), widows signify inauspiciousness and ill omen. Feminists argue that patriarchy perceives widows as threats to social order because they exist outside the traditional institutions like marriage and male guardianship. Therefore, widows are denied autonomy and subjected to symbolic purification rituals that cease their individuality and desire. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Uma Chakravarti have emphasized how women's bodies become sites of social control within religious discourses. They argue that the oppression of widows cannot be understood only through religion; instead, it evolves from the intersection of patriarchy and socio-cultural institutions, which manipulate religious ideology to legitimize inequality.

Water critically examines gender oppression, sexuality, communal violence, and religious orthodoxy. As women are marginalized- socially, sexually, spatially it is the major

concern that surfaces over and over again (Jain, 2007). *Water*, set in 1938, concentrates on the lives of widows living in an ashram in Varanasi, India. The film reveals the exploitative structures embedded within religious customs and shows the sufferings, isolation, and dehumanization imposed on widows.

Existing scholarship on *Water* has basically focused on resistance, gender discrimination, religious orthodoxy, and cinematic representation. “It is the women in the films, who provide insights and nuances of the atrocities of culture/history/society, whether perpetrated by figures or events” (Chatterjee, 2007, p. 83). Several critics have explored how the film critiques Brahmanical patriarchy and exposes the hypocrisy of religious institutions that exploit women under the guise of moral purity. However, critical examination of widowhood as a socio-cultural and religious construct in the film remains an unexplored area. Many studies discuss oppression in general terms without sufficiently examining how social customs, religious ideologies, and practical institutions collectively shape the identity and lives of widows. Thus, this study seeks to bridge this gap by critically scrutinizing how *Water* represents widowhood not simply as an individual condition, but as a socio-culturally constructed system of control.

This study adopts a feminist and socio-cultural approach to investigate the representation of widowhood in *Water*. It explores how religious interpretations and patriarchal traditions reinforce women’s marginalization. By examining characterization, symbolism, dialogues, and cinematic techniques, the study aims to exhibit how Mehta deconstructs dominant narratives surrounding widowhood. The aim of this study is to critically analyze widowhood as a socio-cultural and religious construct in *Water* and to examine how it exposes patriarchal oppression embedded within traditional Indian society.

It explores how widowhood functions as a social construct in *Water*, showcasing methods patriarchal and religious ideologies frame widowhood. *Water* problematizes its naturalization and exposes its ideological substructures through narrative, characterization, and cinematic arrangement. It basically focuses on how water cinematizes the procedure of the construction of widowhood. Thus, the study concentrates on these research questions:

- a. How does *Water* portray the construction of widowhood?
- b. What are the ways of constructing a widow?

Accordingly, the research objectives of this study are:

- a. to find out how *Water* portrays the construction of widowhood
- b. to uncover the ways used to construct widowhood

Review of Literature

In South Asian societies, specifically within India, the representation of widowhood has acquired substantial intellectual attention. Deepa Mehta's *Water* (2005) has ignited an extended academic discourse on the subject of widowhood, patriarchy, and religious orthodoxy. Intellectuals have studied the film from both perspectives as a criticism of institutionalized misogyny and a representation of subaltern (widow) resistance.

Scholars such as Chakravarti (2003) assert that widowhood is not just a personal status, but it is a socio-cultural identity enforced through Brahmanical patriarchy. *Water* functions as a cinematic criticism of deep-rooted gender hierarchies that define widowhood as a condition of permanent social death (Nair, 2007). Similarly, Kumar (1993, p. 122) emphasizes that water “challenges Brahmanical patriarchy by confronting the audience with the brutal realities of widowhood.”

Feminist intellectuals often structure widowhood as a situation of prohibition and regulation. Kumar (1995) stresses that Hindu widowhood in colonial and postcolonial India is framed by an amalgam of religious ideology and socio-economic subordination. Veena Talwar Oldenburg (2002) strengthens this by tracking the colonial institutionalization of widowhood practices, displaying how British legal frameworks both codified and misunderstood indigenous gender roles. This clarifies the structure of the society that regulates widowhood.

