

Female Suicidality and Its Cultural Aspects: Watching the “Living Dead” in Deepa Mehta’s *Water*

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I The Politics of Gendering Death: An Introduction

The general law for widows, that they should observe *brahmacarya*, was, however, hardly ever debated. [...] It is [...] of much greater significance that there was no debate on this nonexceptional fate of widows – either among Hindus or between Hindus and British – than that the *exceptional* prescription of self-immolation was actively contended. Here, the possibility of recovering a (sexually) subaltern subject is once again lost and overdetermined.¹

The problem with studying suicides from a humanities and cultural studies perspective in contemporary India is that there is an evident discomfort in the academic circle with regards to this subject. The researchers, therefore, generally adopt either an entirely psychological approach or a survey-like pragmatic scientificity in dealing with the topic, probably because there is always a preconceived moral stance attached with it, either prohibiting or endorsing. This is why, as an Indian scholar, one has to refer to Western theories and ongoing research such as Mark E. Button’s “Suicide and Social Justice: Toward a Political Approach to Suicide” and Daniel Gordon’s “From Act to Fact: The Transformation of Suicide in Western Thought” (both 2016) in understanding the cultural, political, and social complexities of suicide, although these theories might or might not be appropriate in the Indian context.² The reason for this reliance could be similar to what Maitrayee Chaudhuri identifies in feminist studies as the “existing international academic division of labour which presumes that theorization is the preserve of western concern and expertise.”³

Suicides among *women*, however, have not been in focus even in Western academia. This is partly because statistics generally reveal a huge gender gap in suicide

¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 302–303.

² Mark E. Button, “Suicide and Social Justice: Toward a Political Approach to Suicide,” *Political Research Quarterly* 69.2 (2016): 270–280; Daniel Gordon, “From Act to Fact: The Transformation of Suicide in Western Thought,” *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 42.2 (2016): 32–51.

³ Maitrayee Chaudhuri, “Introduction,” in *Feminism in India*, edited by Maitrayee Chaudhuri (London: Zed Books, 2005), xi.

rates: Men die by suicide almost twice as often as women.⁴ However, women attempt suicide at least three times more frequently than men do.⁵ Now, since men are more tangibly at risk, the risk for women is not given much (or any) attention, as psychologist Silvia Sara Canetto writes: “Because women generally have lower rates of suicide mortality, relative to men, women’s suicidality tends to be viewed as less serious and urgent.”⁶ Another reason why Western theories are used in Indian research on female suicidality is because of “an active lack of interest, an impatience with ‘theory’ in societies such as ours [i.e., Indian] where the sheer urgency of people’s problems demands immediate alleviation.”⁷ Furthermore, since suicide rates in India are generally rather high, theories from the humanities about suicidalities in the broadest sense – that is not just suicide as the attempted and/or achieved ending of one’s life, but the different kinds of self-incurred metaphorical deaths – become absolutely inutile in practical terms.

Outside academia, too, there is a gender bias. A man’s suicide tends to be seen sympathetically – as a tragic response to adversity, a form of mastery, an affirmation of autonomy and rationality in the face of unrelenting adverse circumstances caused by physical, professional, or societal reasons,⁸ or by the negative influence of a female partner.⁹ On the other hand, when it comes to women, suicide typically triggers a (negative) character judgment and is treated as a form of deviance from the subject’s femininity because for a woman, who is so heavily regulated under the burden of dignity, chastity, and her familial and social duties, to make an individual “choice,” even if it is solely about their own death, is seen as the abandonment of her expected feminine roles and responsibilities. Suicide is, in other words, an exercise of “power”: a term which is commonly associated with masculinity.

Therefore, after a woman’s suicide, one might hear statements like: “She did not even care about her children,” “What about her parents?” or “How could she be so selfish?” Now, one might bring forth the instance of *sati* to counter my point,

⁴ “Suicides in India,” Chapter 2 of *Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India 2021*, National Crime Records Bureau of India, n.p., web.

⁵ This fact has been established for more than a century. See Émile Durkheim’s classic 1897 publication *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, edited by George Simpson, translated by John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2005), especially 121 and 263. Compare figures recently published by the World Health Organization (WHO), “Suicide Rate Estimates, Crude – Estimates by Country,” *Global Health Observatory Data Repository*, World Health Organization, 2019, web.

⁶ Silvia Sara Canetto, “Women and Suicidal Behaviour,” in *Oxford Textbook of Suicidology and Suicide Prevention*, edited by Danuta Wasserman, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 333–342.

⁷ Chaudhuri, “Introduction,” xi.

⁸ Silvia Sara Canetto, “Gender and Suicidal Behavior: Theories and Evidence,” in *Review of Suicidology*, edited by Ronald Maris, Morton Silverman, and Silvia Sara Canetto (New York: The Guilford Press, 1997), 145.

