

Questioning Brahmanical Hegemony Towards Women: A Focus on Contemporary Indian Drama Films

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Abstract

Many regional writers have highlighted the Brahmin way of life, particularly the orthodoxies and patriarchal oppression practiced on women among the upper caste Brahmins in India. The present article focuses on contemporary Indian cinemas that present patriarchal Hindu attitudes to women and sexuality as in need of reform. Selected films have met with hostility from Hindu conservatives and have also been accused of Orientalist misrepresentations. While these objections highlight the contested nature of “authentic” Hindu identity remain powerful indictments of patriarchal hegemony in Hinduism. This paper seeks to explore how power is operated in Brahmanical patriarchy. Generally, Brahmanical patriarchy uses power to subjugate women as passive victims of patriarchal oppression and in the case of men they use power for male domination. For this study, I have selected two – Mohan Sharma’s 1912 Malayalam drama film Gramam, Deepa Mehta’s 2005 Hindi/ English movie Water which explores the plight of a young woman in a patriarchal Hindu family in the nineteenth century. This paper analyzes the hypocrisy and two-facedness of Brahmins in executing their power. These films question the Brahmanical roots and the customs and rituals associated with it. He also hits at the caste and religious codes, traditional and cultural values.

Keywords: *Hegemony, Brahmanical patriarchy, Male domination, Female subjugation*



Introduction

Literature and film can vividly portray individual and collective memory its contents, its workings, its fragility and its distortions by coding it into aesthetic forms, such as narrative structures, symbols, and metaphors. Fictional versions of memory are characterized by their dynamic relationship to memory concepts of other symbol systems, such as psychology, religion, history, and sociology: they are shaped by them and shape them in turn; they may perpetuate old or anticipate new images of remembering and forgetting. Hindu themes are common in films from and about India; however, the attitude to Hinduism expressed in these films varies. On the one hand, there are numerous examples of films that seek to affirm what are perceived to be traditional Hindu values; they typically contain little critique. For instance, there is a long history of Indian devotional and mythological films that have little place for challenges to Hindu norms. The gods are venerated, the class and family structure is maintained, and the authority of tradition is not usually questioned. In addition, recent Hindu nationalists have been adept at making use of film and other audio-visual media to promulgate their often-conservative view of Indian cultural and religious identity. On the other hand, there are important examples of films that challenge aspects of Hinduism in a revisionist spirit. For this study, I have selected two movies- Mohan Sharma's 1912 Malayalam drama film Gramam, Deepa Mehta's 2005 Hindi/ English movie Water, which explores the plight of a young woman in a patriarchal Hindu family in the nineteenth century.

Gramam articulates the story of a young girl named Thulasi, who is married to

Rajamani at the age of nine and the boy dies due to snake bite resulting in her widowhood two months after her marriage. She entered widowhood even before she attained maturity. By describing the orthodoxies like the observance of *madi* purity and the Brahmanical conceptualizations of widowhood through various repressive customs and rituals of the nineteenth century, Gramam points out the harshness of tradition and also shows spinelessness of the Brahmanical patriarchy to question the right or wrong of their legacy that was handed down to them over centuries. It can be seen that widowhood is the one phase in which Brahmanical patriarchy uses its power to subjugate the widowed women. After becoming a widow, Thulasi turns out to be the point of focus of the entire community. Through Gramam, Mohan Sharma has explored and mapped the complex transformation of a young girl to that of an unfortunate widow. Here patriarchy marks, categorizes, and trains widowed women in accordance with its ideological formulations. Why widowhood is an odious situation in Brahmanical patriarchy is well exemplified in Gramam.

