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Fire, Water and The Goddess: The Films of Deepa Mehta and Satyajit Ray as Critiques of Hindu Patriarchy

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Abstract

This article focuses on *Fire* (1996) and *Water* (2005), two films directed by Deepa Mehta that present patriarchal Hindu attitudes to women and sexuality as in need of reform. Mehta's films have met with hostility from Hindu conservatives and have also been accused of Orientalist misrepresentations. While these objections highlight the contested nature of "authentic" Hindu identity, *Fire* and *Water* remain powerful indictments of male hegemony in Hinduism. Mehta has cited Satyajit Ray as a major influence on her work; there are interesting parallels between Mehta's films and Ray's film *Devi* (*The Goddess*, 1960), which explores the plight of a young woman in a patriarchal Hindu family in the nineteenth century.

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Hindu themes are common in films from and about India; however, the attitude to Hinduism expressed in these films varies. On the one hand, there are numerous examples of films that seek to affirm what are perceived to be traditional Hindu values; they typically contain little critique. For instance, there is a long history of Indian devotional and mythological films that have little place for challenges to Hindu norms.[1] The gods are venerated, the class and family structure is maintained, and the authority of tradition is not usually questioned. In addition, recent Hindu nationalists have been adept at making use of film and other audio-visual media to promulgate their often conservative view of Indian cultural and religious identity.[2] On the other hand, there are important examples of films that challenge aspects of Hinduism in a revisionist spirit. This article focuses on *Fire* (1996) and *Water* (2005), two films directed by Deepa Mehta that belong to this latter strand of cinema. Mehta's work is a prominent example of globalized filmmaking. She originates from India and her films are often about Indian religion and culture but she lives in Canada. *Fire* and *Water* present patriarchal Hindu attitudes to women and sexuality as in need of reform. Mehta's films have met with hostility from Hindu conservatives and they have also been accused of Orientalist misrepresentations. While these objections highlight the contested nature of "authentic" Hindu identity, *Fire* and *Water* remain powerful indictments of male hegemony in Hinduism. There are also interesting parallels between Mehta's films and *Devi* (*The Goddess*, 1960), directed by the Bengali filmmaker Satyajit Ray, that explores the plight of a young woman in a patriarchal Hindu family in the nineteenth century. Although *Devi* is a much older film than *Fire* and *Water*, the analysis of it in relation to Mehta's work is not arbitrary; Mehta has cited Ray as the director whom she most admires and who has had the biggest

influence on her films. She describes him as "the greatest humanist filmmaker" and expresses a desire to "reach his vision on some level."[3]

Water: **Patriarchy and the oppression of widows**

Water is set in the sacred Hindu city of Varanasi in the 1930s and examines the plight of a community of socially ostracized widows. Their lives are governed by many social and behavioral restrictions such as the taboos against remarriage and physical contact with high-caste Hindus. The film tells the story of eight-year old Chuyia, who has been married and then widowed while still a child; she is then forced by her family to live in a widows' ashram, where the bereaved women live a life of asceticism as their duty (*dharma*) to their deceased husbands. There she befriends the beautiful young widow, Kalyani, who has been forced into prostitution, a fate which has not been unusual for economically vulnerable women in widows' ashrams.[4] Madhumati, the elderly matron of the widow's ashram, organizes liaisons between Kalyani and clients in order to provide funds for the household. Kalyani is permitted to retain her long hair in order to be more appealing to customers; by contrast, the other widows are required to shave their hair as a symbol of renunciation. The film also contains a tragic love story. Kalyani meets Narayana, who is a reformist, liberal Brahmin and follower of Gandhi. They fall in love and he seeks to marry her. This union between a high-caste Brahmin and a socially impure widow is anathema to conservative Hindu opinion as well as threatening the ashram's income. Narayana's mother is shocked when he informs her of his intentions to marry a widow. And Madhumati angrily seeks to prevent the marriage by imprisoning Kalyani in her room and cutting off all her hair to make her less attractive. However, Kalyani manages to escape with the help of

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

Mehta's principal message is that, although the film is set in the 1930s, the mistreatment of widows in India is an issue of pressing contemporary concern. She closes the film with the claim that "there are thirty four million widows in India according to the 2001 Census. Many continue to live in conditions of social, economic and cultural deprivation as prescribed 2000 years ago by the *Sacred Texts of Manu*," the ancient Hindu law book (*dharmashastra*). The difficulties of many widows continue despite the Hindu reformers' vision of a better future. *Water* is a continuation of this Hindu reformist tradition which, since the 19th century, has sought the social uplift of widows by, for example, allowing them to remarry. The promise of reform is presented through the image of Chuyia's potentially happier future; this is what could occur for widows if Indian society changed in accordance with Gandhi's teaching.

