

## **I. Hindu Widow System and Deepa Mehta's *Water***

Hindu Widow System is shaped by religious, bourgeois and patriarchal norms and values along with the Hindu laws. This system sets certain beliefs and rules that reinforces widows to believe and obey. Moreover, this system is an amalgamation of tradition and culture which is adopted by widows thinking the culture of the nation. This system imparts certain objectives that are expected to follow throughout their (widows) lives.

Religion has provided the ideological and moral basis for the status and role of women in society. The people's notion about the proper role of women in the home and society and the social restrictions on women are all rooted in religious conception. Each religion has its own myths and legends which emphasize the position of women. The religious scriptures and sacred texts have influenced the status of women. Myths and symbols which are fundamental to religion are also components of religion. There is a myth regarding the Hindu widow system that widows should be long suffering until death, remaining self-restrained and chaste. Similarly, a virtuous wife who remains chaste after her husband's death goes to heaven and a woman who is unfaithful to her husband is reborn in the womb of a jackal.

This system forbids to get remarried for widows. As Dr. Anjani Kant writes regarding the Hindu culture and system that: "widows remarriage was virtually non-existent among the Hindus" (55). It is regarded that the most important sacrament for women is marriage. When she gets married, she is identified with her husband. She has no identity in her isolation from her husband. In other words, after marriage she is considered to have no existence apart from her husband, and so far religious practices are concerned after the death of her husband she is not allowed for second marriage.

Chastity is demanded by the Hindu system, even after her husband is dead. She should be faithful even after her husband's death by not thinking about other man. According to Manu, "The sacred texts did not [...] allow a widow even to mention the name of another man in connection with marriage" (50). Manu holds a belief that though she is widow, she should not think about other man. Moreover, it is regarded that it is sin to think about other man regarding her marriage except her husband. Widows absence of husband does not excuse them to get remarry and thus they embrace the concept of monogamy.

Widow system regarding Hinduism imparts some options for widows after their husband's death: either they should burn themselves on the funeral pyre of the dead husband which is known as "Sati" or they should live the life of "celibacy" and the life of "self-denial" for the rest of their life.

The original meaning of Sati which is a Sanskrit word is simply a faithful and devout wife, and the term denotes especially to the woman who immolated herself. Though Sati is considered as a Hindu custom, the women, known as sati in Hindu religious literature, did not commit suicide in their dead husband's pyre. The first woman known as sati was the consort of lord Shiva. She burnt herself in the fire as protest against her father who did not give Shiva the respect she thought he deserved. While burning herself she prayed to reborn again as the new consort of Shiva, which she become and her name in the new incarnation is Parvati. In this way the word sati (Suttee in English) comes to exist which is described as Hindu custom in India in which the widow is burnt on her dead husband's pyre in the process of renunciation.

Sati dies as a wife, eschewing the ill fated, ominous, and impure state of widowhood. The religious dogmas believe that through her sacrifice the sati preserved the bodily and spiritual unity of the couple, affording the Hindu sacrament of

marriage is ultimate and the truest expression. The custom appears intimately connected with religion. There is a religious sanction in the form of belief that “a woman who chooses to remain a widow rather than sacrifice herself will never be emancipated from the status in the cycle of reincarnation” (Kant 52), as men are regarded as higher status in patriarchal society. Moreover it is believed that a woman dying on the funeral pyre of her husband can enjoy eternal bliss in heaven and self immolation is the only meritorious course that a virtuous widow can follow. So the term denotes the wife who performed the supreme act of fidelity by sacrificing herself which is an effort of transcending the state of widowhood. The situation becomes more exacerbated in the case of childhood marriage. In "Can the subaltern speak?" Spivak describes the act of sati as follows:

The Hindu widow ascends the pyre of the dead husband and immolates herself upon it. This is widow sacrifice. The rite was not practiced universally and was not caste or class-fixed. The abolition of this rite by the British has been generally understood as a case of "white men shaving brown women from brown men." Against this is the Indian nativist argument, a parody of the nostalgia for lost origins: "the women actually want to die." (93)

Here Spivak views that the subordination of women to the superstructure of male domination includes the very denial of breath and life; the subaltern woman (widow) is not expected to die to preserve the honor of the dead husband, but is indeed imagined to desire death. The death of sacrificed is predicated on the death of her husband which makes clear that women has no self identity.

Child marriage is one of the cultural practices in Hindu society where the children are married in their childhood, without knowing the exact sacraments of

marriage. Moreover girl teens are married with a man of mid forties. And when their husband dies, they are compelled to follow the widow system without knowing what is meant to be widow. So the exploitation of child can be seen in traditional Hindu society. Regarding the child marriage and the exploitation of child because of Hindu sati custom, Anjani Kant has defined the culture of widowhood where she writes that the position of woman in the words of Shastri appeared to be as follows:

The enforced child-marriages, the exposure of the female children by throwing them at the junction of the Ganges and the sea, the violence used to make women follow the sati rule and, thus, end their miserable existence [...] made woman sighed in the secret recess of her heart and wished that she had never been born a woman in the unfortunate country. (57)

Here, Kant opines that women have to renounce their life by following the custom of sati. They are regarded as an object as they are obliged to perform the traumatic act by burning themselves in the pyre of their husband's body and end their miserable existence. Moreover the girl children are also victim of the system as they were thrown at the junction of the sea. Being fed up with the culture of sati women made a wish that they had never been born as a woman.

Another option that Hindu widow system imparts that they should live the life of self-denial and celibacy if they do not perform the option of self burning on the funeral pyres of her husband. They have to detach from the society and live in an institution of widows. Widows should shave their head and wear white custom. Moreover they should avoid pleasure and her food is limited in quality and quantity that is she must not take the single meal a day. They can not eat sweets and delicious food. They can not see their face in mirror nor should they look beautiful. They also

should not use any perfumes and their dress should be coarse and dirty. The use of any kind of conveyance is prohibited. And, also she can not rest in the bed. Overall, there is a belief in this system that widow must neglect her as a person.

Traditionalism and religion play the dominant role in Hindu society which is regarded as the great force. Women are the torch-bearers of religion and play an important role in preserving both religion and culture. Women are obliged to adopt widow system because of the tradition and culture of widowhood. Moreover they have no other option rather than embracing the system as it is very obvious to say that patriarchy has effected in its worst form to Hindu women. In other words patriarchy and religion is interrelated to each other. Religion is the outcome of patriarchy and vice versa. The religious norms and values are made by the male authorities that are to be followed by women. In the book *Women and Religion* by Renavikar, Margaret Anderson quotes: "Sexism in traditional religious teachings and exclusion of women from positions of religious authority indicate that religions authority indicate that religion is a powerful source for the subordination of women in society" (33). Anderson views that "sex" play the crucial role in the society. The religious value is itself patriarchy in the sense that it is constructed by men authorities, where women are excluded from that, which calls the subordination of women in society. Men they themselves set an ideology about women which is seen in sacred texts.

The sacred texts declares that the widow should remain chaste, though their husband dies, by adopting the concept of monogamy but there is not any sacred texts that declares that man also should remain chaste after their wife is dead. So, the religious values are set by the men themselves where they impart that widows should not get remarried but men can get remarried. Thus, the concept of polygamy is set for men by men themselves.

Similarly there is also the bourgeois conservatism in the Hindu society which has shaped the ideology regarding widow. Bourgeoisie, they follow and support the traditional values and are very much conscious about their status in the society. They believe in religious values and they believe in system regarding widowhood. Moreover, they regard themselves superior and women as inferior and are strict regarding the norms of widows in the society. They regard women as an object that should be slaves of their husband and should renounce their life for the sake of their husband. Renunciation is, and has been for a long time, a central value in Hinduism. Renunciation in its pure form is a religious ideology and it is made for women. Hence, religion, patriarchy, and bourgeois play a significant role for the oppression of women in society and the blending of these underpinnings have given birth to widow system. Moreover, these are the powerful source which reinforces women to follow widow system

Deepa Mehta's *Water* is a film which presents the plight of Indian Hindu widows of 1930s. Moreover it presents the lifeless and colorless life of a group of widows who are obliged to live in a widow house being alienated and ostracized by society. Labelled as worthless without a husband to measure themselves by, they struggle to survive by begging and often turn to prostitution.

In the film Mehta shows how the characters are greatly victimized by the Hindu system regarding widowhood, mostly the protagonist like Chuyia and Kalyani along with others. The religious norms and conventionalized Hindu law force widows to live the life of self denial being detached from society and spending the absurd life in widow ashram. Moreover, widows are being objectified and commodified by rich Brahmins as exemplified by the characters like Chuyia and Kalyani, who unwillingly turned to prostitution in order to fulfill the poverty and run the ashram.