Sharma points out that in the nineteenth century the decisions regarding the social and religious matters were taken by the Swami in the temple at Sringeri. The same situation we can see in the Indira's novel *Phaniyamma*. As per the rule, they should follow the instructions of Swami or else they will have to face the dreadful punishment of excommunication. Indira writes:

Since the girl is still a child, remove the signs of marriage on the eleventh day and have her wear a white sari. Don't touch her hair. She shouldn't show her face to anyone until she menstruates. Nor can she perform any *madi* task. The fourth day after she menstruates, her hair must be shaved off and she must be made to take up *madi* for the rest of her life. (*Phaniyamma* 46)

Gramam explains how patriarchy insists or imposes some rigid rules and orthodox customs on the hapless young widow to make her unattractive. On the eleventh day, the old men and women of the village mercilessly broke the bangles of the nine-year-old girl. They wiped off her turmeric and kumkum and tore off her mangalasutra. Apart from all these, they imposed restrictions like dietary control and other similar restrictions to curb the sexuality of a widow. As Chakravarti puts it, in her article, Ideological and Material Structure of widowhood a widow has to give up all forms of adornment like the use of kumkuma, the red mark on the forehead, the sindoor applied in the parting of the hair and the use of haldi (turmeric) because these items are associated with sexuality and reproduction.

Apart from the above mentioned markers of widowhood, the two other important symbols are also used to indicate the status of widowhood that are the white, ochre and maroon coarse sari, and the tonsured head among the higher castes Hindus in the southern and western India. The *Vridhha Harita*, a text written roughly between A.D.600 and A.D. 900, XI.205-10 states about the appearance of a widow after the death of her husband, "The widow should give up chewing betel nut, wearing perfumes,

flowers, ornaments, and dyed clothes, taking food from vessels of bronze, taking two meals a day, applying collyrium to the eyes; she should wear only white garments, curb her senses and anger, and sleep on the ground” (Shadow Lives 38). Thulasi’s menstruation can be seen as a point of entry to her inevitable fate of widowhood, after four years of her widowed life. As part of these elaborate ceremony of making or marking a woman as widow, she has undergone the last auspicious rite, the ritual of tonsure in her life.

Through this Gramam explores how the body of the widow has been considered as a site to conduct all forms of atrocities by the deeply entrenched system of Brahmanical patriarchy. However, through various mechanisms of repression, patriarchy asserts its authority over females. Here the ritual of tonsure can be seen as an attempt to annihilate and deprive both the social and psychological self of a widow. Widows have been treated as mere subjects in the hands of the cruel system. Using its power, the patriarchal discourses make the life of widow a miserable one. After the ritual of tonsure,

No fasts and pujas and ceremonies for her now, unlike the other girls. She realized that until she died she would have to eat one meal a day and live with a shaven head. But what could she do? This happened to every woman whose husband died. No one had wronged her. If there was any mistake, they would be excommunicated by the temple at Sringeri. Here Thulasi meekly accepts the general conduct set by the patriarchy to be followed by widows after the death of their husbands.

In order to examine the possible implications associated with the notion of ‘power’, one should analyze the theorizations of power in the writings of Michel Foucault, the French philosopher, who observes that power is not only the one which works vis-à-vis repression or inhibition, or male domination but as the one which works through institutionalized discourses which include action, knowledge and being. Hence the exercise of power is possible through the control of individuals as mere subjects (Brooker 206). Similarly, Uma Chakravarti suggests that power is operated in Brahmanical patriarchy in three ways and the structure of Brahmanical patriarchy is deeply embedded in the conception of women’s general subordination and men’s domination. By creating an ideology and entrusting the power to discipline and punish the erroneous women by the kinsmen and the king, Brahmanical patriarchy confines people in its debilitating power structure. At the ideological level, Brahmanical patriarchy internalizes the notion of pativrata which is the creation of Brahmanical patriarchy to ensure the chastity of their women and thereby it thrusts and naturalizes the duty to safeguard ones purity in women (Chakravarti, Gendering caste 73). Thus, Brahmanical patriarchy has been keeping its power packed institutionalized form till now.

The focal attention of Brahmanical patriarchy lies in women’s sexuality and it considers women as “mere receptacles and transmitters, never the carriers” of their

vansa line (Chakravarti, Gendering caste 32). They are always in fear of the lower caste men's sexuality to avoid the dreadful mixing of castes. Hence the upper caste women are under the constant surveillance of the patriarchy and thereby they ensure the purity of their vansa line. According to the Brahmanical prescriptive texts, woman has no social existence apart from her husband. In the case of a widow, Brahmanical patriarchy considers her as a person who is physically alive and socially dead (Chakravarti, ideological 64). Hence, she is doubly controlled by the Brahmanical patriarchy. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977) while analyzing the power relations attributed on the body, Foucault points out that, such deeply embedded power relations are not only related to the biological aspect of the body but also historical and it "subjects to power relations which restrain it, invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it, to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (Barry 86). In a similar vein, Kumkum Sangari in the *Politics of the Possible* remarks that "patriarchies, function simultaneously through coercion or threat and practice of violence, through making a wide social consensus drawn from and dispersed over many areas of social life and through obtaining in various ways, different degrees of consent from women". (Sangari 371)