⁹ The media narrative on the death of the Bollywood celebrity Sushant Singh Rajput on 14 June 2020 is a recent example of such discourses. See, for example, “Bollywood Killed Sushant Singh Rajput Out Of Jealousy, Sister Meenu Singh in New Social Media Post,” *OutlookIndia*, 11 September 2022, web.

especially as it is close to the focus of the text analysed in this essay: Deepa Mehta's *Water* (2005), a film that follows the lives of widows in a fictional 1930s ashram on the banks of the Ganges. I want to make it clear that, above and beyond the discourses of resistance and power in these rites, self-immolation of widows was rarely a personal "choice" of the woman, and even when it was, it was only to escape the difficult *brahmacarya* – i.e., the life of celibacy and acute self-denial, enforced on widowed women as objects.¹⁰ As Canetto says: "[I]n Hindu tradition, a widow does not have good life-choices; she only has a good-death choice."¹¹ Therefore, it becomes relevant to ask what is meant by "choice" when referring to suicide, and if there is any real "choice" involved at all. Are not most of these suicides resulting from social issues, basically enforced from outside pressures, that is, almost an indirect form of murder, so to say? And, if the death is not physically manifested, there is not even any responsibility or blame to be assigned. This is why, in India, female suicides either remain underreported and misrepresented, or female life itself turns into a long haul of suicidality comparable to what Achille Mbembe calls being "*living dead*."¹²

Mbembe, in his essay "Necropolitics" (2003), uses the examples of contemporary as well as historical political crises in understanding biopower and necropower. He asks how death and suicide enmesh in themselves the potentiality of resistance, sacrifice, redemption, martyrdom, and freedom. While the political topographies of the essay might not be relevant here, I want to hold on to Mbembe's understanding of life in death and death in life. Using Georges Bataille's definition of death, Mbembe explicates how death is an "*excess*," "the most luxurious form of life," and an "*absolute expenditure*," or "expenditure without reserve."¹³ From what we are going to discuss in the next sections of the essay, we will realize how the Indian widows of the 1930s, who were not offered the option of self-immolation, were stripped of life to such an extent of humiliation that they could not even afford this luxury or expense of death. Both life and suicide became unaffordable privileges, so that the widows had to indulge the life of death. This is close to what Mbembe calls "a form of death-in-life" in the context of slavery, where the slave is "kept alive but in a *state of injury*, in a phantom-like world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity," turning the slave's commodified existence into the "perfect figure of a shadow."¹⁴ Widows too, as we will see through Mehta's film, lose the right over their life and death, and in their case, this "form of death-in-life" is living with *brahmacarya*. Mbembe also discusses the logic of martyrdom and survival. The logic of survival lies in the killing of the opponent and in surviving their attack, where in the opponent's death, one feels a higher security regarding one's own chance at

¹⁰ Widows were burned, mostly against their wishes, by greedy male relatives in those parts of the subcontinent that followed the *dāyabhāga* mode of inheritance: that is, where the women, too, had the power to inherit. This point was discussed thoroughly in a private conversation with Professor Saugata Bhaduri from the Centre for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi.

¹¹ Canetto, "Women and Suicidal Behaviour," 333–342.

¹² Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003): 40. Emphasis in the original.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 15. Emphases in the original.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21. Emphasis in the original.

surviving. In the context of the lives of the widows, in their secluded spaces of ashram, with extreme deficiency of food and the basic necessities for survival, they achieve their sense of security by the death of the other widow, their companion as well as opponent. Mbembe's logic of martyrdom focuses on suicide bombers, but what is significant is that the idea of death becomes a source of self-awareness. For widows, who do not have access to death, the expectation to have the awareness of self is impossible. Therefore, their selves are slaughtered at the very moment they are expected to live at the cost of dying. Mbembe explains how death and freedom are intertwined, and that death becomes the mediator of redemption, which in this context reiterates the argument of how these widows are pushed to the limits of being stifled with no hopes of redemption or release. The absolute abduction of agency is a signifier of how death becomes not the ultimate emancipation, but the cruel struggle of everyday life.

In such a case, I propose to view death not as the final moment of living but as a performance, a struggle through which these social outcasts are supposed to live. In this context, suicidality can be taken to mean the submission to death as a spectrum, where the common understanding of death as the physical indicator of the end of life lies only at the extreme end of the scale. No matter how much of a lived reality it is, this manner of existence cannot be rendered in the figures and data of scientific studies on suicide. Hence, I believe that it is only in the humanities, and perhaps particularly within a cultural studies framework that is attuned to the dynamics of representation, ordinary life practices, and power, that a case study on suicidality in the sense offered here could be undertaken and understood through the experience of being human. This essay will foreground my definition of suicidality as an alternative to suicide, and thus as the enigmatic presupposition of what was expected of a widow in 1930s India. For this purpose, I will study Deepa Mehta's film *Water* closely and use its symbolic economies, plot, and cinematography for understanding the possibilities of dying every day, or, in my argument, of suicidality.

