

Water

(2005) Directed by Deepa Mehta
 (Rated PG-13)
 117 minutes

Central Plot and Main Themes:

This film is takes place during the late 1930s when Gandhi was rising to power and influence. He was challenging the strict social order and the caste system as well as advocating for the end of British Colonial rule in India. This was the period of the decline of the British Indian Empire and there were hints of new possibilities, at least for some in India. (The film is in Hindi with English subtitles. It is beautifully photographed and very evocative of the time period.)

As the story begins, we meet Chuyia, an eight year old girl, who was betrothed and married to an older man as a child bride. She does not even remember the marriage ceremony and still lives with her family. But when her husband dies she is sent to live in an ashram for Hindu widows. There was a cultural belief that a woman was considered half of her husband's body while he was alive; and when he died, she was considered half of a corpse. There is also a belief that the woman's sins from a past life caused her husband's death, and she must atone for those sins. One of the sacred Hindu texts, The Laws of Manu, states, "A widow should be long suffering until death, self-restrained, and chaste. A virtuous wife who remains chaste when her husband dies goes to heaven. A woman who is unfaithful to her husband is reborn in the womb of a jackal." The cultural interpretation of this text is revealed in what happens to the young girl we meet in this film's opening frames. Chuyia's hair is cut, she dresses in white garments as a sign of mourning, and is expected to live a life of repentance in an ashram (a group home) for widows, young and old. She is allowed one simple meal a day and must beg for a living.

Chuyia's insistence that her mother will return for her and take her home, her questions regarding her status as a widow, and her youthful exuberance disrupt the life of the ashram. She is befriended by Kalyani, a young widow with long, uncut hair who lives apart from the others in the ashram and is shunned by the other widows. We learn that she has been forced into prostitution by Madhumati, the widow who oversees the ashram and who uses the Kalyani's earnings for personal needs as well as for financial support of the ashram. When Narayan, a young lawyer from a well-to-do Brahmin family and a follower of Mahatma Gandhi, encounters Kalyani, he is instantly attracted to her and arranges

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Themes of Catholic Social Teaching:

- **The Dignity of the Human Person:** Women, and particularly widows, are treated as less than human. Destinies are determined by marital status, caste, and gender.
- **Promotion of Peace:** Nonviolent social change is one of the underlying principles of the film. Gandhi, though unseen through most of the film, is a shadow that challenges societal norms in regard to the caste system and the role of women that give rise to violence. He insists on the inherent dignity of all persons. He also challenges the colonial rule of the British and maintains that India must have the right to self-determination.
- **The Call to Family, Community, and Participation:** As widows, the women have no say regarding their place in society. Pope John Paul II spoke of the rights of the Spirit as the right to follow one's conscience and the right to participate in decisions that affect the individual. It is first Chuyia in her childlike innocence who questions the injustice of the widow's plight and latter Shakuntula who struggles to understand, articulate, and challenge the structural injustice that supports this oppressive system.



Film Highlight:

At the end of the film, the older widow Shakuntula rushes to hand young Chuyia over to Gandhi's followers before the train leaves the station. She seeks to help Chuyia escape the ashram and to open new possibilities that will offer Chuyia hope and freedom from the restraints of the caste system. Her action flies in the face of her social conditioning and is an act of authentic human freedom.



The young widow, Chuyia at the river lost in thought.



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to meet her. Despite his mother's opposition to her son marrying a widow and against societal convention, he wants to marry her and she accepts his proposal and plans to leave the ashram. However, when she is taken to meet his father and realizes as she nears the house that her boyfriend's father was one of the clients to whom she was prostituted, she loses all hope of being accepted by the family. In despair, she runs away and commits suicide by drowning in the river.

Another key character is Shakuntala, an angry widow who both hates her circumstances yet seeks to live a pious life. At first she is irritated by young Chuyia, but eventually she is won over by the girl's charm and becomes her protector. With the help of a Hindu priest, Shakuntala comes to recognize that Hindu religion and law has been distorted. Hindu practice to shun widows was distorted in order to allow only males to claim the property of deceased relatives and leave the women with no way to keep any inheritance, thus condemning widows to lives of "social, economic, and cultural deprivation."