The setting of the film is 1938 Benaras, a city in India where widow houses still exist. It is set during the period of the British Raj or British Indian Empire when India was still under colonial rule by the British. During that period the marriage of young girls were common in certain parts of India. When a man hailing from an orthodox Hindu family died, his young widow would be forced to spend the rest of her life in an institution for widows in order to make amends for the sins from the previous life which supposedly caused her husband's death. Deepa Mehta adopts the very notion of widowhood as a subject matter for her film *Water*. She focuses on the mistreatment of widows in India.

*Water* begins with the life of eight year old Chuyia, a child bride whose husband dies and she is left in widow's house in Benaras. There she is expected to spend the rest of her life in the process of renunciation. Chuyia as she is a child she does not know about widow system, in spite of that she is forced to live the life of widows adopting the ritual of widowhood. She begins to spend the life of widow by adopting the life of self denial thinking that she must not have to live in the ashram for a long; one day she will go to her home. Her arrival in the ashram changes the life of widows especially Kalyani and Shakuntala who begin to question against injustice widow system.

Once widowed, a woman ceased to exist as a person; she is no longer either daughter or daughter in law. There is no place for her in the community and she is viewed as a threat to society. A woman's sexuality and fertility, which is so valuable to her husband in his lifetime, is converted upon his death into a potential danger to the mortality of the community.

Similarly, another protagonist of the film named Kalyani is greatly affected by the widow system of the society. She is only the stunning young widows among other

who is forced to prostitution. As widows are regarded as family burden in their house so they were sent to bidhuwa ashram. And to run ashram, they often beg for money sitting on the temple and often turn on prostitution. And it is regarded as the tradition in the society. Stephen Hunter, a critic sets forward that it has become duty of widows to perform such act and quotes:

Even as reform seems close at hand, traditional obligations impose tragedy upon the ashram [as] one of the duties of the widows is to perform the occasional act of the prostitution, to keep the economic enterprise afloat: thus Kalyani is selected for job [...] Even worst is the fate that awaits the irrepressible Chiyia. (C1)

The film shows the commodification of widows. Kalyani is a character who is forced to be commodified in the hands of rich Brahmins they are the bourgeoisie of the society. The people of the society are themselves pretender in the sense that on the one hand, they regard widows should remain chaste as declared by religious books but men themselves violates the chastity of widows by sleeping with them.

Mehta's main purpose of making such social document regarding the social issue of widowhood is to show the dehumanization of widows and discrimination over them which is made by widow system. Kalyani, in the film in spite of knowing that widow system does not let her remarriage and to think about other man except her husband is regarded as sinful act falls in love with an educated Gandhian idealist named Narayan. Narayan loves her and thinks her to marry which is thought as dangerous and courageous act in the society. Their love is not accepted by the society, but they decide to get married.

In the falling action of the film, Kalyani recognizes that it was Narayan's father who has used her as prostitute. Being fed up with her lifeless life as she



abdicates her life by drowning in the sea. In this way, the consequence of widow system is embraced by the protagonist Chuiya and Kalyani. William Arnold, a movie critic, regarding the patriarchal tradition of society writes that; "It is a tragic love story that fearlessly attacks the enslaving hypocrisy of patriarchal tradition that has developed over thousand of years of socio-economic imperatives and now disguise itself as religion" (5). Arnold here, states that socio-economic imperatives are the outcome of patriarchal tradition and widows are inferiorized in the society because of these imperatives.

Similarly, another critic Jennette Catsoulis views that widows are institutionally oppressed because of patriarchal imperatives:

*Water* is exquisite film about the institutionalized oppression of an entire class of women and the way patriarchal imperatives inform religious belief. Serene of the surface yet roiling underneath, the film by neatly parallels the plight of widows under Hindu fundamentalism to that of India under British colonialism. Though Gandhi and his followers are as insistent background presence the movie is never didactic, trusting the simply rhythms of the women's lives to tell the story. (19)

In this way, different critics have given their views regarding women and widow oppression in the society and conventionalized widow system is the root cause for this.

Deepa Mehta in the film does not only presents a powerful critique on Hindu Widow System by showing its religious, bourgeoisie and patriarchal underpinnings that treat widows to the level of living deeds but also shows the possibility of subverting such dogmas by raising the issue of widow marriage.

## **II: Feminism, A Tool to Redefine Women Identity**

The term "feminism" develops from the early period of nineteenth century. Feminism as a literary discourse develops after 1960s. In its broadest concept, feminism continues to be closely interrelated with the movement by political feminism for social, economic, and cultural freedom. Generally, it advocates women's right based on a belief in the equality of the sexes politically and biologically or from a women centered point of view and it refuses to accept the cult of masculine Chauvinism and superiority that reduces women to sex object, as second sex, submissive to the other. It seeks to eliminate the subordination, oppression, inequalities and injustices of women which they suffer because of their sex, and defends equal rights for women in a political, economic, social, psychological, personal and aesthetic sense. So, feminism is associated with the women's movement or the feminist movement culture is a transformational social movement that focuses on changing the mostly institutional and social attitudes, beliefs, activities, practices, and identities that form the basis of social life arranged according to an assumed gender hierarchy.

The growing feminist movement sought to change society, preventing stereotypes of women as relatively weak, passive, docile, inferior, emotional, irrational and so forth. Feminist are those who want to achieve greater freedom for women to work, to broaden both women's self awareness and their opportunities to the point of equality with men. They want equal opportunities, equality on rights of freedom in the society with men. They argue that they can do better if they have given more chances with men to decide about their life and life partners.

Feminist generally concentrate on marginalities of all women or their being related to secondary position in the society as in other disciplines of her social life.

They believe that sex is determined biologically, but gender is determined psychologically concept which refers to culturally acquired sexual identity. But they reject the wrong belief of cultural ignorance of women. As Steve Jackson claims, "Masculinity and feminity are defined not by biology but by social, cultural and psychological attributes which are acquired through becoming a man or a women in a particular society at a particular time" (133).

Feminism came into practice to attack against women's marginalization in all social forms of knowledge and practice. This happens because our society, civilization and practices all are pervasively patriarchal, that is male centered, which is controlled, organized and conducted in such a way that it subordinates women in all cultural domains such as family, religious, political, economic, social, legal and so forth. By this cultural process the masculine in our culture has come to be widely defined as active, dominating, adventurous rational, creative, and the feminine by systematic opposition to such traits. Men are always empowered with the sense of "I am man she is woman, I am strong she is weak, I am tough, she is tender. I am rely sufficient, she is needful" (Ruth 54).

*The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*, defines Feminism as a "doctrine suggesting that women are systematically disadvantaged in modern society and advocating equal opportunities for men and women" (132). Feminism has been defined not simply as a particular frame work, set of ideas, a form of social analysis or a critical questioning around the issues on women and power but also as representing specifies way of experience. Adrienne Rich defines feminism as "the place where in most natural organic way subjectiving and polities have to come together" (315). It is a political movement or theory and practice to break the social bondage of patriarchy. It is precise that feminist criticism concerns with gender differences. Its development

as theory and its application are useful to learn social, institutional and personal power relations between the sexes.

Feminism literally means humanism, a massive compliant against patriarchy. Feminist today have finally recognized that the world they have described is not the whole world because it control concern is social distraction between men and women. So, it is commitment to eradicate the ideology of domination and discrimination.

Feminists believe that the entire spectrum is dominated by patriarchal values. Patriarchy is a society in which formal power over public decision and policy making is held by men. In other words, Patriarchy is a social structure in which a male is the head of the family who has the supreme authority of decision making and control over resources. Feminists use the term patriarchy (rule of father) to describe the causes of women's oppression. Patriarchy has determined a very large part the nature and quality of our society: its value and priorities, the place and image of women within in its, and the relation between sexes. Women become instruments through which the social system reproduces itself and through which inequality is maintained. In man made culture, women have to survive unformulated expression and discrimination on the basis of sex, race, religion, tradition etc.

It is the patriarchal social order which subjugates women folks to a second class or even third class citizenship. Here, women are projected as the 'other' subordinate being. Moreover, women are not regarded as an autonomous being; they are always identified by, with men. In her book *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir states, "Thus, humanity is male and man defines woman not as herself but as relative to him, she is not regarded as an autonomous being." (XVIII). She views that, women are always takes as relative being, they are introduced with relation to their father, husband or son. Regarding the patriarchal traditions Elise Boulding writes:

Patriarchal ethics brings in different kinds of socialization practices for the male and female in the family which ultimately lead to turn the male child into an 'oppressor' and the female child into a victim when they become adults. At the root of such oppressions against women is the reality that women are taken as 'objects' of both discriminations are violence of men. (qtd. in Sinha 23)

Boulding holds a belief that patriarchy is the root cause for bringing discrimination in the society between sexes and subordination of women by men.