II

Theoretical Conceptions of Suicidality

Suicide in the general understanding of the term means a death that has resulted from any immediate, voluntary, physical action. However, Émile Durkheim explains:

The intrinsic nature of the acts so resulting is unimportant. Though suicide is commonly conceived as a positive, violent action involving some muscular energy, it may happen that a purely negative attitude or mere abstention will have the same consequence. Refusal to take food is as suicidal as self-destruction by a dagger or firearm. The subject's act need not even have been directly

antecedent to death for death to be regarded as its effect; the causal relation may be indirect without that changing the nature of the phenomenon.¹⁵

And then he adds:

Whether death is accepted merely as an unfortunate consequence, but inevitable given the purpose, or is actually itself sought and desired, in either case the person renounces existence, and the various methods of doing so can be only varieties of a single class. [...] Of course, in common terms, suicide is pre-eminently the desperate act of one who does not care to live. But actually life is none the less abandoned because one desires it at the moment of renouncing it; and there are common traits clearly essential to all acts by which a living being thus renounces the possession presumably most precious of all. Rather, the diversity of motives capable of actuating these resolves can give rise only to secondary differences. Thus, when resolution entails certain sacrifice of life, scientifically this is suicide.¹⁶

In that case the question is: If the explicit choice of immediate physical death is a privilege, a cry of individuality, and a protest against social structures, can the person (in this instance, a woman) cease to exist? That is, is there a suicide of the “self” without immediately and physically dying? American psychiatrist Karl A. Menninger defines such death as “chronic suicide”:

The individual postpones death indefinitely, at a cost of suffering and impairment of function which is equivalent to a partial suicide a “living death,” it is true, but nevertheless living. In such persons, however, the destructive urge is often of a progressive nature, requiring larger and larger payments until finally the individual is, as it were, bankrupted and must surrender to actual death.¹⁷

The examples that Menninger provides for such slow or rather chronic suicides are those of “martyrdom” and “ascetics,” which I will consider more closely in regard to *Water*.

To continue creating a possible definition of alternative suicidalities, Slavoj Žižek’s tripartite categorization of violence and his use of the Lacanian understanding of suicide can make things clearer for us. In *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2008), Žižek offers three types of violence: subjective, systemic, and symbolic.¹⁸ The subjective is the visible type of violence, in which an identifiable agent – that is, the subject – causes a disruption in the normal and peaceful order of things. For instance, in suicide, the subject, who is easily identified, is also the object of violence. However, Žižek suggests that one should primarily reflect on the other two types, which constitute objective violence: namely, systemic and symbolic violence. Systemic violence is the result of economic and political systems. Symbolic violence occurs when language is employed to create reality or when it is superimposed on

¹⁵ Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, xl.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Karl A. Menninger, *Man Against Himself* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), 88.

¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 59–67.

real acts of violence. Here, Žižek gives the instance of the Jews as an ethnic group on whom attacks are made not on the basis of immediate reality, but on the basis of a symbolic, hateful image traditionally circulated.¹⁹ Thus, while suicide may appear to be a form of subjective violence, an attempt could also be made to observe the simultaneous presence of systemic and symbolic violence.

In *The Fragile Absolute* (2001), Žižek provides three variants of suicide – real, imaginary, and symbolic – that further nuance our perspective. Real suicide is the variant in which, as the Freudian/Lacanian explanation goes, the subject considers itself incomplete and over-identifies with the object of desire. When the object is lost, the void is so consuming that the subject chooses to die. Imaginary suicide is the variant that springs from the subject's wish to send a message of disappointment to its Other(s), expecting a narcissistic satisfaction in the imagination that once the subject is gone, the loss will be regretted. Finally, Žižek sees symbolic suicide as the most fundamental and momentous kind. Here the subject kills its subjectivity by cutting off all the links that anchor it in its symbolic substance, thereby depriving the self of its subject identity.²⁰

III

Water and the Role of the Widow: An Analysis

Deepa Mehta's *Water* follows the story of the eight-year-old child widow Chuiya who is in effect dumped at the widow-house by her parents. We are introduced to the other widows in the house from her perspective. Madhumati, the head of the widow-house, exploits the other widows in order to satisfy her own desires. Shakuntala is the only literate widow in the house and assumes a motherly role for Chuiya. The still youthful Kalyani is forced to sexually gratify the patrons of the house and falls in love with a liberal Western-educated university student, Narayan. Patiraji (referred to as *Bua* or Aunt) has grown old and fragile but still remembers her wedding day because of the rich sweets which had been served there and for which she yearns until they become the reason for her death. Through these characters, we witness the horrifying state of living in the ashram where these widows are deprived of food, clothing, and bedding. Any thought, except for that of God, is forbidden and treated as a digression from being dedicated to God and the sacred memory of the deceased husband.