According to Shohini Ghosh (2000), the film “subverts the spiritual sanctity associated with widowhood and exposes its political roots in caste and class oppression” (p. 175). Scholars such as Mazumdar (2006) contend that Mehta's aesthetics- water imagery, spatial symbolism, and character placement- construct an affective critique of widow suppression.

Similarly, Mishra (2002) found it to be an instance of diasporic nostalgia and ethical intervention. Ganti (2004) alerts that studying diaspora-centered films as fully authentic, advising that such texts may simplify complex cultural realities for Western consumption. It is true that such films might risk the fabrication of the film in such a way that it can present the broken reality to please the audience.

Gayatri Gopinath (2005) has pinpointed that *Water* solidifies visible “queer traces” in South Asian history, specifically with the help of characters like Kalyani, who resembles both victim and transgressor of the widowhood system. Furthermore, Mohanty (2003) explores the film's intersectional layering of gender, caste, and religion, which criticizes the universalist representation of Third World women. Adhikary (2020) argues that patriarchal Hindu

traditions institutionalize widowhood. Khushi and Johri (2024) examine the adaptation of Bapsi Sidhwa's adaptation of *Water*. They focus on how cultural and religious ideologies reduce widows to symbols of impurity and social burden because of gender discrimination and economic dependency. Joshi (2026) studies the socio-spiritual experiences of widows and the role of Bhakti in coping with grief. It argues that religion functions both as a source of emotional support and as a mechanism of social regulation.

Virdi (2003) places *Water* within a tradition of cinema of resistance, which problematizes patriarchal nationalism. Meanwhile, Chopra (2005) accentuates the socio-political counterattack against the film's production in India, signifying that the narrative's encounter with religious orthodoxy was professed as a threat to traditional authority.

Datta (2000) notices that Mehta's widowed characters are icons of both resistance and resilience; they navigate social constraints while articulating an alternative feminist ethics. Mankekar (1999) also transcribes the significance of spectatorship in framing how widowhood is deciphered by global audiences, cautioning against cultural appropriation.

Shoma Chatterji and Ruchi Jaggi's work focuses on the affective politics of widowhood in *Water*, exhibiting how Mehta's directorial style produces empathy and discomfort simultaneously, thereby compelling audiences to reckon with the continuing relevance of widow marginalization (Chatterji, 1998; Jaggi, 2008). Adhikary (2020) uses a feminist lens to peep into the world of widowhood. Khushi and Johri (2024) focused on how widows are a social burden. Whereas Joshi (2026) studies the socio-spiritual aspect of the film.

The existing literature on *Water* proposes precious insights into widowhood as framed by Brahmanical patriarchy, colonial legacies, and cinematic aesthetics. Most explorations concentrate on widowhood as a site of feminist resistance or diasporic representation. Chakravarti, Ghosh, and Kumar concentrated on feminist criticism of religious and gendered exclusion. Mishra, Ganti, and Mohanty questioned the authenticity and diaspora politics. At last, cinematic analysis emphasizing aesthetics, affect, and global audiences is focused on by Mazumdar, Jaggi, and Mankekar.

However, an all-inclusive questioning of widowhood as a socially constructed identity is one that is persistently negotiated. Across intersecting axes of caste, class, gender, religion, and colonial history, widowhood as a socio-cultural religious construct remains underexplored. Moreover, little attention has been paid to how *Water* mutually constructs widowhood as an ever-changing and contested identity rather than a stagnant classification. A study is essential that spotlights widowhood not just as a feminist or postcolonial concern, but

rather as a constructed and performative social role, shaped and framed by numerous ideological apparatuses and contested from within by the widows themselves.

Thus, this paper fills the gap by proposing a critical study of widowhood as a social, religious, cultural, and traditional construct, examining how *Water* problematizes its naturalization and exposes its ideological substructures through narrative, characterization, and cinematic arrangement. The paper basically focuses on how water portrays the construction of widowhood.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodology based on film analysis and critical theory. The primary text is *Water* by Deepa Mehta. The study is based on textual analysis, concentrating on narrative cinematography, dialogue, characterization, and symbolism. Thematic coding, recognizing repetitive themes such as gendered marginalization, ritual purity, resistance, and reform, is the major concern of the study.

