



ISSN Print: 2394-7500  
ISSN Online: 2394-5869  
Impact Factor: 8.4  
IJAR 2023; 9(7): 26-28  
[www.allresearchjournal.com](http://www.allresearchjournal.com)  
Received: 21-04-2023  
Accepted: 26-06-2023

**Jagdish Kaur**  
Research Scholar, Department  
of English, Desh Bhagat  
University, Fatehgarh Sahib,  
Punjab, India

**Dr. Renu Shama**  
Assistant Professor,  
Department of English, Desh  
Bhagat University, Fatehgarh  
Sahib, Punjab, India

## Demystifying water: How religion, caste and gender play their role in the lives of widowed women

**Jagdish Kaur and Dr. Renu Shama**

### Abstract

This research paper aims to shed light on the complex interplay of religion, caste, and gender in the lives of widowed women, with a specific focus on their relationship with water. Water, a vital resource for survival, holds cultural and religious significance in many societies. In certain regions and religious contexts, widowed women face unique challenges and restrictions related to accessing water and participating in water-related rituals. Through an exploration of diverse cultural and socio-religious perspectives, this paper seeks to demystify the relationship between widowed women and water, examining how religious beliefs, caste-based discrimination and gender norms influence their access to and engagement with water resources. The researcher found that water comments on the symbolism of Ganga, how it can purify and can take away life. How the widows accustomed to taking baths in it every morning and evening and how a widow like Kalyani falls into the absurd tradition of purity and took her own life by drowning herself in Ganga. How it is the holy river, a place where all sins are washed away, a site for purification but it is also the passage to the upper caste homes where young women like Kalyani and Chuhia are prostituted. Apart from that, this movie had to suffer a huge amount of hostility from conservative right-wing organizations. For them, this movie was portraying negative light on their religion and tradition. They organized protests and attacks on cinema which eventually led to the change in location of the shoot. The movie was shot in Sri Lanka. The reason I am mentioning this point is that still after so many years nothing has changed. The idea of following the religion is not wrong but when it denies the essential human rights of an individual is where the matter is. Maybe these practices are not as upfront as it was before but it is still there and the consequences of it are still equally brutal.

**Keywords:** Water, women, suffering

### Introduction

Religion has always been an important identity marker since primordial time. The world has witnessed many historical events such as India's first war of Independence, Attack on 9/11, Charlie Hebdo shooting and Attack on Taj on 26/11 etcetera; in these entire events, one thing that was the central point was religion. Here I will explore the representation of identities and their interaction with religion and gender-based on the narrative of Indian society. Our society's attitude has been developed around patriarchal interpretations of religious belief that has shaped the social and cultural context of our values. Men have been dominant in understanding and conveying the rules and customs of our religion while women have largely been passive receivers. Many books, articles, movies have represented this hierarchical and biased set up of society. In this paper, I will try to explore and analyze the movie 'Water' by 'Deepa Mehta' that represent the conservative nature of Hinduism and its reflection on women especially widows who are expected to live their lives in poverty and chastity but deep down it's nothing but sad, oppressive and inhumane lives that they endure. The film is set in 1938 in Benaras when India is still under the British Empire. Gandhi is campaigning to drive the British out of the country through non-violence and establish an Independent India.

**Objectives of the study:** The research objectives of this study are as under:

1. To examine the religious beliefs and practices that influence the lives of widowed women in relation to water, considering their roles and responsibilities within different religious communities.

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Dr. Renu Shama**  
Assistant Professor,  
Department of English, Desh  
Bhagat University, Fatehgarh  
Sahib, Punjab, India

2. To investigate the impact of caste on access to water for widowed women and understand how caste-based discrimination affects their water-related experiences.
3. To explore the gender dynamics and power structures within the context of water usage, management, and control and how these affect widowed women's access to water resources.