Mehta's film makes it clear from the outset that the male Hindu hegemony seeks to rationalize the mistreatment of widows by appealing to the authority of Hindu scriptures; the film

opens with a translation from *The Laws of Manu* which gives unambiguous instructions about the *dharma* of a wife whose husband has died:

> A widow should be long suffering until death, self-restrained and chaste. A virtuous wife who remains chaste when her husband has died goes to heaven. A woman who is unfaithful to her husband is reborn in the womb of a jackal.[5]

It might be objected that Mehta overemphasizes the significance of the *Laws of Manu*; it is questionable how closely the ethical and legal rules and regulations of this text corresponded to social practices at the time of its composition, let alone now. Ancient sacred texts produced by the Brahminical elite are arguably idealized prescriptions rather than entirely reflective of lived reality.[6] Moreover, the *Laws of Manu* contain some exhortations to honor and respect women.[7] Nevertheless, Mehta thinks that the text is expressive of a negative attitude towards women, and widows in particular, that persists in contemporary India. Her view is supported by William Dalrymple's evocative account of the harsh conditions in the widows' ashrams in the town of Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh, which he refers to as "The City of Widows."[8]

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

Contrary to the picture that emerges in Mehta's film, there is evidence that widows in ashrams renounce the domestic life voluntarily and are not always forced into their situation;

they sometimes contend that their ascetic life is a choice motivated by religious devotion rather than economic pressures or an oppressive patriarchy. According to Malini Bhattacharya, the widows' claim that faith is their primary motivation "is not just a veneer, but a deeply internalized attitude."[9] However, it might be countered that this demonstrates that the influence of patriarchal conditioning runs so deep that it affects women's own belief structures; their faith is itself a product of the social environment that they inhabit.

Critics sensitive to the issue of Orientalism are perhaps right to accuse Mehta of setting *Water* in late colonial times and yet neglecting the manner in which the image of the victimized and vulnerable Indian woman was manipulated to rationalize Western imperialism. The oppression suffered by Indian women was used to justify British political and economic dominance of the subcontinent and yet this historical reality is absent from the film. In addition, they argue that Mehta's film perpetuates stereotypes of Indian female passivity by representing the widows largely as victims who require Westernized, educated male heroes, Narayana and Gandhi, to save them from the evils of Hindu culture.[10] However, Mehta's female characters are not entirely passive; Shakuntala begins to question the way that widows are treated and takes action to save Chuyia from the fate of prostitution, Chuyia herself exhibits signs of rebelliousness against the tyranny of Madhumati, and Madhumati's manipulative and self-serving behavior as a madam is itself her way of asserting her agency within severe social constraints.

Water was the focus of well-publicized protests launched against it by Hindu nationalists. Mehta initially tried to shoot the film in 2000 in Varanasi. A group of about 500 people tore down and burnt parts of the set at Tulsi Ghat in Varanasi. They saw the film as contaminating the sacred city and as an insult to Hindu culture including the institution of widows' ashrams.