Feminism and social constructivism are employed to interpret the text. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity helps examine how widowhood is ritualized and enacted through external markers, such as shaving heads and wearing a white *saree*. Borrowing ideas from Berger and Luckmann's (1967) theory of social construction, it examines widowhood as a socio-religious construct reproduced by institutional rules. Similarly, drawing the perspective of the subaltern from Spivak (1988), characters such as Chuhiya and Shakuntala Devi can be scrutinized as their voices are mediated and erased by the dominant narratives.

Widowhood as a Socio-cultural and Religious Construct

Water examines widowhood not through the lenses of a strict socio-cultural and religious institution. *Water* is set in the background of 1938, which explores the lives of widows living in an ashram in Varanasi, India. As Deepa Mehta states, "... Water with politics of religion" (qtd. in Chatterjee, 2007, p. 76), the film begins with Sanskrit quotes from the *Laws of Manu* Chapter-5, Verses 156-161, *Dharma Shastras*:

A widow should be long-suffering until death, self-restrained and chaste.

A virtuous wife who remains chaste when her husband has died goes to heaven.

A woman who is unfaithful to her husband is reborn in the womb of a jackal.

(Mahadevan, 2007, p. 171)

In *Water*, Hindu widows of all age groups are portrayed living in extremely oppressive conditions, enduring physical and emotional deprivations" (Gupta, 2007, p. 242). Chuhiya is a girl child, Kalyani is a young lady, Shakuntala Devi is a middle-aged woman, and Madhumati is an old lady.

Ritualization and Performativity

The theory of gender performativity, propounded by Judith Butler (1990), is evident through the exterior indicators of widowhood, such as white sarees, shaved heads, bare feet, and abstention from sweets and jewelry. These markers are not only traditions but also performances that construct and regulate the widow's identity. "Like the sati, ascetic widowhood is also symbolic of continued devotion to the dead husband's memory, and therefore a continuing symbol of martyrdom" (Chadha, 2007, p. 92). Hence, the process of constructing a widow is done on two levels: body and mind.

Constructing the Body of a Widow

As "Femaleness is constructed and the terms of such construction need to be sought in the dominant modes of 'ideology' in a similar manner, widowhood is also constructed (Rajan, 2007). The construction of a widow's body is done at the physical and psychological levels. The film is about the journey of Chuhiya from an eight-year-old child wife to her making and becoming a child widow, and finally fleeing from the widow's ashram.

After the death of Chuhiya's husband, the barber shaves her head ruthlessly. The shaved head, white cotton *saree*, and bare feet all signify not only mourning but her induction into a novel, socially, religiously, and culturally regulated identity. "*Sat*, can be garnered only through the curtailment of worldly/bodily desires, such as those for dress, ornaments, and rich food" (Chadha, 2007, p.93). To attain *Sat*, the activities performed by widows, repeated and ritualized, accentuate how widowhood is maintained and regulated through visual and bodily practices, especially for widows. "It is a self-effacing regime of fasting, purification, and denial of bodily desires additionally loaded with the stigma of being inauspicious" (Chatterjee, 2007, p. 81). *Water* illustrates how body and mind are configured to construct a widow.

Constructing Chuhiya as a widow begins. It begins with breaking of red bangles on her wrists, chopping off of her hair, shaving her hair, draping of a white cotton *saree*, bare feet washing off her *sindoor*, removing off her *bindi*, all signify the brutality performed on the name of rituals "these enforced signs of widowhood- signifying restraint or castration- along with the effacement of color from her garments and taste from her food" (Mukherjee, 2007, p. 219).

As the appearance of all was similar, they look alike, bald shaven head, lean and thin body wrapped in white cotton old saree, as all these bodies were constructed by Hindu patriarchal society, "the body is not only a text of culture. It is ... a practical, direct locus of social control; it is a metaphor of culture" (Bordo, 1989, p. 13). The appearance of any

widow clearly signifies the atrocities she faces after the death of her husband. “The body operates as a metaphor on many levels- as the site/object of violence, as both participant in and victim of resistance, as a figure of sexual politics, as an icon of nature/culture” (Chatterjee, 2007, p. 83). Expressionless face with wide-open eyes as if witnessing their own destruction.