However, the situation did not remain same. Women have become conscious of their secondary situation and began to put question mark over it. They started to fight against patriarchy and trend to establish their own position and identity in the society in their own way. As women were paid less attention than men from the very beginning, they were not allowed to gain knowledge by studying and going to school. They were restricted getting systematic training. .Mary Wollstonecraft was the first who raised the voice in support of the education and emancipation of women. She was the first feminist theorist and with her publication of *A Vindication of Rights of Women* feminism gained momentum. The lack of sufficient training and prefer guidance were felt to be one of the major disabilities in women's struggle for independence.

It was the industrial revolution which brought social changes in the life of the western society the second half of the eighteenth century. It opened women's eyes to the fact that their economic dependence on men and their lack of educational, political and social opportunities were key factors in their subordinate position in society. At the same time, middle class women raised their voice for equal opportunities and

higher education. So, the several acts were praised for the benefit of women and children.

Most of the feminist critics have raised a strong voice for women's emancipation and from the biased attitude on women since long time. Wollstonecraft indicates the fault in the process of the socialization. She detests the then false system of education that inspired women to have at the expense of reason, and encouraged women to study medicine, burden, and mathematics. Rosemarie Tong examines Wollstonecraft view about women's education and further, claims that they should, "be provided with real education, one that sharpens and focuses her mind and gives her a chance to develop her mind and gives her national and moral capacities full human potential" (15).

In this way feminism emerged as a counter part for the patriarchy and oppression of women in different field of the society, and regard that man and woman both are equal. Not only in the western society but also all over the world including Third World Countries, women began to seek their hidden identity and speak for their rights in the patriarchal society.

### **II.I Tradition, Culture and Third World Feminism**

Traditions have ideological functions with respect to the oppression of women. Tradition in its multiplicity reflects an agglomeration of literary, scripture based inheritance, which is unit only being reshaped by the oral tradition and the social discourse. Tradition is rooted primarily because it represents a norms and values of the nation. And from the past, as the society is patriarchal, there is a tradition which is always based on the values, set by men, as they are regarded as high personalities of the society.

Traditionally, the roles of men and women are clearly defined and separated from each other. It is the very tradition that men have always attended to the task

outside the household and the women have a complex constellation of roles: manager of the household, caretaker of her husband and children and faithfulness regarding her family. The socialization process emphasizes modesty and adaptation for women, while it teaches male children to be superior, independent, assertive, aggressive etc. Women always are assigned to domestic sphere. Tradition, culture, religion all are synonymous and inter-related to each other. Tradition has always been involved to buttress arguments for the continued suppression of women.

Traditions have given birth to the issues like sati, polygamy, veiling, child marriage, widow system, dowry, arrange marriage and so forth in third world countries. Hindu fundamentalists (men) regard tradition and culture should be followed but they do not want to listen the burden of such tradition that treats women in a discriminatory way in relation to man. Traditions and cultures are made by men themselves in hierarchy to subordinate women. The underpinnings like conventionalized religious dogmas and tradition, orthodox culture and patriarchy all are just amalgamation to oppress women. Women of third world countries are greatly affected by the patriarchal tradition and cultures. Being victim of such orthodox traditions, they are bound to live the lifeless life. So, listening to the pathos and ethos of women suffered by so called traditions and culture, third world feminist emerged as opposing such culture which discriminates women in its worst form in contrast to men in various forms like social, economic, political and other.

Women of third world countries are enforced to follow the tradition. The status of women in the society is no more than that of a mute animal. Women are obliged to follow the hierarchical social systems where they can not find their respectable position. Regardless of caste, class or religion women are differentiated as secondary objects. The society keeps them aloof from social matters like decision

making, participating in political matters, problem solving, social and familiar discussions and in financial issues. She even does not have right to make her own decision as she is deprived by tradition. In this context Suguna Paul writes:

Women have been suppressed under custom and have for which man was responsible and in shaping of which she has no hand... Woman has as much right to shape her destiny as man has to shape his...It is up to men to see that they enable them to realize their full status and play their part as equal as men. (44)

Here, Paul views that because of men made tradition, women cannot speak for their desires in the society. She also has right of human being to shape her destiny and it is very men who must enable them (women) for having equal rights and opportunities in the society.

Though, culture is not based on biological inheritance, as it is an abstraction of the basis reality of human behavior and social products; but men are the propounder of the culture. As critic, Sapana Malla Pradhan quotes, "Culture is the handwork of man and the medium through which he achieves his ends" (qtd. in Ghimire 149). She views that culture is made by man himself to accomplish his motives.

Religion and culture have a great impact in the lives of women. Many cultural practices are influenced by patriarchal value that considers women as inferior to men. The tradition involving child marriage, sati and widow system is just a construction in the society that treats women as living dead. Marriage is regarded as an important sacrament for women. The marriage of Hindu religion is not thought of only for fulfillment of sexual gratification rather it taken as spiritual inseparable union between the souls and thus "the wife would be taken as Ardhangini (better half) and after marriage the women's individuality would be ended" (qtd. in Thapa 58).



Marriage is regarded as an institution of enslavement, where women are slaves of their husband. In this context Uma Narayan writes:

Marriage is an oppressive institution for many women is something that predates my explicit acquisition of a feminist politics, and is something I initially learned not from books but from Indian women in general and my female relatives in particular. (9)

Narayan holds a belief regarding marriage that it is an institution in which women work as slaves or workers for their husbands and husbands are regarded as the owners or masters of the marriage institution.

So, marriage has become oppressive ritual for women in the sense that women show their faithfulness by becoming slave of their husband not only in their presence, but also after the death of their husbands as they are obliged to embrace the tradition of sati or the life of chaste and self denial for the rest of her life.

There is an always cultural conflict between western colonizing cultures and colonized indigenous culture with issues pertaining to women's roles and female sexuality. The issues like child marriage, sati, and widowhood all are significant points of conflict and negotiation between colonizing western culture and different colonized third world cultures. In these conflicts, western colonial powers often depicted indigenous practices as "symptoms of the backwardness and barbarity of Third-World cultures in contrast to the progressiveness of western culture" (Narayan 17). As in western culture, there is not any system and culture like sati and widowhood, so it is said that "the figure of the colonized woman became a representation of the oppressiveness of the entire cultural tradition of the country" (17).

Male dominated Third World elites mostly the Bourgeois (man) often responded by constructing these very practices like sati, chastity, widowhood, self-immolation, self-denial as sacred and long standing tradition that were constitutive of their values and worldviews. Bourgeois are very strict regarding tradition and culture. They think women as objects and should be slaves to the men. Their notion about women is patriarchal. Women are tied into religion, tradition and cultures. They are always second class citizen in all these cultural contexts, as they are not given opportunity for making any norms and values. So, gender plays the significant role in the ideological service of third world women. The orthodox traditions and cultures play the hindrance role for the women.

While saying, it may seem biased to go against the tradition of the nation. But feminists opine that the tradition is patriarchal and made in hierarchal order which is just a construction that subordinates women in a great extent, which is very true as seen in society, such tradition should be change. Narayan views that third world feminist need to be particularly alert to how much relatively uncontested change is needed for the better improvement of women and quotes, "we need to re-describe and challenge this picture of "Unchanging traditions" that supposedly are only now in danger of betrayal as a result of feminist instigation" (25).

Western feminist like Daly talks about the problems of third world women who are affected by their own tradition. Daly's chapter on "Indian Suttee" goes on to refer to contemporary incidents of the ill-treatment of Indian widows, dowry harassment, female maternal morality and so forth. Narayan in her work writes that, "Daly's discussion suggests that *sati* is a practice endorsed by all version of Hinduism and engaged in by all Hindus. It is a short step from such totalizing representation of "religion" to the equation of "religion to "tradition and "Culture" (52). Daly suggests

that traditional practices are motivated by a different sort of "patriarchal desire to control women and by a cultural relish in inflicting pain on women [and] naming of these practices "sado-rituals" (qtd. in Narayan 78).

Narayan also supports those western feminists who have talked about the issue of third world countries and says, "when analyzing patriarchal practices in third world context, western feminist good intentions need to be supplemented by care and alternativeness to avoiding the colonial stance" (58).

Sati is regarded as a faithful wife who immolates herself. It is a Hindu custom where a woman after the death of her husband is burnt in the funeral pyre of her husband. When women's husband dies she is regarded as a responsible for his death and had to prove her faithfulness by renouncing her life in husband's pyre. These practices viewed as the loyalty and sincerity of wife towards her husband. By performing this dangerous act she is regarded as faithful wife. Hindu woman is blessed in death only if she jumps in the fire "that symbolizes patriarchal discourse that no other form of suicide is acceptable in the preservation of her dead husband's honor" (Gairola 310).