Although the central government had cleared her film with a few changes, the regional government of Uttar Pradesh denied her use of Varanasi as a setting for her film. Mehta was forced to abandon the shoot and eventually relocated the set to Sri Lanka.[11]

It is evident that *Water* caused such outrage because of the power and influence of Hindu nationalist political and cultural groups in contemporary India. The Hindu nationalist or Hindutva (Hinduness) ideology was forged by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in the 1920s but came to political prominence in the 1980s. Although the Hindutva movement is quite diverse and incorporates many different groups with their own agendas, it tends to equate Indian cultural and political identity with Hinduism thereby marginalizing or excluding minority groups.[12] Hindu nationalists also see the introduction of Western values as a form of colonialism and as having a corrosive influence on Indian society. It was members of an organization associated with the Hindutva movement that led the protests against *Water* because the film was considered to be a disrespectful and offensive attack on Hindu culture and religion.[13]

Fire: Patriarchy and female sexuality

This was not the first time that a film by Mehta had been controversial in India. Her earlier film, *Fire*, caused protests by Hindutva groups when it was released in 1996. *Fire* focuses on the story of Radha, a middle aged married woman, and Sita, her more Westernized younger sister-in-law, in a contemporary Indian middle class family in Delhi. They are neglected and mistreated by their husbands. As a consequence of Radha's infertility, her husband Ashok has taken a vow of celibacy which he tests in bed with his wife. He is preoccupied with the pursuit of spiritual salvation under the tutelage of his guru. He defines women solely in terms of their traditionally

prescribed functions as wives and mothers. He expects his wife to be dutiful and obedient. Sita's husband Jatin is obsessed with his Indo-Chinese mistress, Julie; he is callous and sometimes violent towards his wife in their loveless and sexually unfulfilling marriage.

Radha and Sita are represented as Indian women caught in an oppressive web of commitments to family, arranged marriages, and traditional patriarchal notions of duty. The film documents the attraction, intimate friendship and eventual lesbian relationship between the sisters-in-law. When their secret is discovered, they leave their husbands, breaking free from the oppressive bonds of patriarchal control over their sexuality and identity rather than begging their husbands for forgiveness. Subeshini Moodley comments that "Mehta's women characters undergo journeys of identity. They travel from being obedient, dutiful, virtuous women who honour the family … to women who step outside of tradition to become empowered, decision-making beings."[14] Mehta has explained that Radha and Sita's story in the film has great personal resonance for her as she also had to struggle against entrenched cultural attitudes when seeking to end her own marriage.[15]

In a powerful symbolic episode near the end of the film, Radha is caught in a kitchen fire from which her husband, appalled by his discovery of her lesbian relationship, does not try to save her. This scene brings to mind the phenomenon of so-called "accidental kitchen fires" in contemporary India, by which unwanted women are murdered often as a result of dowry disputes.[16] However, Radha survives and reunites with Sita at the tomb of Nizammudin, a Sufi shrine which functions here as a symbol of the outsider and tolerance. This fire episode is a clear reference to the *Ramayana* and Sita's ordeal by fire in order to prove her purity and obedience to her husband Rama. Indeed, an earlier scene in the film shows Ashok watching with approval a traditional performance of Sita's fire ordeal. But the film proceeds to subvert the symbolism;

unlike Sita in the traditional story, Ashok's wife Radha passes through the fire in order to assert her freedom from patriarchal control and traditional notions of sexual purity.

Fire is a recent example of a long tradition of alternative versions of the *Ramayana* which sometimes challenge the orthodox rendition, with its patriarchal and high-caste biases. The text of the *Ramayana* has often been contested and open to a variety of readings that are dependent on cultural background, social class and gender.[17] *Fire* is not alone in extending this tradition into contemporary cinema. For example, the "Bollywood" film *Lajja* (Shame, 2001) directed by Rajkumar Santoshi reinterprets the *Ramayana* in accordance with the director's feminist agenda; the patriarchal domination of Sita functions as an allegory for the social and economic disadvantages faced by women in contemporary India. Globalization has also resulted in "Western" feminist retellings of the *Ramayana* such as the American animated film *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008) by Nina Palley.