In addition, the Hindu scriptures guide that after the husband’s death, the widow has three options to follow: to become a (*sati*) sit on the pyre with the husband and burn herself to death, marry (*dewar*) the husband’s younger brother, or to lead a life of self-denial. As a *sati*, ascetic widowhood also symbolizes continued devotion to the dead husband’s memory, and therefore a continuous sign of martyrdom. In a Hindu patriarchal society, a woman’s identity is governed by her male relative, such as her father, husband, or son. After the death of the husband, she ceases to exist as a person and passes into a state of ‘social death’ which also signals her ‘sexual death’... As a widow, she is reduced to a void, a zero” (Mukherjee, 2007, p. 219). As she is turned into a zero now, “the question rises about where to place her” (Mukherjee, 2007, p. 219). As Chuhia is a widow, she is useless. She is taken to the ashram and forcefully deposited there because, as Narayan says- one less mouth to feed, four less saris, and a free corner in the house, disguised as religion, it is about money” (Chatterjee, 2007, p. 82).

The ashram was near Ganga *ghat*, where only fourteen widows live who abide by the strict conventional instructions set by the ashram. Mehta explains that “their world” in the ashram “is so harsh that outside it we want it to be as beautiful as it can be. Something that is not accessible to them, yet they are living it to show the irony of their lives” (qtd in Jodha, 2007, p. 49). Madhumati, the matriarch of the ashram, controls all the widows. Shakuntala is a manager. Kalyani earns bread for the ashram through prostitution. All widows sleep on mats on the floor in “most old houses ..., used to be fairly dark inside, but Mehta uses this aspect of realism to symbolize the darkness of widows’ lives” (Parameswaran, 2007, p. 18).

Similarly, the scriptures prohibit widows from eating fried, spicy, nutritious, fatty, and heavy diets. They have only one meal a day. On *Ekadashi*, *Purnima*, *Amavasya*, etc., widows are forced to fast. “The body is not only a text of culture. It is ... a practical, direct locus of social control; it is a metaphor of culture” (Bordo, 1989, p. 13). Their meal consists of one spoon of rice and thin soup on a leaf. This is the reason all widows are lean and thin. “The female body is seen to have a history which is related to its embodiment in different social contexts-... widowhood and victimization in *Water*” (Chatterjee, 2007, p. 83). They seem to be suffering from undernutrition.

Constructing the Psychology of a Widow

Chuhiya's father shakes, calls, and wakes her up, and asks, "Do you remember with whom you were married?" She replies, "No," and he further adds, "He is gifted to the river (he is dead). Now you are a widow." Then she asks, "For how long, father?" As "the female psyche can be studied as the product of the construction of cultural forces" (Showalter, 1982, p. 16), the process of making her a widow begins by breaking the red bangles on her wrists, chopping her long black hair, cutting them, watering the roots of the hair, sharpening the knife and then shaving the head and doing further activities in the light of the blazing pyre of her husband.

Then she is taken to the ashram, which is the institution that helps in building habits and psychology. As her aunt gets into the house, she also goes in, and from the broken compound wall, she looks into the ashram where she sees old widows, which scares her, and she comes back and says, "Baba, let's go home," but the father replies, "now this is your home." She further asks, "then where is mom?" She repeatedly asks the same question, meanwhile, two widows come and grab her and take her in. She keeps shouting, "leave me, leave me." She is deposited in the ashram, and there starts her life as a widow. Shakuntala applies turmeric paste on the shaven head of Chuhiya as she sits in front of her, showing her back. Shakuntala explains to her that the paste will cool her head and cure the wounds from the blade. This implies that widows need to be cool and calm, and for that, they need internal as well as external peace. The wound of the head will be cured by the turmeric paste, and the psychological wound too will start healing with the coolness of mind and the care of elderly widows.