Hindu fundamentalists view upon sati as an integral part of Hindu tradition, culture and values. They valorize tradition, culture and religious status in the society. They regard themselves intellectually superior in the society and women should follow the widow system, as act of performing sati is one of the beliefs of this system after the death of women husband. They are very strict in tradition and custom as they themselves construct norms and values for women. Criticizing such patriarchal custom of sati and going against Hindu fundamentalist Narayan quotes:

Patriarchal structures and discourse help shape these events of sati into profitable occasions and into events that can be manipulated to create

mass political support for Hindu fundamentalist political groups, the desires for profit and for political power are not simply reducible to a desire to control women. (78)

Narayan holds a belief that the politics behind dictating that widow should perform the act of sati is only their patriarchal desires to control women. The reason behind following such tradition is only for the purpose of their profit and political power.

The women involved in the women's movement in India justified their new roles with the ideology of social feminism, that is, they tried their arguments about women's rights to women's obligation to perform traditional role and serve the needs of the family.

Vina Mazumdar, one of the contemporary feminists talks about the tradition like 'sati' in India. She recalls that one of her great grandmother performed sati though this custom had been prohibited after a long attempt of feminist. In the book, *The new Cambridge History of India*, she writes that because of the "root of the patriarchal society, her grandmother was obliged for such custom" (21).

Religion is such element in the world which has influenced human life most extensively, and regularized it in accordance with its tenets. Many religious tenets which had governed the social and religious life of entire womankind of the world emerged as religious taboos for their progress. Every religion plays vital role in determining a women's position in the society, as the position of women is determined by the religion they adhere. Moreover the people's notion about the proper role of women in the home and society and the social restrictions on women are all rooted in religions conception. Moreover, the religious scriptures and sacred texts have influenced the status of women. The passage in the *RigVeda* declares that "the women are very fickle" (qtd. in Altekar 319). There is always misrepresentation of women in

the religions literature or scriptures. In Mahabharata it is told that "sensual enjoyment is the sole aim of women's existence" (320). Women are always taken as a means of enjoyment.

Religious dogmas are regarded as an abrupt for the women for their better life. When one is married, marriage vows are equally binding on the couple. But women suffer much more and they are also much more faithful than her husband. Men can marry even in their old age to a young girl or child, but women had to live the life of chastity all her life. So, it is crystal clear that patriarchy and religion are interrelated to each other. Patriarchy is the outcome of religion and vice-versa. Men, regarding themselves as superior, even go on talking of their love to their wives while they are alive, and get second marriage soon after their wives death. Women, on the other hand feel grateful to their husbands and even she follows the act of sati burning on funeral pyre of her dead husband or living the rest of her life being chaste, urged by the prompting of their conjugal love. So, here it is very explicitly seen that who is faithful and sincere in love. In this context Altekar writes:

For men to say that women are fickle and faithless is the height of impudence and ingratitude, it reminds one of the audacity of clever thieves who first send away their lost and then challenges innocent person demanding from them the stolen articles. (322)

Here, Altekar views that though marriage vows are made for both men and women, women are found to be much honest than men regarding their marital affairs. And to say women are fickle in Rigveda is just a voice of patriarchy to dehumanize women.

From the early history, man is seen excluding women from religious service almost everywhere because she is regarded as unclear and impure, mainly on account of her periodical menstruation. Hygienic rules often appear in the form of religious

taboos in Hindu culture. Moreover, superstitious belief is based on Hindu religion. It is thought that the main person polluted by the birth of a new born is mother and the purification was needed mainly for her. Mother will be pure only by scattering holy water on her body and around her room. As there is always exclusion of women from religious authorities and values, the person who performed the rituals concerning it, would be the father of the new born child. In the absence of the father of the new born, "the mother was not the person to perform the ritual but the uncle of the new born had to perform it" (Thapa 57). Thus, sons or males were the performers of all religious rituals of the families. Daughters or females had been barred from performing such rituals.

Saraladevi Chaudharani known as a grandmother of politics and feminism has spoken for the Indian womanhood. She views that women are treated from their earliest childhood as separate and inferior. As girls they are denied sweets while their brother eats their full. Men had shown no interest in understanding women's feelings. She views that now it is the time to speak publicly about their status and join the world wide women's movement. She has given many feminists speech and she concluded what was certainly the most forceful feminist speech of the 1930s with "a call for legal, economic social and educational equality" (qtd. in Forbes 143). She regards for equal treatment for women.

It is written by a pupil of a British Zenana missionary, one of the few Hindu women who can read and write, and who has tasted the bitter sorrows and degradation of Hindu widowhood from her childhood:

Oh Lord, hear my prayer: No one has turned on eye on the oppression that we poor women suffer, thought with weeping, and crying and desire, we have turned to all sides, hoping that someone would save us.

Oh Father, when shall we be set free from this jail ? For what sin have we born to live in this prison (qtd. in Pandita 87)

The pathetic voice is heard from a widow, who is enforced to live the life of widowhood in the widow ashram, as ashram is regarded as prison for her.

Third world feminists criticize about the issue of widowhood as imposed upon women by her tradition and culture. Lata Mani, a feminist has so rightly pointed out, the debates over social issues, that deny them complex personalities and agency. Mani writes, "Tradition was thus not the ground on which the status of women was being contested. Rather the reverse was true; women in fact became the site on which tradition was debated and reformulated" (17). Here, she holds a belief that women have become just site and victim of tradition. Metaphorically, tradition is a player contesting on the life of women.

Child marriage is one of the cultures and traditions in Hindu traditional society where the children are married in their teens. The child in their teens are married away even they do not know the exact sacraments of marriage. Moreover, there was a culture of marrying a girl child in her teens with an old man. And it is very precise to say that if a teen girl is married with a middle aged man, man dies first because of his old age. And when her husband dies, she is forced to live the life of widow for the rest of her life adopting the very widow system. She remains widow from her teens till to an old age. So, the exploitation of child by the very custom of child marriage is seen in the Hindu society. The rite of child marriage left many girls widow before she knew what marriage was, and what it means to be widow.

M.K. Indira's *Phaniyamma*, a true life biographical narrative, about a child widow is a fine epitome of the exploitation of child because of child marriage and widow system. A child Phani is an Indian girl widowed at nine, was victim of widow

system, such culture and traditions. She is forbidden from all the pleasures of childhood and fused into a world of deprivation and exploitation under the threat of excommunication of the family. The rationality behind such customs is to "starve the body into compliance and obedience" (107).

Phani, her head is shaven off and enters the life of a maid. She even did not realize her husband but had to enter the life of widowhood. She is equally shocked by the double code of morality, as it is implemented by society to live the life of self denial. Eventually, she emerged as an revolutionary figure to revolt such in human tradition of Hindu culture. Being traumatized with the customs and tradition she quotes:

What peculiar customs we have [. . .]. If a man touches an outcaste woman, all he needs to do is to change his sacred thread, and he's pure again. If a woman even looks at other man, she's a whore [. . .]. How many blind traditions we have, like the banyan tree father planted that everyone hanged himself from. None one ever thinks of changing anything. (96)

Josbir Jay, an Indian feminist in her work *Women Across Culture*, brings the reference M.K. Indira's *Phaniyamma*, and talks about pathetic condition of Phani. Jay writes that the changes she (Phani) wants are based on comparison, an understanding by human emotions and desires, and the "desire to think of men and women as person not confined merely to their gendered roles" (Jay 21). Moreover, in this context Jay writes that "the tribal people are the victims of an indigenous exploitative system. Traditions and superstitions are often employed as means to that exploitative end" (32).



Widowhood is regarded as the punishment for a horrible crime or crimes committed by the woman in her formal existence upon earth. Disobedience and disloyalty to the husband, or murdering him in an early existence are the chief crimes punished in the present birth of widowhood. In other words, widows are accused of murdering her husband before her death and should repay this by adopting widow system. Chastity is demanded by the Hindu system even after the death of husband. Cultural diversity and gender inequality is a problem of Hindu society. The Hindus have conservative and strict controls on chastity, sexuality, early and arrange marriage and prohibitions of remarriage after widowhood and divorce by the husband, seclusions and restrictions in social interactions and also neglect and discriminate the girl child.

The culture of widowhood forbids woman to get remarry, forbids to eat sweets, she has to take only one time meal, not to wear ornaments, to be clothed in white dress, not to look beautiful, her head must be bald and so forth. In this context Athavale writes, "We live in a patriarchal society. Men say that culturally as a widow you cannot grow your hair; you should not look beautiful [ . . . ] (45). Furthermore she criticizes the very custom of shaving head in her autobiography and writes:

Who knows who was the damn author of the custom of shaving heads.