Furthermore, *Fire* can be contrasted with Ramanand Sagar's highly popular television adaptation (1987-88) and Sooraj Barjatya's box office hit *Hum Saath Saath Hain* (*We Stand United*, 1999) both of which retell the story from a more conventional perspective; values such as loyalty, self-sacrifice, family unity and respect to elders are emphasized and there is little room for feminist or other critical points of view.[18] *Fire* is also at odds with with many Bollywood films that have often tended to reinforce the patriarchal dichotomy between heroines who receive approbation as dutiful, sexually pure women versus the sexually impure, unrestrained women who meet with moral disapproval. There is a strong tendency for mainstream Indian films to objectify women both by idealizing and demonizing them.[19]

It is unsurprising that proponents of the Hindutva ideology were upset by *Fire*. One of the characteristics of their conservatism and nationalism is the re-emphasis of the stereotype of

the virtuous Hindu woman as a paragon of distinctively Indian duty and self-sacrifice. She is a symbol of family harmony and, as "Mother India", Indian nationhood. Anannya Bhattacharjee remarks:

> A persistent theme of Indian Nationalism has been the re-processing of the image of the Indian woman and her role based in the family, based on models of Indian womanhood from the distant glorious past. The woman becomes a metaphor for the purity, the chastity, and the sanctity of the Ancient Spirit that is India.[20]

Hindu nationalists regarded the film as a rejection of these sacrosanct values. In addition, the film's sympathetic depiction of a lesbian relationship challenged contemporary conservative Indian attitudes to sexuality that strongly disapprove of male homosexuality and usually fail even to acknowledge the existence of same-sex female sexual relationships. Homosexuality is widely regarded as a foreign Western import and imposition; it is considered to be the product of a decadent culture rather than a biological disposition.[21] Moreover, Mehta undermines the Hindu patriarchy by naming her heroines after Sita and Radha, traditionally regarded as exemplars of feminine virtue and devotion. The Hindutva movement saw the depiction of Sita and Radha as lesbians as a defilement of the sacred nature of the traditional heroines.[22] Rahul Gairola claims that Mehta's film "cuts against patriarchal codes" that are dominant in India.[23] Consequently, it was subject to protests by Hindutva groups in various Indian cities.[24]

Ratna Kapur observes that the controversy over *Fire* is not simply about freedom of expression; it is also indicative of the entrenched cultural disputes going on in contemporary India. This conflict is part of a broader "ideological struggle about who counts as part of Indian culture and who is excluded, an outsider."[25] The film's representation of lesbianism and female

rebellion against traditional family structures challenges some Hindutva groups' static and essentialist understanding of authentic Hinduism.

Paradoxically this Hindu conservatism might itself be termed revisionist insofar as it constructs a new version of Hinduism that does not fully recognize the elements of change and diversity that have always characterized the religion. "Hinduism" is a label which covers a multitude of religious attitudes and practices. Indeed, Mehta identifies herself as a Hindu[26] and her films seem to promote a type of Hinduism broadly based on Gandhi's notions of tolerance and compassion. Hindu identity is a contested notion; Mehta's view of authentic Hinduism is very different from that promulgated by the Hindutva groups. Contrary to the rather fossilized view of tradition propounded by some Hindus, Mehta has remarked that "surely the point about traditional values is that they have to be questioned all the time. Otherwise, we'll be stuck; there'll never be any change. We would just accept things the way they are."[27] It is ironic that Mehta has herself been accused of treating Hinduism and Indian society as monolithic and static by giving the simplistic impression in *Water* that the situation of widows in contemporary India is the same as in the 1930s.[28]

Mehta has also commented that "like all religions, Hinduism has been misinterpreted by those who can take advantage of it. So, under the guise of religion a lot of things are done."[29] This is a common view of reformers who often view the negative aspects of their religion as misreadings and cultural accretions. However, it could be objected that such reformers are themselves in danger of essentializing Hinduism insofar as they imply that the version of Hinduism of which they approve is the only genuine one. The diversity of Hinduisms arguably precludes any objective assessment of a particular reading of Hinduism as the most authentic.