Naming is a tool to construct the identity of the women whose husbands are dead. After the death of the husband, the wife is called *Vidhwa* (widow). The father of Chuhiya says, "Now you are a widow," and in reply Chuhiya asks, "till when Baba?" This shows she is unaware of the name (widow) she is given. Similarly, *Didi* is a commonly used name to call the elder widows in the ashram. *Didi* means elder sister, which shows an emotional bond that helps maintain the affection and respect among all the widows. As Chuhiya is deposited in the ashram, she says, "I don't want to be a widow." Then Madhumati says that she will tie her with a rope, which makes her angry, and she bites her on her foot. Then Madhumati names her Chuhiya. Her teeth, small plump body, biting of the foot, running here and there, etc., all resemble a rat, hence she names her "Chuhiya." Chuhiya, which "means a mouse" (Sengupta, 2007, p. 112). So, the new name she got in the ashram also signifies that she is reduced to the stature of an animal from a human being. Primarily from a girl to a child wife,

then to a widow, and now to an animal a mouse. Not only her, but the other young widow is named “Kalyani” because she “has wealth of beauty and youth which the house sells for survival” (Sengupta, 2007, p. 113).

Similarly, recreational activities are injected to construct the devotional psychology of a widow. Recreational activities, such as chanting Ram (*Jap*) 108 times, teachings (*Pravachan*) of Sadananda (the priest), *Bhajan*, and *Kirtan* help them survive and construct their psychology. They dance in *Bhajan* and *Kirtan* in the nearby temple. They also celebrate Holi, in which Chuhiya becomes Lord Krishna, and other widows become *gopini* who play with color, sing songs, dance, and enjoy the festival. This is the only day they touch colors; otherwise, the whole year their lives are colorless. This is the only time they are seen smiling, laughing, playing, singing, and dancing with joy. The *Bhajan* and *kirtan* are devotional in nature. Its vocabulary, lyrics, rhythm, and music all encourage widows to be devotional, sacrificing, and indifferent to the materialistic worldly affairs.

In addition, Sadananda teaches the scriptures to these widows. Shakuntala frequently visits Sadananda, her “unquestioned acceptance of the *Shastras*, points to a deep-rooted indoctrination that makes her passively obey and endure suffering” (Chadha, 2007, p. 93). The acceptance of the *Shastras* helps these widows keep calm and follow the tradition and become devoted to God. The film asserts that the widows are unable to resist the pain and torture so much so that Kalyani drowns herself in the Ganga, and Shakuntala Devi, “who after having cognized the ambivalence inherent in scriptural writing and interpretation, breaks the limitations of a deep-rooted indoctrination” and hands over Chuhiya to Narayan (Chadha, 2007, p. 88). This shows widows want to escape their fate/lives as a widow. They want to dismantle the construction widowhood.

The film begins with the *Laws of Manu* and ends with:

There are over 34 million widows in India according to the 2001 Census. Many continue to live in conditions of social, economic and cultural deprivation as prescribed 2000 years ago by the Sacred Texts of Manu. (Mahadevan, 2007, p. 171)

The film portrays the condition of widows in 1938 India; the ending reveals the condition of widows in 2001. As the closing text indicates, many widows still live in similar conditions, it can be assessed that the construction of widowhood is not stopped.

Conclusion

It is concluded that *Water* depicts the condition of widows, proposing an instrumental cinematic interference into the socio-cultural and religious construction of widowhood. The combination of cinematic elements, such as symbolism, music, narration, and picturization

prove widowhood is constructed. The critical engagement with socio-cultural, religious, and traditional elements helps *Water* exhibit that widowhood is constructed. It accentuates how widowhood is not a biological inevitability; rather, it is a gendered performative role prescribed by religion, culture, tradition, and social institutions. *Water* clearly depicts that widows are constructed, and the methods used in the process of constructing a widow are based on two levels: body and mind. The structures developed by religious, cultural, traditional, and societal institutions discipline the minds and bodies of widows. Appearance, food, and shelter (ashram) help in constructing a widow's body and naming, chanting of mantras (*Jap*), teachings (*Pravachan*), *bhajan*, and *Kirtan* help construct their psychology. The disciplining of mind and body regulates their actions by numbing their pain, silencing their voices, and detaching them from internal as well as worldly desires. By employing feminist and social constructivist theories, this study confirms that widowhood, as portrayed in *Water*, is a historically situated and culturally reproduced institution. The start and the ending of the film clearly justify that the construction of the widow is not yet ended. Although the study is limited to the construction of widowhood, it will be an insight for researchers interested in studying other institutions, films, and literature dealing with social, cultural, and religious issues.

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