The movie discloses the double standards of Brahmanical patriarchy. She mocks at the *madi* purity and touching taboo of Brahmanical patriarchy and wonders at the uncomprehending rules of patriarchy. She broods over the pathetic plight of widowhood and thinks that, when her own blood flowed every month, a woman was defiled. She had to sit outside the house for three days. On the fourth day, she was purified, and could then become *madi*. Many women in Thulasi's family continued to menstruate after the fourth day, but they were still considered *madi*. The widows who were touched by the barber were still *madi*. But those widows who had full heads of hair were considered absolutely impure even though they had never been touched by a man. Hundreds of questions about these things plagued Thulasi.

At the ideological level, the motive behind elevating the discourse of purity by religious patriarchy is to control widow's sexuality and identity. Referring Nur Yalman, an anthropologist, Uma Chakravarti states that a fundamental principle of Hindu social organization is to construct a closed structure to preserve land, women, and ritual quality within it. These three are structurally linked and it is important to control the female sexuality to maintain its structure. Without closely guarding the sexuality of women who form the pivot of the entire structure, the purity of neither caste nor the land or ritual quality can be maintained (Gendering caste 66). Similarly, Thulasi also questions the idol of *pativrata* in Hindu mythology. The notion of *pativrata* is a symbol in Hindu religion. For instance, once Thulasi witnessed an illicit relationship of Rao Bahadur Mani Swami, a married man and Thankam, who was abandoned by her husband. This made Thulasi to think about the anomalies in the existing traditions and beliefs of Hinduism and the hollowness of the grand notion *pativrata*. Through Gramam mocks at the celebrated Hindu mythology and its discursive traditions. Thulasi had never understood what *pativrata* meant, even when she heard the tales of good house

wives from the Puranas and fables. Kunju Ammaal had been beheaded for looking at the reflection of the sanyasi who sat on the opposite bank of the river. She was turned to stone for sleeping with a god who came to her in the guise of her husband. But men who slept with a hundred women were still pure as fire. (*Phaniyamma* 93-94) Describing the characters like Mani Swami, Panikkar Jolsyan and Thankam, Amminiyanamma discloses the hypocrisy of people who act overtly as they are obeying and accepting religious notions in their life, but covertly they act against it. Chintamani's daughter Nalini had no children in six years of her married life. So, her husband sent her back to her natal family. After several years she has been living as a pativrata. Through Phaniyamma Indira questions the foundations of Hinduism like puranas and its teachings, the deceitful notions of purity where men can have various illicit relationships but a woman's illicit relationship is punishable.

Thulasi also points out a character Ambi Swami who is a Brahmin and a man who has no control over his sexual impulses. He lies with untouchable women at night and changes his sacred thread in the morning. If someone enquired about it, he would explain the matter as he had stepped on a piece of old cloth. Considering it might have been an untouchable's or a menstruating woman's, he bathed and changed his thread. Through this, Thulasi reveals the hypocrisy of the Brahmin men. Gramam hits at the foundations of Brahmanical patriarchy with her arrows of questions. Thulasi thinks, "What peculiar customs we have", If a man touches an outcaste woman, all he needs to do is to bathe and change his sacred thread, and he's pure again. If a woman even looks at another man, she's a whore. O Lord, why do you play with us like this? The left hand which washes the buttocks is used to ring the bell during your prayers. When we pray, we must join both palms to you. For every task, we need the left hand. And we're not allowed to begin any auspicious ceremony with it! How many blind traditions we have! Like the banyan tree father planted that everyone hanged himself from. No one ever thinks of changing anything.