While the negative response to *Fire* by Hindu nationalists was entirely predictable, it is perhaps surprising that the film also received some criticism from left-wing elements in India, including the gay and lesbian community. Admittedly, the film was praised for breaking the silence about Indian same-sex sexuality and challenging the Hindu nationalists' narrative about Hindu culture. Nevertheless, some feminists criticized the film for giving the simplistic impression that women's oppression is linked solely to the control of her sexuality by the Hindu patriarchy.[30] Moreover, some advocates for lesbian rights were disappointed by Mehta's claim that the film is not primarily about lesbianism; she has stated that its main focus is the decision of the protagonists to defy traditional norms and roles in a culture where such agency is often denied to women. Mehta contends that the film is about women's ability to make choices rather than a particular form of sexual preference.[31] She has said: "Lesbianism is just another aspect of the film. It is probably the last thing they [Radha and Sita] resort to when they derive a certain confidence out of the relationship."[32] This comment also reinforces the film's problematic portrayal of the women's lesbianism as caused by the denial of sexually fulfilling relationships with their husbands. This implies that lesbianism is a second-best option rather than being a first choice and natural proclivity for some women. Mary E. John and Tejaswini Niranjana comment that the film feeds "the all too common stereotype that people become gay when deprived of normal sex."[33] This criticism clearly has some weight; however, Mehta's intimate, sensitive and sensual portrayal of the two women's loving relationship goes some way to mitigating its force.

Mehta's films are interesting for students of religion because she is clearly sympathetic to Hinduism and yet is willing to criticize those elements of the religion that she views as oppressive and destructive. However, Mehta has been vulnerable to attack because, though born in India, she has lived in Canada for much of her adult life. It might be doubted that she really

should be classified as an Indian filmmaker. The fact that the dialogue in the original version of *Fire* (though not *Water*) was in English rather than Hindi perhaps reinforces this objection. Thus, she is a representative of diaspora or transnational cinema which might be portrayed as inauthentic because tainted by outside influences and insufficiently rooted in genuine Indian traditions. However, as already noted, notions of "authenticity" are problematic given the sheer diversity of Hinduism(s). Moreover, the voices of Hindus beyond the Indian subcontinent are an important feature of contemporary Hinduism in an increasingly globalized world. Nor is it clear why membership of a diaspora community should disqualify a filmmaker from making legitimate and sometimes critical comments on her original home culture.

Devi: **Patriarchy and Goddess worship**

Mehta's films are not an aberration; there are examples of other films that share her critical perspective on the Hindu patriarchy and Ray's *Devi* is a striking early example.[34] It is therefore not surprising that Mehta looks to Ray's filmmaking as a source of inspiration. In an episode foreshadowing the controversies surrounding Mehta's films, *Devi* caused a political uproar when it was released in 1960 with critics denouncing the film as an attack on traditional Hinduism. Some members of the Indian Parliament demanded that *Devi* be denied an export license; they were evidently concerned that the film would give a misleading and negative impression of the worship of the mother goddess in India. The critics were silenced by Prime Minister Nehru's intervention when he came out in support of the film on the grounds that it was a careful and considered treatment of Hinduism and that many of the protestors had not even seen it.[35]

The film is based on a story by Prabhat K. Mukherjee set in the late 18th century; however, Ray's film takes place more than half a century later in 1860.[36] The change in historical setting is significant because by the 1860s the influence of the Hindu reform movement was being felt and Ray is able to weave this theme into the plot of the film. *Devi* is about the clash of two worldviews in a Bengal village. On the one hand, there is the traditional Hindu perspective in which women are under the control of family patriarchs, goddesses can incarnate in young women, dreams convey knowledge, and miracles are expected. On the other hand, there is the rationalist, reformist point of view according to which women's status should be uplifted and beliefs in incarnations, religious visions, and the miraculous are dismissed as mere superstition.

Devi tells the story of Kalikinkar, a local landowner and family patriarch, who is a very pious devotee of the goddess Kali. One night he has a dream in which he sees that Kali has incarnated as his seventeen year old daughter-in-law, Dayamayi, who has been looking after him. The belief that deities manifest in people and images is a widespread feature of traditional Hinduism.[37] Kalikinkar insists that she be worshipped as the incarnation of the mother goddess. Further proof for Kalikinkar of Dayamayi's divinity occurs when a beggar's dying son is apparently miraculously healed after being brought to Dayamayi by the child's father with the desperate request that she, the mother goddess, save the little boy. As a result of this supposed divine intervention, pilgrims and devotees flock to take *darshan* from Dayamayi.