In the filmic text of *Water* there is only one obvious and visible suicide, that of the character Kalyani Devi (played by Lisa Ray). She did not even meet her husband before his death, and so does not remember when and how she became a widow. However, the cultural ideologization amongst the widows is so deeply rooted that despite being unaware of their sins, they obey the punishment as faithful subjects. Their subjectification is such that, when the widowed child Chuiya (played by Sarala

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute* (London: Verso, 2001), 27–31.

Karyawasam), who has not yet been ideologized, asks about the residence of the “male widows” in an early scene, she is rebuked for her childish imagination by the widows themselves. This shows that the sacrifices made by the widows are only meant for women, while men are supposed to prepare the altar for those sacrifices. Kalyani, too, like a faithful subject, initially tells her upper-caste love interest Narayan (played by John Abraham) that those traditions that are “good should not die out.”²¹ Being a subaltern both in terms of gender and by force of being a widow, Kalyani expects Narayan, in his hegemonic role, to articulate on her behalf, as she puts the responsibility of differentiating between good and bad on him.

This stance is highlighted in a crucial scene. On her way to the Ganga Ghat for a romantic rendezvous with Narayan, Kalyani takes the lamp from the temple, showing her complete trust in and submission to him like those shown to a god with the song in the score literally saying “Meri aas ka tu manmeet” (“You are the friend of my soul’s hopes”).²² But by the time Narayan could act and speak for the subaltern against the dominating force of an upper-caste Hindu male client, who is also his father, it is too late for him to be the “friend of [Kalyani’s] soul’s hopes.” While Kalyani’s suicide is apparently an instance of subjective violence according to Žižek’s model, we realise that it is just the ultimate stage in her objective suicidality. Her chronic suicide had begun at an extremely early stage as a child widow, as she was and is subjected to symbolic violence like all the other widows. For instance, when she mistakenly jostles with another woman on the street during an outing with Chuiya early in the film, she is told, although the encounter is completely harmless, that “widows shouldn’t be running around like unmarried girls. You’ve polluted me! I have to bathe again.”²³ This is due to the symbolic idea of the widow as an embodiment of bad luck.

Kalyani is also subjected to what Žižek identifies as systemic violence because the widow-houses were not sponsored by anyone and to survive (that is to keep breathing, not to live), the most beautiful amongst the younger women had to provide sex to upper-caste men (who are almost invariably also upper-class). These men would propagate their exploitation as benevolence in providing monetary help in exchange for sleeping with the widows, since it was believed that sleeping with Brahmin men blesses women. Narayan even admits towards the end of the movie that, “[d]isguised as religion, it is just about money.”²⁴ In fact, the word he uses is *vyapaar*, which literally means “business,” extending the sexual connotation of the exploitation to the economic. In this connotation, then, the character of Madhumati (played by Manorama), the chief of the widow-house, can be treated as the “boss” figure in a business structure who, despite being a subaltern herself, allies herself with the oppressor for individual benefits. Kalyani finally decides to break the chain

²¹ *Water*, directed by Deepa Mehta (Canada/USA/India: Searchlight Pictures/Mongrel Media/B. R. Films, 2005), 01:04:46. For English-language subtitles, see “Water Subtitles,” *Open Subtitles*, n.d., web.

²² *Water*, 00:59:12. Unless otherwise indicated, all further translations are my own.

²³ *Ibid.*, 00:21:19.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 01:38:24.

of these symbolic and systemic forms of violence and chooses symbolic suicide. As Carl Cederström and Peter Fleming observe in their analysis of capitalist work structures, *Dead Man Working* (2012): “[I]t is not enough for us to kill the boss [...]. Because, ultimately, we *are* the boss [...] To kill ourselves, symbolically, is to kill the boss function.”²⁵ Kalyani wishes to kill the “boss function” by deciding to get remarried, thus killing how she knows herself, that is, as a widow, and starting “anew.”

This hope of renewal is countered by pessimistic foreshadowing. Like the parrot in the cage, whom Chuyia had offered a violent freedom in an earlier scene, Kalyani's dreams and optimism cannot survive. She returns to the widow-house after an inevitable humiliation and Madhumati expects her to reinstate herself in the same sexually exploitative systemic violence. However, this time, instead of killing her own autonomy, she chooses to assert the self within by dying corporeally. This decision is not formulated in words, but rather shown through symbolic action. Before dying, Kalyani removes the white cloth that is bought from the money of the clients, showing her absolute separation from the exploitative economic system (figure 1). The close-up shot of the cloth with the Tulsi neck beads, signifying the life of penance as a widow, with the rippling sound of the water, signifying Kalyani's movement away from the discarded items into the water, shows that this is her final and only way to escape from the long, painful, and continuous life of death, or chronic suicide.