It is not even Ramayan or Mahabharat. We do not know whether the custom existed in the Vedic period. We learn from men that it is found in the laws of Manu. (51)

Athavale views that the custom of shaving head is not in a ritual rites, as she states that it is not even in the holy books like Ramayan or Mahabharat. Moreover, she views that whether the custom existed in religious values regarding women is not known. The very custom is only known by the men, as men make myth for women,

which is found in the laws of Manu. Manu, himself is a man, who sets certain belief and laws for women.

Widows are shunned from society when their husbands die, because of tradition and culture. Social humiliation that comes being a widow. She is said not to attend weddings because her presence is considered to be bad luck. She is outcast by society and forced to spend her rest life in widow ashram.

History and culture are the construction of male ideology. As in the primitive society there was power of man in relation to all field of the society, for instance tradition and culture, and women were site of the very third world tradition and culture. The culture regarding widowhood is just a construction by men. In this context Narayan writes about the attempt of third world feminist effort for minimizing the issues created by culture to women and writes:

The political location of many third world feminists makes it particularly clear that the scope of feminist needs to include not only contestations of *particular practices and institutions* detrimental to women but additionally to include challenges to the larger pictures of Nation, Nation, National History, and cultural traditions that serve to sustain and justify these practices and institution. These are often "pictures of history" *that conceal their on historicity and their own status as representations* suggesting that the Nation and its culture are natural givens rather than the historical inventions and constructions that are. (21)

Narayan holds a belief that culture and history are just related which sets an ideology for a return to past traditions, and the narratives of culture, history and tradition often present themselves as factual, but they are always in fact political that tries to describe

the power holding in the society, and which party is important in the society. They are just a construction and representation, not a fact. So, for her, "Third world feminist struggles feminists in all notions comfort problematic nationalism, and different version of these burden of history" (21).

Widow system is just violence against women. The concept of violence against woman here does not include only physical assault on her, but also physical and mental torture, harassment, exploitation, discrimination, which she has to undergo for being a woman. The state of widowhood represents the "climax of violence against women in our society. A widow in Hindu society has to undergo various kinds of socio-religious, cultural oppression as well as economic hardship" (Sinha 121). Women are exploited and tortured just because of widow system. The state of widowhood which is been imposed upon them is not due to their own fault, but it is just a natural phenomenon. For a widow, the maxim is "once a widow, always a widow"(qtd. in Sinha 122). Women are dying culturally, the act of sati and dowry murder is the death imposed to women by culture.

In this way, conventionalized tradition and culture is the reason behind exploitation of women in its worst form. Indeed, feminism has often focused upon what is absent rather than what is present, reflecting concern with the silencing and marginalization of women in a patriarchal culture; a culture organized in the favor of men, where their (women) existence in the society is always inferior to man. Feminism tries to minimize the oppression of women caused by the patriarchal tradition and culture, and seeks the equal rights and opportunities between men and women.

### **III. Deepa Mehta's *Water*: A Critique on Hindu Widow System**

In *Water*, Deepa Mehta presents an issue regarding widowhood where the widows are forced to live a detached life adopting Hindu widow system. Following the system of widowhood, widows live the life of self denial in the widow house known as bidhuwa ashram.

The film examines the plight of group of widows forced to live into poverty at a temple in the holy city of Benaras. The women are sent here to expiate bad karma as well as to relieve their families from financial and emotional burdens. The gloom setting of the film explores the unhappiness of the widows. Plight of widows represents the worst form of discrimination against women in India. Superstitious families say widows are bad luck and blame for the death of their husband. The film illustrates widows struggle to survive and shows the rituals of widowhood.

All the widows live in the ashram as homelessness and lack of parent's love and affection. The ashram is a melancholy place with old widows. Mehta presents Chuyia and Kalyani as protagonists and shows the exploitation of these characters along with others like Shakuntala and Patirajji (Bua), because of the tradition of the widowhood.

*Water* follows the life of eight year old Chuyia, a child bride abandoned at widow's house in Benaras after the death of her husband. There, she is expected to spend the rest of her life in penitence. She does not want to accept her fate of widow and becomes catalyst for change in the lives of widows, but she is forced to live the life of widow because of the widow system. She even

does not know when marriage occurred and what it means to be a widow, which is realized in the conversation between Chuyia and her father:

Father: Do you remember getting married?

Chuyia: No.

Father: Your husband is dead. You are a widow now.

Chuyia: For how long, father?

These lines depict the exploitation of child Chuyia by the culture of child marriage and widowhood. The eight year old Chuyia does not know that she was a married girl but now she is a widow. She also does not know that she has to adopt the very widow system which is amalgamation of tradition, culture and religion. When her father tells that she is widow now, in her innocence she asks the duration of remaining widow. Without knowing any marriage custom and what it means to be a wife, without having any compassion and love towards her husband, she is compelled to live the life of a widow imposed by tradition. Her question about the span of being widow makes her father dumb as he can not answer her question.

In the very beginning of the film, Chuyia's husband dies, but she does not react on his death. Actually she was married to a man of the mid fifties and after his death she follows the rituals of widowhood, as her mother-in-law smashes her red bangles. She is provided white cloth by taking of her skirt and blouse as Hindu widow system does not permit widows to wear stitched clothes. The barber shaves her head. Her father watches her young daughter performing an agonizing ritual. Chuyia does not know why her head is shaved and why she is wearing white dhoti. Chuyia, while shaving her head curls her toes which symbolizes mute protest. It is enforced by the belief that if the widow does not

shave her head every drops of water that falls upon the hair, pollutes her husband's soul.

Widows are always ostracized by society. The culture regarding widowhood in third world country like India, outcasts widows from society. They are regarded as burden of family and society with a belief that they will bring misfortune for rest of their (widows) family. So, all the women whose husbands die are sent to the widow ashram in Benaras. They live rest of their life without having any contact with their families and society. When Chuyia first goes to bidhuwa ashram with her father and mother in law, she is ignorant of the fact that she is going to be left in ashram forever by her father. She peeps in ashram and she is afraid of the appearance of two of the widows staring at her. Then, she runs out and asks her father to go back:

Chuyia: Let's go home father?

Father: This is your home now.

The above dialogue precisely conveys that after being widow, the tradition does not allow Chuyia to live with her family. Chuyia does not like the ashram at her very sight so she pleads to return back from that place but her father says that the very widow ashram is her home after her husband's death. When Chuyia listens that widow house is her home, then she innocently asks, "Where's Ma?" She thinks that in the house (ashram) she will live with her father and mother. Chuyia asks again and again about her mother if the ashram is her house but her father is speechless as he has no answer. She cries with her father and denies living in the ashram. She says, "Do not leave me here father," but he leaves Chuyia there because of widowhood culture. Chuyia is left in ashram to live the life of perpetual mourning. From the scene we can feel the agonizing separation

between father and a child. Chuyia is unknown about her misfortune caused by widow system to her.

Deepa Mehta, in the film presents the society guided by patriarchal norms and values. There is a system regarding widowhood and all women whose husband dies have to follow the very system. The tradition that she shows regarding widowhood is very rigid and inhuman. Every religious dogma and value has constructed the ideology of people in the society. Moreover, Women also follow the culture of widowhood thinking that it is their duty to obey the culture. The character named Madhumati is domineering of the widow house. She is guided by cultures and traditions of the society. She is very hypocrite, fat and pompous lady in her seventies. As she herself is a widow and thinks widows have to adopt the widow system by living the life of chastity and self denial in the ashram. She believes in the religious scriptures and books.

Different religious books dictate the values of women which call for the subordination of women to men. Religious books impose patriarchal views upon women is known by the dialogue of Madhumati towards Chuyia as she says, “Our holy book say, a wife is a part of her husband while he is alive. And when husband dies, God help us, wives are also half die, so how can a half dead woman feel pain?”

The above line depicts that the holy book shows that a wife is always identified with her husband. After marriage her husband is regarded as lord and she has to be a slave for her husband. Moreover, the wife does not have her self identity; she is a part of her husband. The wife has no existence in absence of her husband. She is regarded as half-dead person. Widows are treated as objects of

exploitation which is supported by Madhumati's statement that widows do not feel any pain.

Mehta presents her character Chuyia as a victim of widow system. Though she is innocent and does not know about the culture of widowhood, Mehta makes Chuyia to utter such dialogue which criticizes and protests against the dehumanization nature of tradition towards women. When Chuyia listens to Madhumati saying her (Chuyia) life as a half dead because of her husband's death she gives a precise answer in her low voice, "Because she is half alive." The line makes it clear that though widow is regarded as half dead person doomed to live in one corner, still has half life. The people of the society do not think that widows are also human beings and get hurt by animalistic behavior towards them.