Thulasi had recognized the hollowness of religion. Through the incidents of Bhargavi and Mani Swami's, she questions the significance of the idealized concepts of pativrata and sacred thread, and the do's and don'ts of the system in Brahmanical Patriarchy. Uma Chakravarti states that the pativrata concept is the most successful ideologies created by the Brahmanical patriarchy. Through this, women control women's sexuality themselves and believe in gaining power and respect through such observance. She also asserts that pativrata is the ideological 'purdah' of the Hindu woman like chastity and wifely fidelity as the means to get salvation (*Gendering Caste* 74). Thulasi questions and challenges the hypocrisy of the Brahmin men and the continuous perpetuation of traditions. She shows that they frame separate rules for men and women. Similarly, they force widow to take madi and when she became pregnant she would be excommunicated and forced her to work in the entire village and not only that her children would belong to the caste of the untouchables.

Water is set in the sacred Hindu city of Varanasi in the 1930s and examines the

plight of a community of socially ostracized widows. Their lives are governed by many social and behavioral restrictions such as the taboos against remarriage and physical contact with high-caste Hindus. The film tells the story of eight-year old Kalyani, who has been married and then widowed while still a child; she is then forced by her family to live in a widows' ashram, where the bereaved women live a life of asceticism as their duty (*dharma*) to their deceased husbands. There she befriends the beautiful young widow, Kalyani, who has been forced into prostitution, a fate which has not been unusual for economically vulnerable women in widows' ashrams. Lekshmiamma, the elderly matron of the widow's ashram, organizes liaisons between Kalyani and clients in order to provide funds for the household. Kalyani is permitted to retain her long hair in order to be more appealing to customers; by contrast, the other widows are required to shave their hair as a symbol of renunciation. The film also contains a tragic love story. Kalyani meets Narayana, who is a reformist, liberal Brahmin and follower of Gandhi. They fall in love and he seeks to marry her. This union between a high-caste Brahmin and a socially impure widow is anathema to conservative Hindu opinion as well as threatening the ashram's income. Narayana's mother is shocked when he informs her of his intentions to marry a widow. And Madhumati angrily seeks to prevent the marriage by imprisoning Kalyani in her room and cutting off all her hair to make her less attractive.

However, Kalyani manages to escape with the help of Shakuntala, another widow from the ashram who has a growing consciousness of the injustice of their situation. Narayana discovers that his father is one of Kalyani's clients and his father justifies his exploitation of women on the grounds of caste privilege. His father says to him that "Brahmins can sleep with whomever they want, and the women with whom they sleep are blessed." Narayana's consequent rejection of his father is a radical act in traditional Indian society in which fathers should be the recipients of utmost respect. Meanwhile Kalyani is overcome by shame and despair, and drowns herself in the waters of the Ganges before Narayana can save her. Chuyia is sexually abused when forced into child prostitution by Madhumati who is desperate to find a new source of income for the ashram. Despite all of this tragedy, the film ends on a hopeful note; Chuyia is rescued by Shakuntala and then taken away from Varanasi by Narayana on a train carrying Gandhi and his supporters.

Mehta's principal message is that, although the film is set in the 1930s, the mistreatment of widows in India is an issue of pressing contemporary concern. She closes the film with the claim that "there are thirty-four 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*," the ancient Hindu law book (*dharmashastra*). The difficulties of many widows continue despite the Hindu reformers' vision of a better future. *Water* is a continuation of this Hindu reformist tradition which, since the 19th century, has sought the social uplift of widows by, for example, allowing them to remarry. The promise of reform is presented through the image of Chuyia's potentially happier future; this is what could occur for

widows if Indian society changed in accordance with Gandhi's teaching.

Mehta's film makes it clear from the outset that the male Hindu hegemony seeks to rationalize the mistreatment of widows by appealing to the authority of Hindu scriptures; the film opens with a translation from *The Laws of Manu* which gives unambiguous instructions about the *dharma* of a wife whose husband has died:

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.

It might be objected that Mehta overemphasizes the significance of the *Laws of Manu*; it is questionable how closely the ethical and legal rules and regulations of this text corresponded to social practices at the time of its composition, let alone now. Ancient sacred texts produced by the Brahminical elite are arguably idealized prescriptions rather than entirely reflective of lived reality. Moreover, the *Laws of Manu* contain some exhortations to honor and respect women. Nevertheless, Mehta thinks that the text is expressive of a negative attitude towards women, and widows in particular, that persists in contemporary India. Her view is supported by William Dalrymple's evocative account of the harsh conditions in the widows' ashrams in the town of Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh, which he refers to as "The City of Widows."