Kalyani's death in *Water*, though it is quite context-specific, can be situated within the larger framework of female suicidalities. Her literal suicide is strikingly close to the emancipating death of Edna Pontellier at the ending of Kate Chopin's novella *The Awakening* (1899).²⁶ Unlike the common belief that the aesthetics of suicide have to be represented as in a rush, in an atmosphere of restlessness and through uneven anxious gestures, in both Kalyani's and Edna's entrance into the water there is a relief as well as a hopeful fecundity of death. Water as the mode of suicide becomes even more relevant in this discussion. Kalyani's death takes place in a notably calm Ganges, and this calmness is emphasized by a serene background score of the flute. In Chopin's novella, Edna's walk to the sea is equally peaceful. She is compared to a child and her exhaustion is emphasized:

How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! how delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known. [...] Her arms and legs were growing tired. [...] Exhaustion was pressing upon and overpowering her.²⁷

²⁵ Carl Cederström and Peter Fleming, *Dead Man Working* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2012), 66.

²⁶ Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (Elibron Classics, 2006). I am very thankful to my fellow discussant Adrian Döring for highlighting the similarity between the characters of Kalyani Devi and Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 120–121.



Figure 1. Kalyani removing the white cloth before her descent into the water. Still image taken from the film *Water* (2005).

In both cases the act of getting rid of one's clothing is significant. Along with the death by water, the film and the novella suggest the reverse birth of a naked, unexploited, innocent baby. According to medical research on the psychodynamics of suicide, "[d]rowning represents not only suffocation, but also rejoining mother, by immersion in what becomes literally a fluid *matrix*."²⁸ Therefore, death by drowning can be understood as a gasp of longing for a new life at the other end of this endeavour as well as a union with the mother figure. The two characters are extremely different in various ways, but their absorption into a larger motherhood or woman-kind strengthens the hope for a transnational, universal feminist world where no woman has to undergo death every day. In fact, Kalyani's walk into the water, being rid of the clothes and all their implicit significance, is also a walk away from a cremating dead body. This suggests that her suicide is to be seen as an act of breaking away from the vicious circle of life, agony, and painful endings.

When the movie begins, there is an epigraph quoted from *Manusmriti (The Laws of Manu)*:

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.

Therefore, the expected behaviour of a widow is a form of asceticism similar to the kind that Menninger talks about in describing chronic suicides. Another relevant example Menninger uses is that of martyrdom, and one can immediately associate this type of death with the rites of *sati*. However, the kind of martyrdom for a widow who is alive is different from that of *sati*, which the historian Upendra Thakur glorifies in *The History of Suicide in India* (1963).²⁹ This distinction takes us directly to what, in the film, the preacher Sadananda (played by Kulbhushan Kharbanda) explains about the life of a widow:

The scriptures say that widows have three options. They can burn with their dead husbands; or lead a life of self-denial; or, if the family permits, marry their husband's younger brother.³⁰

However, these are not strictly all the "options" available to women, but rather the options decided by the cultural lineages of the particular families. Amongst the three, women who are expected to lead a life of self-denial are arguably making particularly painful sacrifices; instead of ceasing to exist at once, they are denying life and destroying the self every day.

In such a case of self-denying chronic suicidality, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's comparison between Mahatma Gandhi's *satyagraha* and *sati* in her influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) is twisted because *sati*, as Spivak says, is a "good

²⁸ Sidney Furst and Micol Ostow, "The Psychodynamics of Suicide," *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 41.2 (1965): 201.

²⁹ Upendra Thakur, *The History of Suicide in India: An Introduction* (Delhi: Munshi Ram Manohar Lal Oriental, 1963), 183.

³⁰ Mehta, *Water*, 00:00:36.