### Rationale of the study

The movie starts with a young girl, Chuhiya who is probably 8 years old, riding a carriage where she is happily eating her sugar cane. There are other people in the carriage, who are taking a sick man in an unknown destination. After a while her father wakes her up from her sleep saying, the man that she was married to, is no more and now she is a widow. It is from this scene we got to know that the chuhiya was a child bride. Later, near the Ghats of Ganga cremation ceremony takes place and at the same time Chuhiya's head is being shaved off and she is dressed in a white sari, keeping the tradition of widowhood. One thing to notice here is that the Chuhiya is not showing any kind of resistance probably she is unaware of the fact of what is happening. The next scene is of early morning where Chuhiya and her father are going to an old, dilapidated house. Her father leaves her there saying, "ab yahi tumhara ghar hai" The old house is an ashram for widows. The ashram is a home for several widows who live there, by looking at the condition of the house we can say that they are poor and have been disbarred from their families as they will be nothing but a financial and emotional burden for them. The ashram is ruled by Madhumati, an old woman in her 70s. Madhumati explains Chuhiya the values of Shashtra, that how a woman also half dies with the death of her husband so she shouldn't feel any kind of pain like the other widows when practising the tough life of widowhood, to which the other widows present there agrees. This shows that since generations the conservative interpretations of Hinduism are being followed without any resistance. There was a small introduction given to the Laws of Manusmriti (sacred Hindu text) when the movie started explaining how a widow should live after the death of her husband. It says a widow should live a chaste, self-restrained life, away from all the happiness and pleasures, and suffer long until her death. A virtuous wife who remains chaste after her husband's death will go to heaven and if she is unfaithful and fails to follow these rules will be reborn in the womb of a jackal. Over the next part of the movie, we see Chuhiya has befriended Shakuntala, a middle-aged widow who displays sincere devotion to her faith and Kalyani a young widow and the only one in the ashram who has been allowed to keep her hair long and other widows shun her. Through the course of the movie we see the day to day activities of these women; every morning they bathe in the holy water of Ganga, beg near temples, listen to the preaching and perform an evening prayer. They are provided with an only one-time meal and some 2 to 4 plain white clothes. Even after living a secluded life, following all the customs, enduring the oppressive tradition so that can prove their chastity, there are certain instances in the movie that shows us how society treats them; in one scene when Kalyani and Chuhiya are playing, a woman scolds Kalyani that she shouldn't run like a young bride and should be in her limits, in another scene when Shakuntala takes water from Ganga, pandit comments on her as she intervened the marriage

ceremony that was taking place. These instances are important because it poignantly highlights the establishment of the oppressive nature of these Hindu customs. In the following section, I discuss the politics of religion through the lives of the three main characters that expose and question the patriarchal interpretation of religion and the way they treat women and expect them to behave in a certain way but at the same time, they use this religion for their benefit.

- **Kalyani:** At one point where she is expected to behave and remain chaste, she is also being prostituted by Madhumati to Seths (upper caste men) for extra income, one of the reasons that she was allowed to keep long hair so that she can appear attractive in front of those men. We see here how the society, traditions, customs want a widow like Kalyani to remain chaste and value the rules but when it comes to their benefit they use their position of power and manipulate them. Apart from that Kalyani is shunned by other widows for her work. Another protagonist in this movie is Narayana, an upper-classman and a follower of Gandhi. He befriends Chuhiya near the Ghats of Ganga and falls in love with Kalyani. There are many instances in the movie which tell us that Narayana does not agree with the customs and traditions of Hinduism. He is against the manipulations of the Vedas and Shastras done by the upper caste men, he believes in widow remarriage as Raja Rammohan Roy. He wishes to marry Kalyani and wants to take her to Calcutta with him. When Chuhiya accidentally reveals about their marriage to Madhumati, she is enraged. Fearing at losing her source of income and that she will face social disgrace she cuts off her hair and locks her up. It is Shakuntala who stands up to Madhumati to free Kalyani so that Narayana could take her home. However, when Kalyani realizes that Narayana is the son of the Seth whom she has been prostituted to, she demands to go back. When Narayana confronts his father, he says, "Brahmin jiske saath bhi chahe so sakte hai, usme faida uss aurat ka hai." This scene is important because it shows the clear hypocrisy of the people who preach the customs of Vedas and Shastras but at the same time manipulate them as per their convenience. Kalyani drowns herself in Ganga thinking that Narayana will no more accept her as his wife. After her cremation, when Shakuntala says that there is a reason behind every custom and tradition and there is a reason that they have to live like this, Narayana says that it is nothing but a business. The society runs a business under the guise of religion; there is one less mouth to feed and an extra bed for someone else. Later, Narayana leaves the city to follow Gandhi.
- **Chuhiya:** She has been presented as a free and rebellious spirit despite the unfair and absurd situation that she has been placed in. At the beginning of the movie when Madhumati was teaching her how a widow shouldn't feel pain because her half-life is dead with the death of her husband, she questions about the other half. In one scene she is sitting with Shakuntala and other widows being attentive to the evening prayer given by a pandit when she asks, "aadmi vidhwa ka ghar kaha hai?" This one question brings disturbance in the group and women sitting there are shocked, they started cursing her as she dared to question the men. This shows how there is this unsaid rule that questioning

men are no less than sinning. The set-up of the society is patriarchal, religion is chauvinistic, they use their position and power of hierarchy as per their convenience but nobody can question their intention and if anyone does, they are shunned and cursed by the society. The free-spirited Chuhiya is still as a dead person when she is sent to prostitution as a replacement for Kalyani. This shows that Chuhiya has shared the same fate as Kalyani and has been the victim of the manipulation of faith.