It is regarded as a duty of wife to live the life of penitence when her husband dies but the innocent Chuyia who is unknown about the tradition wants to go home from the ashram. She protests such widow system and says to Madhumati, "I do not want to be a stupid widow Fatty." The line of Chuyia expresses her denial to accept her widowhood. Even being unaware about the cultural and ritual system of widowhood, Chuyia expresses hatred toward such system. We can feel the cruel aspect of widowhood culture from the reaction of Chuyia.

The arrival of Chuyia creates turmoil in the ashram as she is not accustomed to live such a life of widow. She thinks that one day she will go to home and reunite with a family. Slowly and gradually she begins to live the life of widow expecting that one day she will go to her home and does not have to live in ashram. She is quite young than others in the ashram.



Patirajji (bua) is one of the characters who is very old in the ashram counting her lifeless days. She is at the final stage of her life. She desires to eat sweets and when she sees Chuyia, she expects that Chuyia may have laddoo and asks, "Do you have a sweet?" After knowing that Chuyia does not have laddoo, in her despair she says, "Awake or asleep, even in dreams, all I see are sweets." The line of Patirajji depicts that after being widow she is compelled not to eat sweets because of Hindu widow system. But she desires to eat sweets before her death. While talking to Chuyia she says about her wedding which she hardly remembers and declares that she is fond of eating sweets. She was married in her teens. In her marriage ceremony she even did not know that she was making vows with her husband which means a lot for Hindu women. Nor she had any interest regarding her marriage which is explicitly expressed in one of her dialogues, "When the priest was reciting the vows, I started to laugh. Ma slapped me hard." She further adds about the wedding feast and says, "Plump white rasgullas, piping hot gulavjamuns, yellow laddoos made with pure butter, cashew nut sweets. I drool even now when I think of it." As tradition of widowhood forbids Patirajji to eat sweets and fry foods she expresses her despair, "Life is so disappointing."

One day on her way from temple to ashram, Chuyia sees fried foods and sweets and desires to eat. When she looks towards the shop of sweets, a vendor says, "Get away," as if she is a stray animal. Actually, he thinks that Chuyia (widow) will bring bad luck to his business. Moreover when she shows a coin to the vendor, he says, "Widows do not eat fried foods." This makes Chuyia very sad.

Mehta portrays another protagonist named Kalyani who is very young and beautiful. She is second young widow as Chuyia is the first in the ashram. She is only a widow whose head is not shaven up. Kalyani builds a mutual relationship with Chuyia. They become good friends and Kalyani begins to reveal her secrets to Chuyia. Obligated by tradition, she is in the widow ashram but she does not like to follow the tradition of widowhood. As dog is regarded as a bad omen to keep in widow house, Kalyani has a dog in her room. Nobody knows about the dog but she reveals it to Chuyia.

In the film, culturally widows are treated as inferior beings. After being widow, culture denies them to talk with other people of the society especially with any man. They even can not touch other person in the society as they are regarded impure. Widows also can not run like other person. Overall, widows should live the life of oppressed and suppressed in the society. The dialogue by woman to Kalyani hints about the false assumption towards widows as she says, “What are you doing? Widows should not run around like unmarried girl. You have polluted me? I have to bathe again.” The line of woman conveys the attitude of the society towards widows. When Chuyia runs after the dog Kalu to catch it, Kalyani follows her saying not to run after it, it will come back and on the very time she comes to give a dash to woman. Woman who is guided by the patriarchal tradition of the society feels herself impure by the very touch with Kalyani and says immoral to her for touching her (woman) and running like unmarried girl. Widows are regarded as filth and pollution as woman says that she has to get bathe again because Kalyani polluted her.

Shakuntala is the most enigmatic widow. She is quiet and reserved widow among other widows. She believes in religious scriptures and is caught

between her hatred of being widow and her fear of not being a sincere, devoted widow. She is a Hindu widow who listens to the priest reciting the scriptures to the pilgrims. Moreover, she herself reads the scriptures and tries to live as pure as possible. She becomes a mother-figure for Chuyia. She cares about Chuyia, Kalyani and Bua. Mehta presents such a character like Shakuntala to show the faithfulness and fidelity of wives towards their husbands. Though Shakuntala follows the widow system, in her heart she feels living a life of humiliation, renouncing all the human desires, which is known by the conversation of Shakuntala with the priest:

Priest: So many years of sacrifice and devotion, do you feel closer to self liberation?

Shakuntala: If self liberation means detachment from worldly desires, then no, I am not closer.

Shakuntala's statement satires the religious dogmas of the widowhood culture which forwards the view that self liberation is attained by the detachment from the worldly desires. She expresses that she has not gained self liberation as described by the religion because she is still attached to the worldly desires and she seems to seek the self liberation in such worldly desires.

Widows are regarded as bad omen in the society. Moreover, the shadow of the widows is regarded as an upcoming misfortune and bad luck in the society which is expressed by the dialogue of the priest to Shakuntala as he says, "Watch it! Do not let your shadow touch the bride." When Shakuntala goes to the river to get holy water, on the very side of the river there is a wedding ceremony going on. As she stops there to fill the pot with water, the ceremony comes to an abrupt halt. The priest sharply says her not to be present there as

she is misfortune for a child bride who is just married. Lowering her eyes in humiliation and apology she goes back taking her pot.

Hindu widow system also sets a belief that widow should take meal only once a day which is known by the dialogue of bua to Chuyia, “Eat slowly, child. Chew each grain carefully; your next meal is tomorrow.” All the widows in the ashram eat meal once a day and Chuyia who is just arrived in the ashram eats less amount of food as she is unaware of the fact that she will not get meal at night. Bua says Chuyia to eat her complete meal so that she will not feel hungry at night. Moreover, widows also keep fast in especial occasions which are expressed by Shakuntala to Chuyia in the following dialogue:

Chuyia: Didi when do we get food? I am hungry.

Shakuntala: Today we fast. It is Maha Shivaratri. No food, No Water.

The line of Shakuntala makes clear that because of the culture of fasting, Chuyia is forbidden to eat food on the very day. Chuyia after not getting food on time goes to Shakuntala’s room and asks food. But she comes to know that she will not get food, though she is hungry. She has to fast without drinking water. The culture of widow system is seen cruel to the child. Moreover Madhumati who is rigid regarding widow system expresses her grief of not eating food due to the culture which she believes. She says, “You are lucky Mitthu. You do not have to fast.” The line of Madhumati explores that she thinks herself unlucky because she has to adopt the tradition of fasting because of her widowhood.

One day while eating food, Chuyia realizes that Kalyani is not with them. She asks about Kalyani to Shakuntala. Actually, Kalyani eats her food in

her room alone. As her head is not shaved, there is a belief by some widows that they should not eat their food with Kalyani which is expressed by one of the characters named Kunti, “Eating with Kalyani will pollute our food, and her head is not shaven.” The line depicts that Kunti is such character who tries to fulfill the belief of widow system.

In the middle part of the film, all widows come to the temple to listen the preaching of priest. Chuyia finds that all are women listening preach. She looks all women and priest and presumes that the white length of cloth in which they are wrapped in, is a uniform worn by both man and woman widows. She nudged Shakuntala and asks, “Didi, where is the house for male widows?” The line of Chuyia truly depicts that the tradition and culture are made in hierarchy order. Tradition and culture are the out come of patriarchal norms and values which discriminates woman from man. Chuyia’s question about the house for widower is very just question in the sense that Hindu widow system imposes widows to live their lives in an ashram alienated from society but there is not any system made for men who are widower.

One of the duties of widow is to beg for money sitting outside the temple. Chuyia is not accustomed with such act of begging. One day she also goes with other widows and sits outside the temple. She does not know that she is there to beg money. In the very moment a woman and her daughter comes out from the temple. The young girl of her teens is in red sari and blouse. Chuyia seeing her remembers her red sari, blouse and bangles. She goes on seeing the mother and daughter, which make us feel that perhaps she is remembering her mother. The girl gives Chuyia a coin, and she (Chuyia) realizes that she is there

to beg as beggar. Her hatred towards such culture of begging can be known by her action as she leaves the place saying, "I hate you", to Shakuntala.

Shakuntala personifies the conflict between conscience and faith. The priest who recites holy text and whom she follows says her about Mahatma Gandhi, before Gandhi's departure from Vanaras. The priest says her that Gandhi is one of the few people in the world who listens to the voice of conscience. When she listens she immediately asks, "But what if our conscience conflicts with our faith?" She seems to say that though her conscience reminds about her pathetic condition, her faith regarding devout widow and widowhood culture comes as an abruption in her life.