wife, who [...] escapes the regressive stasis of the widow in *brahmacya*,³¹ while Gandhian resistance was a delayed sacrifice through hunger strike and renunciation. Spivak's definitive text, which acts as a gateway for Western academics into Indian theories of the subaltern and *sati*, fixates so much on the "voice," free will, subjectivity, and agency of women in choosing or transgressing the ritual of *sati* that it almost obliterates the existence of the widows who are forced to survive, living as the sanitized, less scandalizing figures of *sati*. In Spivak's essay, the claim that the "root in the first part of satyagraha and *sati* are the same" puts the sacrifice of the widows on a sacred pedestal.³² Therefore, the preacher's reference to Gandhi in Mehta's film points not just to a saviour figure, but also to the prototype of sacrifice. Thus, the *sat* that Spivak mentions as being beyond gender specificity becomes gendered.³³ While Gandhi, being a man, has a choice and is part of the hegemonic force, the widows are choiceless subalterns. In contrast to Gandhi, who was fighting for rightful freedom, the widows portrayed in the film are not even aware of their rights nor do they have a clear sense of freedom. As Spivak mentions, the reference to the *sat* is also important because of its association with the holy symbol of the *swastika*, which means "domestic comfort."³⁴ Interestingly, in the film's first shot of the widow-house the two *swastikas* are drawn in reverse to how Hindus compose the symbol (figure 2), which hints at the desecrated lives of the deprived: the *sat* not as spiritual growth, but as a punishment enforced. Moreover, given the kind of hunger, poverty, and ghettoization the film widows go through, these *swastikas* also remind us of the fascist symbol and its connection to dehumanization and extermination. Therefore, while the *sat* that Gandhi represents is one of self-liberation, the *sat* of the widows, with no remaining self, is one of bare survival. This is why, when Kalyani seeks her self-liberation in love, she is told off by Madhumati: "How we survive here, no one can question, not even God!"³⁵

Similarly, the self of each of the widows has been denied in the movie. Shakuntala (played by Seema Biswas) becomes the central figure to depict the conflict of being a particularly compassionate and the only literate woman in the ashram, caught in a turmoil between being obedient and faithful or questioning the meaning of self-liberation as a human being. She not only becomes the substitute maternal figure for Chuiya, but also rebels for Kalyani's cause. While she never transgresses the boundaries for herself, she actively questions the mistreatment and fate of being a widow. When she is asked if she feels closer to self-liberation, she says: "If self-liberation means detachment from worldly desires, then no, I'm no closer."³⁶ Unlike Kalyani – who, as a young widow, unwittingly commits the grave mistake of jostling with a married woman – Shakuntala is so used to her own defunct soul and its

³¹ Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 302 and 305.

³² Ibid., 302.

³³ Ibid., 100.

³⁴ Ibid., 102.

³⁵ *Water*, 01:15:58.

³⁶ Ibid., 00:41:54.



Figure 2. The holy symbols, *swastikas*, shown inverted on either side of the entrance-door to the widow-house. Still image taken from the film *Water* (2005).

indignation that when the priest instructs her to “Watch it! Don’t let your shadow touch the bride!” she does not even react. As she recedes from the pond in this scene, she eagerly looks at the couple and their wedding rites, while in the background, again, dead bodies are being cremated (figure 3). The composition and cinematic unfolding of the scene show that even in her disowned desires, the only consummation is through erasing the imaginary traces of those desires, much like those burning dead bodies which have no animate aspirations left.

As is shown in the film, exceptionally young girls who had not even reached puberty were often married to elderly men. The result was early widowhood, with the self being mutilated when it had not even developed yet. This raises the question: If the self has not survived with the body, how does one liberate it? Mehta’s film explores this question through the figure of the elderly Patiraji (*Bua/Aunt*, played by Vidula Javalekar). She is introduced as an old, fragile woman with a childish rationality, whose adult identity, having been widowed at the tender age of seven, could not be developed thereafter. She is the only one in the ashram who is thoroughly amused by Chuiya when she runs away after biting Madhumati. Her desires are still stuck in the child-like craving for sweets, when, after the initial introduction, she asks for *laddoo* and confesses how she only ever thinks of it and nothing else, whether awake or asleep. The rich Indian sweet *laddoo*, which is considered a sign of new beginnings, becomes the crux of her deep desires, as it is a forbidden food for the widows. Self-denial, therefore, extends not just to the right to a dignified life, but also the right to pleasure, including food. By finally satisfying the desire of the self with the *laddoo* (figure 4), she reverses the imagination of death from being treated as an end of life to the symbol of an auspicious new beginning, perhaps even a better and more humane afterlife. She also puts in question the symbolic violence inherent in the imagination of desire fulfilment being sinful for the widows. In this process, she goes ahead with symbolic suicide by breaking away from the years of renunciation and choosing pleasure instead. Thereby, she also chooses a literal, but content death. When Shakuntala says to Chuiya “Don’t worry, after eating the *laddoo*, she’ll go to heaven” she not only reinstates the right to pleasure as a human being who also happens to be a widow but also utilizes the symbol of the *laddoo* to define death as a commencement rather than an end. Heaven is the source of hope for those who have spent all their lives in disillusionment.

Chuiya, too, has been uprooted from her family at a young age and wonders if there is any end to her life of death. The movie begins with her rubbing her eyes after sleep, as she asks her father innocently about how long she has to stay a widow.³⁷ By rubbing her eyes, she is shown to enter into the world of horrifying realities; and through her vision, we are introduced to the widows. It is through her perspective that we realise that these women are more dead than their dead husbands because, unlike them, these women are dumped and forgotten. When Madhumati dehumanizes the widows, arguing that they cannot feel pain because

³⁷ Ibid., 00:03:43.