Dayamayi's husband, Umaprasad, has been exposed in Calcutta to the Hindu reform movement and his outlook is rationalist and anti-traditionalist.[38] On his return to the village, Umaprasad is astonished to find his wife ensconced as a goddess and the object of devotees' worship. He accuses his father of insanity and completely discounts the validity of his father's dream vision. There is mutual incomprehension as Kalikinkar finds his son's modern attitudes

perplexing. Moreover, Kalikinkar insults him by calling him a "Christian", a reference to the common accusation by Hindu traditionalists that the reformers' modern attitudes were the result of the religion of the British colonialists. He is also upset by Umaprasad's lack of deference to him as patriarch of the family.

Dayamayi vacillates, unsure whether she is a manifestation of the goddess. She curls her toes back in revulsion and shock when her father-in-law falls at her feet in veneration and proclaims her divinity and yet she thinks that the miracle of the healed child means that the goddess might be incarnate in her. According to Darius Cooper, Ray depicts Dayamayi as a "confused presence" and a "split subjectivity."[39] She apparently begins to believe in her own divinity because her father-in-law has given her that status; however, her husband's rationalism pulls her in the opposite direction. Umaprasad seeks to save her from the influence of his father by taking her away from the village; however, as they begin their departure she sees the remains of a Durga shrine that has been immersed in the river. She interprets this as possibly a portent and wonders aloud to her husband if perhaps the healing of the child means that she is indeed a manifestation of the goddess. She thinks that she should not leave in case her husband receives a supernatural punishment for depriving the devout villagers of her benign sacred powers. To the consternation of Umaprasad, she decides to remain in the village due to her confusion and uncertainty.

The film reaches its climax when Dayamayi's young nephew, Khoka, of whom she is very fond, becomes ill and Kalikinkar places the young boy under Dayamayi's protection, rather than seeking medical treatment. Clearly the devotees have faith that she will enact another miraculous cure; however, Khoka dies. The different responses of the protagonists to this tragedy are instructive. Umaprasad predictably blames his father for trusting in miracles and placing the

burden of divinity upon Dayamayi. He sees Khoka's death as proof that Dayamayi is human and not divine. By contrast, Kalikinkar takes the death of the child as an act of wrath on the part of Kali; for some unknown reason the mother goddess is punishing him despite his many years of devotion to her. Indeed, a recurring theme of the devotional songs in the film is that Kali is the bringer of sorrow. The divergent worldviews of the father and son account for the death in different ways. Dayamayi herself seems caught between their opposing perspectives. Dayamayi's grief and sense of responsibility for Khoka's death, as well as her mental confusion about her own status, drives her to madness; the film closes with Dayamayi running away through a field of mustard flowers and vanishing into the mist while Umaprasad futilely calls out to her.[40]

Devi is a reflection on the dangers of irrational faith and the terrible consequences that its intransigence can have. Ray made it clear that his own views were akin to those of the reformist Umaprasad.[41] However, Ray does not overtly condemn Kalikinkar; on the contrary, the film leaves the viewer with a heightened understanding of how Kalikinkar, given his social and religious conditioning, has come to have the beliefs that he holds. Indeed, the film portrays the worship of Kali and the songs that accompany that worship with exquisite sensitivity, emotion and beauty; Ray makes it possible to understand the appeal of this faith. As Chidananda Das Gupta comments, the superstitious Kalikinkar "is not seen as the villain of the piece; he has his own reasons and as much right to sympathy as his victim."[42] Ray is sympathetic to his characters even when they behave badly; he recognizes their moral and intellectual flaws as part of their humanity and psychological complexity. In this respect, Ray's treatment of Kalikinkar is rather different from Mehta's portrayal of the male oppressors in *Fire* and *Water* who often seem too selfish and inhumane to elicit much sympathy.