Like many Hindu reformers, Mehta depicts the hypocrisy of the Hindu priestly class; Brahmins are supposedly concerned with preserving their purity, and yet they use their high social status to justify the exploitation of vulnerable women and children. Furthermore, the film's title and setting allude to the water of the Ganges river which flows through Varanasi. Here the Ganges is a symbol of the Hindu conservatism which seeks to justify the low social status and mistreatment of widows. Thus, it is fitting that Kalyani, oppressed by the weight of traditional beliefs and values, meets her end by drowning herself in the waters of the sacred river.

Contrary to the picture that emerges in Mehta's film, there is evidence that widows in ashrams renounce the domestic life voluntarily and are not always forced into their situation; they sometimes contend that their ascetic life is a choice motivated by religious devotion rather than economic pressures or an oppressive patriarchy. According to Malini Bhattacharya, the widows' claim that faith is their primary motivation "is not just a veneer, but a deeply internalized attitude." However, it might be countered that this demonstrates that the influence of patriarchal conditioning runs so deep that it affects women's own belief structures; their faith is itself a product of the social environment that they inhabit.

Critics sensitive to the issue of Orientalism are perhaps right to accuse Mehta of setting *Water* in late colonial times and yet neglecting the manner in which the image of the victimized and vulnerable Indian woman was manipulated to rationalize Western

imperialism. The oppression suffered by Indian women was used to justify British political and economic dominance of the subcontinent and yet this historical reality is absent from the film. In addition, they argue that Mehta's film perpetuates stereotypes of Indian female passivity by representing the widows largely as victims who require Westernized, educated male heroes, Narayana and Gandhi, to save them from the evils of Hindu culture. However, Mehta's female characters are not entirely passive; Shakuntala begins to question the way that widows are treated and takes action to save Chuyia from the fate of prostitution, Chuyia herself exhibits signs of rebelliousness against the tyranny of Madhumati, and Madhumati's manipulative and self-serving behavior as a madam is itself her way of asserting her agency within severe social constraints.

Water was the focus of well-publicized protests launched against it by Hindu nationalists. Mehta initially tried to shoot the film in 2000 in Varanasi. A group of about 500 people tore down and burnt parts of the set at Tulsi Ghat in Varanasi. They saw the film as contaminating the sacred city and as an insult to Hindu culture including the institution of widows' ashrams. Although the central government had cleared her film with a few changes, the regional government of Uttar Pradesh denied her use of Varanasi as a setting for her film. Mehta was forced to abandon the shoot and eventually relocated the set to Sri Lanka.

It is evident that *Water* caused such outrage because of the power and influence of Hindu nationalist political and cultural groups in contemporary India. The Hindu nationalist or Hindutva (Hinduness) ideology was forged by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in the 1920s but came to political prominence in the 1980s. Although the Hindutva movement is quite diverse and incorporates many different groups with their own agendas, it tends to equate Indian cultural and political identity with Hinduism thereby marginalizing or excluding minority groups. Hindu nationalists also see the introduction of Western values as a form of colonialism and as having a corrosive influence on Indian society. It was members of an organization associated with the Hindutva movement that led the protests against *Water* because the film was considered to be a disrespectful and offensive attack on Hindu culture and religion.

The play of power is evident in these two novels. On one hand, Brahmanical patriarchy uses power to subjugate women and widows. On the other they use power for domination and also to suppress others. Both ways they use power negatively. It can be seen that these two writers have taken a step to annihilate the power structures of Brahmanical patriarchy by vehemently criticizing and disclosing its hypocrisy. But patriarchy still continues its power through various mechanisms and thereby controls and maintains the caste hierarchy and its supreme position in that hierarchy. However, without realizing this hidden agenda of Brahmanical patriarchy, other sections of the Hindu society are adopting their practices especially their marriage practice of endogamy and also the upper caste norms of female virtue. Hence, as Uma Chakravarti states, they reproduce 'the bio-genetic map of inequality' (Chakravarti, Gendering

Caste 36).

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