Figure 3. Shakuntala looking at the wedding rites as she walks away, while dead bodies are being cremated behind her. Still image taken from the film *Water* (2005).



Figure 4. Patiraji satisfying her forbidden longing for *laddoo*. Still image taken from the film *Water* (2005).

one half of them dies after the death of their husband, she knows that she is half alive too and completely capable of feeling pain and sorrow.³⁸ At the same time, Chuiya is still unaware that this half-life is what gradually, as a widow, she would be expected to sacrifice by giving up colourful clothes, tasteful food, her already fissured childhood, and even her sexual security. Chuiya keeps hoping to return home even when she knows she cannot,³⁹ and towards the end of the film, after she is sexually abused, we are not sure if the lively, playful Chuiya can ever return to her-*self* anymore. We are left with the unnerving question of whether her life of death as a living widow ever ends, so she can finally leave her trauma and indignation behind.

IV Suicidality and Filmmaking

In *Water* Mehta traces suicidality not only in the narrative, but also in her cinematography through scenes strongly tinted in a blue hue. The technique goes back to early filmmaking. The US-American director D.W. Griffith famously tinted emotionalizing scenes blue in *Birth of a Nation* (1915). In particular, blue was used for scenes in which women and children were endangered. The color coding thereby primed for the emotional response of empathy.⁴⁰ While arguably drawing on this background, Mehta's use and understanding of the color's implications are more complex. For the director, blue means "the step before darkness, [...] gradation towards something that's perhaps looming and inevitable."⁴¹ She could have easily worked with whites and blacks for such a grim theme, but her choice of blue is interesting because it depicts how for women, and in this case widows, there is never really any binary in their existence.⁴² There is always a suspension into a deadly blue gloom, shaded along a continuum from the light and airy to nearly black gloom, and never the liberty or assurance of finality between the blacks and the whites that could have offered a secure contrast.

However, in India, Mehta is more known for the public outrage she draws than for her art. One cannot talk about the shooting and release history of *Water* (2005) without talking about Mehta's previous films *Fire* (1996) and *Earth* (1998).⁴³ *Fire* created a huge scandal because it was apparently the first film featuring mainstream

³⁸ Ibid., 00:09:35.

³⁹ Ibid., 00:55:40.

⁴⁰ See *Birth of a Nation*, directed by D. W. (David Wark) Griffith (United States: David W. Griffith Co. / Epoch, 1915), 00:46:44.

⁴¹ "Deepa Mehta Opens up about Her Work and Shares the Best Advice," *CBC Arts on YouTube*, 13 September 2017, web.

⁴² This can be contrasted with the black-and-white colour palette in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), which suggests stark differences between the victim and the victimizer with red highlighting the possibilities of human warmth and connection.

⁴³ *Fire*, directed by Deepa Mehta (Canada/India: Deepa Mehta Productions, 1996); *Earth*, directed by Deepa Mehta (Canada/India: Deepa Mehta Productions, 1998).

Indian actors that depicted a lesbian bond between two characters who were in addition also named after two revered Indian goddesses, Sita and Radha.⁴⁴ Right-wing groups violently protested the film, claiming that homosexuality is a Western concept and that there are no lesbians in India. They further demanded that even if such a film is shown for the sake of awareness, the characters should be renamed as Shabana and Sayra. That is: They should be given Muslim names.⁴⁵ *Fire* was believed to be an attack on Hinduism and on an Indian cultural heritage which the commentators believed to be exclusively constituted by Hinduism. Despite the riots, however, the film was released and did fairly well in the box office, grossing \$8,172,058 worldwide.⁴⁶

In *Earth* Mehta then tried to show the plight of Hindus and Muslims amidst the chaos of Partition in 1947. She strategically won over Hindu sentiments by depicting the ultimate villain in the movie as a Muslim (the character of Dil Nawaz, played by Aamir Khan) who victimises a Hindu woman (the character of Shanta, played by Nandita Das). Probably, this turn to a conventional black-and-white kind of storytelling was a key reason why the film was chosen as the official Indian nomination for the Academy Awards in 1999. By this time, Mehta was aware that she was on the national radar because of the controversies surrounding *Fire*; so much so that she confessed in an interview: “In this climate right now, it would have been disastrous, you know, if I was Muslim, I would have been lynched by now.”⁴⁷ Despite being aware of the risks in triggering majoritarian sensibilities, she attempted to shoot *Water* in 2000. This was not only a likely career suicide, but actually a life-threatening, literally self-destructive, decision. Right-wing mobs destroyed the film set in the northern Indian city of Kashi (officially, Varanasi) on the second day of the shoot and threatened to lynch the actors and the director. They claimed that the movie was a Western conspiracy against Hinduism and the integrity of widowhood in India.⁴⁸ Most strikingly, given the focus of the film, they threatened to hold suicide protests. The government did not help the artists much, in spite of Mehta’s Academy Award nomination. Finally, after a long legal struggle, Mehta was asked to drop the project and leave the country because of the risks to her life and to the lives of the film cast.