Narayan, is a young and charming character of upper class, follower of Mahatma Gandhi falls in love with Kalyani on his very first sight. Upon meeting Kalyani there is a immediate attraction but the restriction placed on interaction with widows make it difficult to find a way of pursuing any kind of relationship. Kalyani feels insecure in presence of him as for widow; tradition does not allow her to talk to man. Kalyani prohibited by culture from addressing a stranger directly speak to Narayan through Chuyia and says, "Chuyia, tell him not to follow us. It will be sin."

Narayan begins to think about Kalyani and desires to get marry with her. Moreover, Kalyani on the other hand can not get the young man (Narayan) out of her mind and begins to love him too in spite of knowing that to think of other man is sin. When Narayan asks Kalyani about her marriage and her husband she says, "I do not remember. I never met him." The line of Kalyani depicts that she does not remember her marriage which reveals to us that she was married in her teens. Though she does not remember her marriage ceremony and does not

recognize her husband, she is following the culture of widowhood. Narayan says to her that he likes her and wants to marry her. Kalyani also likes him and wants to get married with him. Kalyani ignores social taboo by falling love with Narayan.

Mehta presents Kalyani as a revolutionary figure by making her to act against the widow system. The secret is revealed by Chuyia who is thrilled at the prospect of wedding feast where one can eat as many sweets and forbidden foods. When Madhumati forbids Chuyia from eating puri, Chuyia in her protest says, "I will eat hundred puri in Kalyani's wedding." Madhumati comes to know through Chuyia that Kalyani is going to get married; she screams towards Chuyia and says "widows do not get married." Chuyia in her anger goes on saying, "Kalyani will get married. She will. She will. She will. Drown yourself, liar!"

Madhumati, after knowing Kalyani is going to get married, with rage goes towards the room of Kalyani and following conversation occurs between them:

Madhumati: Chuyia, says you are getting married?

Kalyani: Yes.

Madhumati: Have you gone mad? Nobody marries a widow.

Kalyani: He will.

Madhumati: Shameless! You will sink yourself and us. We all will be cursed. We must live in purity to die in purity.

The above dialogues between Madhumati and Kalyani depict that Madhumati is guided by orthodox tradition and religion, and regards that widows can not marry; it will be great sin. But Kalyani tries to revolt such inhuman culture of religion by declaring that she is going to get married with Narayan. The saying

of Madhumati about living in purity and die in purity truly explores the hypocrisy of Madhumati in the sense that on the one hand she talks about chastity and purity of widow on the other hand she sends Kalyani across the river to perform the act of prostitution in the house of bourgeois. Kalyani unwillingly turns into prostitution to struggle against poverty and to run the ashram. Madhumati forces Kalyani to be prostitute and make money for survival. When Madumati says that widows have to spend the life of celibacy, she protests against such hypocrisy of Madhumati by saying, “Then why did you send me across the river?”

Kalyani raises question against Madhumati’s act of sending her across the river for the act of prostitution. She expresses the double code of tradition imposed to her. Tradition does not allow her to re-marry and sets a belief that she must be faithful towards her dead husband by not having any physical relation with other man but it is the same tradition because of which she is sent across the river for the sexual fulfillment of the bourgeois.

The ashram means a life of misery for widows. They live out their days in monastic simplicity, deprived from the worldly pleasures. They are treated in all ways as second class citizens. The ashram is run by the Brahmin men as a brothel, and it is the earnings of the young women (widows) of the ashram as prostitutes that sustain the ashram running financially. Madhumati thinks Kalyani as a source of making money to run the ashram. She says Kalyani to take care of herself so that clients will be happy. Kalayani can not bear it any more and her hate towards the imposition to act as prostitute is expressed as, “This is an ashram, not a brothel.”



Chuyia, one day brings laddoo for bua. She goes to room where bua is sleeping and calls bua slowly. She keeps laddoo in front of bua and when bua opens her eyes, sees laddoo in front of her. Bua feels whether she is dreaming or it is a real. She smells laddoo and feels delight to eat it. Bua's face looks as if she has attained nirvana. It becomes coincidence that the day she eats laddoo she dies because of her old age. When Chuyia reveals to Shakuntala that Bua ate a laddoo, Shakuntala says, "Do not worry! After eating laddoo she will go to heaven. God willing she will be reborn as man." The line of Shakuntala reveals her disgrace and pain of being a woman. She wishes that bua would reborn as a man, which makes clear about her panic situation because of partiality of culture between man and woman. If bua will reborn as man than she will not have to live the oppressed life.

Chuyia thinks that widow house is not her house and her stay is temporary one. She will go to her house soon which is expressed in the following dialogues of Chuyia to Shakuntala:

Shakuntala: Don't u have a dry sari?

Chuyia: It is in *your* house.

Shakuntala: Bring it tomorrow.

Chuyia: Tomorrow, I will be in *my* house.

The dialogue of Chuyia expresses that widow house is Shakuntala's house. She does not want to accept the widow system that after her husband death, that ashram is her house. She lives in widow house in a illusion that one day she will go to her home.

After knowing Kalyani's effort to violate the culture of widowhood, Madhumati locks her in the room. Moreover, she cuts her hair and says to other

widows of the ashram, “We would have burned in hell because of her. I have saved you all!” Madhumati denies Kalyani’s desire of getting remarried as she thinks it is against Hindu religion. Furthermore, she uses an abusive language to curse Kalyani which is expressed as, “Let’s see the whore get married now.” The word whore here expresses about the treatment and use of language towards widows. Chuyia in her sadness asks Shakuntala to open the door. Shakuntala as a devout wife says, “To think about remarriage is sin.” Chuyia asks the reason for denying Kalyani’s marriage and Shakuntala says, “Ask with God.” Chuyia is a destabilizing force, questioning not only her own confinement but the logic of other widows.

Chuyia is the rebel who provides the voice for Mehta’s broadside against the religious tradition of widowhood. Chuyia opens the cage to free the Mitthu. As soon as it becomes released it dies. It shows her protest against the prison like life of widows in the ashram such as Kalyani is locked inside the room. It seems that she is not only imprisoned in a room rather she is captive by the very traditional culture of Indian widowhood. There is a not alternative ahead of Mitthu like Kalyani who becomes free at first but her freedom causes her death at last. The death of a bird and Kalyani seems same. Both are helpless, marginalized in the society. Both are treated in a same way. People make Mitthu domestic by arresting its freedom and Kalyani too is used by the same people time to time as a prostitute.

The characters in a bidhuwa ashram are living a meager life. When bua dies, there is not money for her cremation. Kalyani gives few coins to Shakuntala for the cremation of bua. Moreover, Kalyani says, “Didi, I was saving these for my cremation.” As women are not given any opportunity to

work in economic field, they are living the poorest life by begging and often turning to prostitution, which is explicitly shown in the film. Corruption in ashram is shown by the event of bua's funeral. Madhumati does not give money from the fund though she is head in the ashram. The money given by Seth in terms of Kalyani is misused by Madhumati.

Chuyia has a powerful effect on Shakuntala. The way she (Chuyia) asks questions to Shakuntala, she (Shakuntala) begins to question her fidelity and faith towards Hindu scriptures that subjects women who have lost their husbands to live such degrading lives. It will not be wrong to say that when there is excessive oppression and when one lost the endurance power either she renounces her life or she revolts against the oppressive culture which is exemplified by Shakuntala who in the climax of the film as a revolutionary figure opens the lock of the door and says Kalyani to go from the ashram. From the very act of Shakuntala one can know the end of endurance power in her and beginning of subverting such injustice tradition of widowhood. As the independence movement of Mahatma Gandhi swirls around them (Kalyani and Shakuntala), they begin to challenge the notion of widow system flourished in India. Impact of Gandhi upon the Indian youth supports the nationalist movement where one can get freedom from the traditional form of society created by the bourgeois; such as Chuyia escapes from the widow camp to join the nationalist movement with Narayan.

Narayan's mother always discusses with Narayan about his marriage. She says about the proposal of marriage for him from her friend's house to her daughter. Narayan reveals that he has chosen a girl to get married with and says "she is a widow." Knowing about her son's decision to marry a widow which is

not allowed by society she says, “Marry a widow, have you even think of it? This is a sin.”

By using the word sin again and again Mehta tries to show the influence of religion and tradition on people. Especially in Hinduism woman consider as widow can never married in their life. This impact upon Narayan’s mother seems rigid. His mother follows the tradition created by Manu and the famous holy book Manusmriti that regards to get marry with a widow is a sin. But Narayan provides an example of Mahatma Gandhi by telling his mother that all people are born equal and are free to survive at all. She feels worry about her son as she knows religious scriptures declare that widows can not get remarry. Widows must spend their mourning life on the remembrance of their dead husband. Narayan tries to convince his mother and for that he says, “Raja Ramohan Roy says widows should get married.” As Narayan likes the beautiful Kalyani he goes against the tradition to marry her. But Narayan’s mother thinks that the tradition of society does not let him to marry a widow and she says, “What does he (Raja Roy) know about our traditions?” She leaves the room saying that to get married with widow is an attempt to dismiss Hindu widow system. Narayan though his mother is not convinced and without asking with his father decides to get marry with Kalyani.