- **Shakuntala:** Throughout the whole movie Shakuntala has been presented as an enigmatic character. She shows sincere devotion to her faith and has taken Chuhiya under her wing. Although she practices widowhood with sincere faith somewhere she also questions the religious system that has been made for the widows. She wonders what if the conscience is against the religion. She asks the pandit, “kya vidhwao ke saath itna bura salukh kiya jaata hai?” to which he replies that there are ways given for a widow to live but also tells her the new law that has been made by the government i.e. a widow can remarry if she wants. Shakuntala is surprised by this and realizes how society uses religion for their benefit, how religious groups ignore these laws because it doesn't suit them. She stands up against Madhumati and the religious rhetoric that she has been living by and makes sure that Chuhiya doesn't deserve the same fate as Kalyani.

### Conclusion

Water comments on the symbolism of Ganga, how it can purify and can take away life. How the widows accustomed to taking baths in it every morning and evening and how a widow like Kalyani falls into the absurd tradition of purity and took her own life by drowning herself in Ganga. How it is the holy river, a place where all sins are washed away, a site for purification but it is also the passage to the upper caste homes where young women like Kalyani and Chuhiya are prostituted. The movie addresses how these religious beliefs serve the requirements of individuals who are in the position of authority. There are women like Shakuntala who stand up against this absurd tradition but there is a cost to pay. Shakuntala decided that Chuhiya will not be another victim, so she hands her in the arms of Narayana who has decided to follow Gandhi. She wants Chuhiya to make progress away from the oppressive tradition and abuses of power in religion. Even today within the 21<sup>st</sup>-century people follow these texts. They follow these chauvinistic religious rules and treats the religious text as sacred which do nothing but are oppressive and inhumane especially to women and the lower caste people. Apart from that, this movie had to suffer a huge amount of hostility from conservative right-wing organizations. For them, this movie was portraying negative light on their religion and tradition. They organized protests and attacks on cinema which eventually led to the change in location of the shoot. The movie was shot in Sri Lanka. The reason I am mentioning this point is that still after so many years nothing has changed. The idea of following the religion is not wrong but when it denies the essential human rights of an individual is where the matter is. Maybe these practices are not as upfront as it was before but it is still there and the consequences of it are still equally brutal.

### References

1. Phogat G. Existence or acceptance A Post-Colonial Study of Bapsi Sidhwa's Ice-Candy Man. *Periodic Research*. 2013;7(01):2013.
2. Piterson AK. Critical Analysis of Deepa Mehta's Elements Trilogy. *Universal Review*. 2010;12(03):18-21.
3. Razmia M, Pourablib S, Nozad S. Digital Storytelling in EFL Classroom (Oral Proposed Action of the Story): A Pathway to Improve Oral Production. *Proceedings Social and Behavioural Sciences*. 2016;98(12):1541-1544.
4. Rich A. Compulsory Heterosexuality & Lesbian Existence. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. 1980;5(4):631-660.
5. Richard. *Effective Reading*. New York: Newbury House; c1990.
6. Robinet A. Teaching English to Speakers of Other Language. *International Journal of Social Science, Art and Humanities*. 1978;15(10):25-70.
7. Robert M, Sari KB. *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods (2<sup>nd</sup> ed); c1992*. p. 20-24.
8. Rohi AL. Impact of English Learning Skills on English Language Competence. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*. 2010;21(10):28-70.
9. Ronald M. *A New Approach to Teaching of English India*. Discovery Publication New Delhi; c1999. p. 41.
10. Rossner, Bilither R. *Current of Change in English Language Teaching* Oxford, Oxford University Press; c1990. p. 18-13.
11. Shohini C. *Feminist Film Theorist: An analytical Study of Selected Feminists*. *Journal of Creative analysis*. 2006;12(20):15-30.
12. Showalter E. *Towards A Feminist Poetics. Women Writing and Writings about Women*. Croom, Hell Publishers: London; c1979.