Despite this appalling display of personal humiliation, Mehta did not drop the project. In 2003 she returned to shoot the film in Sri Lanka under the pretended title “River Moon.”⁴⁹ Because of the violence and stigmatization the entire crew had experienced before, she also signed new actors. The film was finally received with great enthusiasm all over the world. It was nominated for the Oscars and won

⁴⁴ Sita, the wife of Rama, and Radha, the lover of Krishna, are Hindu mythological characters, but they are often revered and worshipped as goddesses.

⁴⁵ “Fire by Deepa Mehta | Documentary | Behind the Scenes,” *Steria* on YouTube, 30 October 2020, web, 14:48.

⁴⁶ “Water 2006 Re-Release,” *Box Office Mojo*, 2016, web.

⁴⁷ “Fire by Deepa Mehta | Documentary | Behind the Scenes,” 15:52.

⁴⁸ “‘Water’ Shooting Stopped Again, Mehta Asked to Leave Varanasi,” *The Hindu*, via *Archive.ph*, 7 February 2000, web.

⁴⁹ “Water (2005 Film),” *Wikipedia*, 28 November 2021, web.

awards at the Bangkok International Film Festival, the Oslo Films from the South Festival, and from the Vancouver Film Critics Circle. In India, however, the film remains banned to the present day.⁵⁰

The transnational, national, and nationalist dimensions of the making of *Water* are important. Mehta continues to face boycotts in India, and it is curious how during the controversies surrounding *Fire* she was seen as the evil Western woman, while during the promotion for *Earth* she apparently represented India. However, ever since *Water* she has been seen as the Western, desecrating element again. Despite being born and brought up in India, Mehta has had to use her Canadian citizenship for sheer survival throughout her career. As she has often said in interviews, when the shooting for *Water* was halted and she was receiving death threats coming back to Canada was a huge relief.⁵¹ In spite of its Indian topic, the film was sent to the 2007 Academy Awards as a Canadian entry for best foreign film. These developments might be taken to suggest the flexibility and even the relative unimportance of national categories. However, the violence directed at Mehta, and particularly the gendered dimensions of that violence, suggests something quite different: the power of the national and the perils of a hyper-nationalism so deeply enmeshed with hyper-masculinity that any woman's rising to the hegemony in order to articulate for the subaltern is responded to with violence.

This reaction is a continuation of the history of conflating the image of a chaste and self-sacrificing woman with that of the nation. In fact, in the violent protests against both *Fire* and *Water* in India, some women were taking the lead because of Hindutva politics offering "individual women real space in the public realm, a degree of empowerment and a new sense of self-confidence."⁵² However, one must observe "its uncompromising orthodox compulsions as well as its decidedly fundamentalist tendencies," as Chaudhuri observes:

An inalienable gap exists between the spaces that it [i.e., Hindutva] affords to some middle-class women and the overall thrust of the Hindu right's offensive against the basic premises of liberal rights and thereby of modern secularism. It is no surprise, therefore, that these women do not join contemporary women's agitations for gender rights and justice [but rather those against it].⁵³

The result, therefore, is that the important discourses around the struggles of womanhood are lost, reduced to scandals, and remain unacknowledged within the politics of choosing which narratives are supposed to be validated.

⁵⁰ "Water," *IMDb*, 2014, web.

⁵¹ "Deepa Mehta Opens up about Her Work and Shares the Best Advice," *CBC Arts on YouTube*, 13 September 2017, web.

⁵² Chaudhuri, "Introduction," xxiv.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

V Questions for the Future

As a conclusion, I can only offer a rather bleak statement, which is necessary in assessing reality. The kind of suicidality we witness in *Water*, though focusing on Indian widows, is not exclusive to India, or to widows, for that matter. There are instances of similar chronic suicides where death is never even a choice, especially when considering the incessant silencing and marginalization of women across the world. In these circumstances, some questions are worth contemplating: What are the roles of the spectators – national, international, or transnational – as an audience and as political citizens in the articulation of the issues of the subaltern? How does the “personal” tragedy of a woman’s suicide become “political,” and is the “local” subjective violence of suicidality linked directly to “global” objective violence? Finally, how does the sheer ignorance within Indian and Western academic and political elites, towards such unacknowledged sacrifices take away the universal characteristic of solidarity that feminism claims? This research is still developing, and so I am not able to answer my questions. Nonetheless, it is to be hoped that through the continued critical work in cultural studies and the humanities one will soon be able to delve deeper into the aesthetic counterparts of being the living-dead, and probably even offer new perspectives on these issues.