Though Madhumati follows the widow system and says other to follow, she explores her hatred towards her husband in one of her dialogues as it is expressed, “My husband, the old bastard, was so horny. The minute he climbed on me, instead of coming, he went! Straight to heaven! Bastard! Pleasuring himself in heaven. . . And me, stuck in this hell!” The line of Madhumati explores her hatred towards her husband as expressed by the word ‘bastard’.

Moreover it is also known that she was married with an old man. The detest towards widow ashram also can be known by the word 'hell'. She regards that she is living in the hell and her husband went to heaven. Madhumati seems to say that man lives in heaven even after their death.

Kalyani upon his meeting to Narayan asks why he has not married yet. Actually she asks question in the sense that she was married in her teens and Narayan was not married in his childhood. Narayan says, "My father says childhood is a time for play, not for marriage." The dialogue imparts the double code of culture to man and woman. On the one hand Chuyia gets married in her teens; the age for play as Narayan's father says, but he had not let his son (Narayan) to be married in his childhood. The question arises that if childhood period is not the period for marriage than why the widows including Kalyani and Chuyia get married in their childhood with a middle aged man and are suffered because of their child marriage and consequences they have to adopt by living in the boundary of culture regarding widowhood.

The film also shows the commodification of widows. Widows are compelled to be commodified in the hands of rich Brahmins and they are bourgeoisie of the society. The bourgeoisie of the society regard widows are substandard beings. They are themselves imposter in the sense that they believe in religious value and declare that widows should follow widow system by remaining chaste for their whole life but they sexually exploit life of widows by using them as a prostitute and think that it is widows fortune to sleep with Brahmins like them which is expressed by Narayan's father, "What happened was unfortunate . . . However . . . Do not marry her keep her as a mistress. Our

holy book say, “Brahmins can sleep with whomever they want, and the women they sleep with are blessed.”

The dialogue said by Narayan’s father to Narayan reveals that Narayan’s father is the typical representation of bourgeois of the society. In the line ‘her’ means Kalyani. When Narayan decides to take Kalyani to his house going against the culture and religion regarding widowhood, on the way towards Narayan’s house, Kalyani comes to know that it is Narayan’s father who has used her as a prostitute. After knowing the fact Kalyani refuses from going his home. When Narayan asks the reason behind not going with him she says, “Ask with your father.” Narayan goes home and asks with his father about Kalyani, and Narayan’s father says Narayan to keep Kalyani as a mistress which reveals the ideology of bourgeoisie towards women as he (Narayan’s father) think women are means of sexual enjoyment. Moreover, he does not feel any regret of sleeping with such a person whom his son is going to get married. He boasts himself and say that he has right to sleep with women.

Narayan and Kalyani talk about the traditions. Kalyani regards that good traditions should not be change but bad tradition should be change. In this context, Narayan asks her, “Who will decide what is good and bad.” Kalyani replies “You.” Here, Kalyani seems to say that as it is men who make traditions and they can minimize bad traditions as she regards widowhood tradition is bad in the sense that it defeats women.

Mehta shows the Indian culture of widowhood contrast to British culture. Once Narayan takes Kalyani in carriage for the tour of the city. In the very moment there comes the edge of the city, and he says that it is the very place where British lives. Kalyani feels insecure as tradition prohibits her to be

with Narayan and if anyone recognizes her as a widow being with a man (Narayan). Her face goes on dark as she is afraid, Narayan notices her and the following conversation occurs between them:

Narayan: They do not care if you are a widow.

Kalyani: Why? Don't they have widows?

Narayan: Of course they do. But not like ours; they do not treat them like we do.

The dialogue of Narayan reveals that there is not any system regarding widowhood in west in contrast to the east. In the dialogue the word 'they' means British and 'our' means Indians. It does not matter for British if they see widows with man. Mehta's main purpose of bringing only reference of widowhood culture contrast to westerners' culture hints her critique of the treatment of Hindu widows which serves as a useful remainder to Indians for their need of a benevolent globalization from West.

After the revelation of Narayan's father Kalyani returns to the ashram. Madhumati says her to remain outside so that Gulabi will come and take her across the river. Being dejected with her life, in the falling action of the film, Kalyani renounces her life by drowning herself in the water. The orthodox nature of society eventually grinds her life to the doomed end that is engraves in the code of unspoken commands for all such widows. Shakuntala and Chuyia feel sad about her death. Narayan being disappointed with his father's act leaves home and comes to take Kalyani in the ashram but he finds that she is no more alive. Shakuntala opines that widows dream of living like a common people and getting remarriage is all illusion which is expressed through her dialogue, "The Holy Texts say all this is illusion". She seems to say that Kalyani's dream of

getting out from the chain of widow system is just an illusion as the reality is different and that is her death.

Madhumati sends Chuyia away with a Gulabi (eunuch) as the next widow for Narayan's father. Shakuntala seeks Chuyia in the ashram and when she does not see her she asks Madhumati about Chuyia. When Madhumati says that she has send Chuyia with Gulabi Shakuntala slaps hardly on her face. Shakuntala runs out to prevent the worst, but she only arrives at the shore when Chuyia is brought by Gulabi in the boat. Gulabi leaps the boat leaving Chuyia alone. Shakuntala steps into the boat and kneels down beside Chuyia's curled body, speaking softly to her she says Chuyia to open her eye. Shakuntala fears seeing traumatized Chuyia. She takes her to ghats and washes Chuyia's face.

The film shows the tragedy by showing the death of Kalyani and traumatized Chuyia. Mehta shows the impact of widow system in these characters. In the end of the film there is a short appearance of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi is presented as a voice for the revolution as well as a potential liberator from British. As he talks about the freedom, he preaches liberation for widows. Shakuntala walking through town with traumatized Chuyia on her arms, hears about Gandhi being at the train station, ready to leave town. She follows the crowd to receive his blessing before his departure. As the train is departing, in an act of despair, Shakuntala runs along the train, asking people to take Chuyia with them and give under the care of Gandhi. Narayan sees Shakuntala and calls her. Shakuntala hands Chuyia over Narayan's arm and pleads, "Make sure she is in Gandhi-ji's care." Gandhi's visit brings salvation for Chuyia..



By letting Chuyia to keep under the care of Gandhi, Mehta wants to make her characters free from the chain of tradition and culture of widowhood.

(The dialogues quoted in this chapter are the English version of the film itself.)

## Conclusion

The present research study arrives at the following conclusion which is drawn in the light of critical analysis of preceding chapters. The film *Water* by Deepa Mehta presents the predicament of Indian Hindu widows. It shows the inert life of the group of widows obliged to live in a widow house neglected from society because of Hindu widow system; a cultural violation of the women identity in a society. Mehta shows how the characters have become the victim of the tradition and culture regarding widowhood as exemplified by the protagonists like Chuyia and Kalyani.

The tradition and culture of widowhood discards widows to live the life of common people. They are regarded as insignificant being without husbands and forced to live the rest of life in penitence. The protagonists like Chuyia and Kalyani are compelled to adopt the widow system and live the life of self denial and chastity for their whole life.

The underpinnings like religion, patriarchy and bourgeois have given birth to Hindu widow system. Mehta criticizes the tradition regarding widowhood through her characters Chuyia and Kalyani. The questions of Chuyia like duration of remaining widow and the house of men widower hints towards the powerful critique on widow system. Moreover Chuyia brings forbidden food laddoo to bua, and from her act it is clear that she is trying to subvert the belief of widow system of not eating sweets.

Narayan's father is the representation of bourgeois. He commodifies widows including Kalyani and Chuyia. Hindu widow system sets a belief that widow must be loyal to her husband by not having any relation with other men. Hindu widow system in the Hindu religion is based on the patriarchal norms such as

Narayan's father makes it clear. He makes physical relationship with Kalyani by following the same religious scripture that defines rules and regulations for the widows and also sets the belief that Brahmins can sleep with all women.

Mehta shows the possibility of subverting such culture of widowhood by raising the issue of widow marriage. She presents Kalyani as a revolutionary figure who revolts against the patriarchal culture which undermines women and widows. In spite of knowing that widow system does not allow her to think about other man except her dead husband, she falls in love with Narayan and takes decision to get re-married.

The film ends with the widow Shakuntala gazing directly at the camera. Through her haunting eyes, Shakuntala makes a desperate plea that something needs to change.

In nutshell, Mehta shows her characters being suffered by the culture of widowhood as the consequent of such culture imparts the tragic end of the characters in the film as Kalyani dies and Chuyia is sexually subjugated.

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