When Madhumati, the ashram overseer, locks Kalyani in her room to prevent her marriage, which would bring shame and loss of income to the ashram, Shakuntala defies her authority and releases Kalyani. When she discovers that Madhumati's pimp has taken Chuyia to Narayan's father as a new prostitute, she attempts to rescue the young girl, another act of defiance. Unfortunately, she is too late.

Chuyia has been deeply traumatized by her experience of sexual exploitation. Hearing that Gandhi will be stopping briefly at the railroad station, the older widow gathers Chuyia into her arms and rushes to bring her for a blessing from the holy man. As the train pulls out of the station, she spots Narayan among Gandhi's followers and rushes to hand Chuyia to him to place in Gandhi's care.

At the conclusion of the film, a postscript states that according to the 2001 census, there are over 34 million widows in India, many of whom continue to live as outcasts and in oppressive conditions like those depicted in the film.

Imaging Justice: Pivotal scenes depicting the efforts toward justice include:

- Narayan's conversations with his friend and his mother about the message and the hope that Gandhi brings to India.
- Gandhi's speech at the railroad station where he equates God and Truth
- Narayan's willingness to defy social conventions by marrying a widow.
- Shakuntala's choice to follow her conscience and stand up against the tyrannical policies of the ashram.
- The final scene where the young girl is given a hope of a new life with the followers of Gandhi.

Imaging Injustice: Scenes highlighting injustice include:

- The hierarchical structure of the ashram, with its exploitation of some of the women as prostitutes.
- The societal attitudes and treatment of widows depicted throughout the film.
- Narayan's father's and society's double standard in regard to women.
- The depictions of the poverty and squalor of India.
- The scene that suggests sexual violence toward children.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. What is the significance of the film's title? What is the symbolism of the pervasive image of water throughout the film?
2. How does life in the widows' ashrams reflect values in the Hindu society of that period?
3. What are the pivotal experiences that become the catalysts for Shakuntula's questioning of the social order and her interior conversion?
4. Are women in other societies adversely affected by societal attitudes? In our society?
5. One character says of Gandhi, "Gandhi is one of the few people in the world who listens to the voice of his conscience." Who else do you see in society today who would fit this description? Explain your answer.
6. The film makes the point that the Hindu scriptures were used to justify the ill-treatment of widows. How do religious extremists misuse different scriptures to justify injustice? Cite examples.
7. Gandhi's campaign is in the background of the film and helps provide a perspective on what happens in this drama even though it is not overtly highlighted. What similarities do you see between Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. in their efforts to change societal attitudes and unjust laws? Be specific.
8. Production of the film was stopped for five years and the location for filming had to be changed because of death threats, acts of arson, and rioting by extremist groups in India in response to the film's subject matter. What do you believe such groups would find threatening in the film's content? Why does such content provide films a way to become catalysts for justice?



Education for Justice

Links for further information about justice issues highlighted:

Deepa Mehta on Water

Read the director's statement about the film and the controversy it sparked.

<http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films/features.php?id=15544>

CNN article: Shunned from society, widows flock to city to die

This feature story highlights the current situation of widows in India today. The article is a great companion to the film and includes photos, video clips and links.

<http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/07/05/damon.india.widows/index.html>

A Photo Journalist's visit to the Widows of Varanasi

View a slide show of 12 photos and a summary of the journalist's visit to the present day widows in Varanasi where the film took place.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/07/AR2005100700471.html>

Indian Culture and the Caste System

The Pluralism Project - A Harvard University effort to engage Americans with the realities of religious diversity. Includes extensive material on Hinduism. <http://www.pluralism.org/>

Signs of Hope for Widows in India

Change comes slowly and yet there is hope on the horizon for the widows of India. Learn about the signs of hope. <http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/1794/context/archive>