It is also the case that Umaprasad is not entirely blameless; his rationalism proves powerless in the face of deep-rooted religious tradition. This can be understood both as a sign of Umaprasad's own weakness and as a comment on the relatively impotent nature of the 19th century reform movement associated with the Bengali Renaissance. Traditional Hindu customs and beliefs persisted despite the reformers' attempts to remove them. Suranjan Ganguly notes that Ray did not have an unconditional admiration for the 19th century Bengali Renaissance; he regarded it as characterized by a high-minded bourgeois idealism which remained superficial and often ineffective.[43]

Like Mehta's films, *Devi* contains a critique of the Hindu patriarchy. Dayamayi is a powerless young woman who is required by Hindu tradition to serve and obey both her father-in-law and her husband. She is a pawn in a patriarchal battle between father and son. Ironically the goddess is traditionally the source of power (*shakti*) and yet her father-in-law's divinization of Dayamayi leads to her disempowerment; she is largely robbed of her sense of agency. Furthermore, she becomes alienated from those for whom she has the most affection. For example, her conflicted feelings about her own divinity undermine her relationship with her husband. Moreover, her young nephew Khoka sees her as a goddess to be regarded with fear and awe whereas they previously had been extremely close. Even Umaprasad, despite his liberated views, is arguably guilty of objectifying his wife to some extent; a flashback to their wedding night shows him comparing the shy, passive and beautiful Dayamayi to the silent image of the goddess, adumbrating later events. Perhaps his attitude to his new wife is just playful and affectionate; however, it might also be viewed as idealizing Dayamayi's femininity while also exhibiting a paternalistic attitude to her vulnerability and helplessness. Neverthless, Umaprasad

does at other times seem to respect her autonomy; he does not force her to leave the village, for instance, and respects her wish to remain.

Devi is an example of a number of Ray films which are focused on the status of women in Indian society. Some of Ray's female protagonists in other films—such as *Mahanagar* (*The Big City*, 1963) and *Charulata* (*The Lonely Wife*, 1964)—are portrayed as strong and impressive women negotiating the competing demands of traditional roles and modernity. However, Dayamayi is not so fortunate; traditional beliefs are the cause of her oppression but reformist views do not lead to her liberation. The burden her father-in-law has unwittingly placed upon her takes a terrible toll, surely a symbol of the destructiveness of the Hindu patriarchy to women's sense of identity and autonomy. Here there is a contrast with Mehta's films; both *Fire* and *Water* end in a more optimistic manner than *Devi*. Mehta seems to have more confidence in the power of reform and its capacity to offer a future for her female characters free from the sufferings imposed by the male Hindu hegemony. This is arguably because Mehta's films are set in cities and in later historical periods, the 1930s and contemporary India. *Devi* takes place largely in a rural location where traditional views persist more strongly and in the 1860s when the reform movement was still in its infancy.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how *Fire, Water* and *Devi* have expressed critiques of patriarchal attitudes to women in traditional Hindu belief and practice. These films make important statements against injustices against women in Indian society that are sometimes perpetuated in the name of religion. However, it is doubtful that such films have effected significant change in

contemporary Indian society. Structures of oppression are often resilient and deep rooted; the political and social changes required to extirpate them cannot be brought about by such artistic statements alone. Filmmakers such as Mehta and Ray present powerful portrayals of the suffering caused by gender discrimination, but these inequalities continue to be a serious problem in contemporary India.

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[1]See Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2006), 12-96.

[2]See Christiane Brossius, *Empowering Visions: The Politics of Representation in Hindu Nationalism* (London: Anthem Press, 2005).

[3]Deepa Mehta quoted in Jacqueline Levitin, "An Introduction to Deepa Mehta: Making Films in Canada and India. With extracts from an interview conducted by Kass Banning", in eds. Jacqueline Levitin, Judith Plessis, Valerie Raoul, *Women Filmmakers : Refocusing* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 284.

[4]Malini Bhattacharya, "The Hidden Violence of Faith: The Widows of Vrindaban", *Social Scientist*, Vol. 29, No. 1/2(2001), 81. Accessed April 18, 2013. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3518273

[5]Mehta cites *Laws of Manu* chapter 5, verses 156-161 although the translation in the film is a condensed, edited version. For a complete translation, see trans. Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith, *The Laws of Manu* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991), 116: "A virtuous wife who remains chaste when her husband has died goes to heaven just like those chaste men, even if she has no sons. But a woman who violates her (vow to her dead) husband because she is greedy for progeny is the object of reproach here on earth and loses the world beyond. No (legal) progeny are begotten here by another man or in another man's wife; nor is a second husband ever prescribed for virtuous women. A woman who abandons her own inferior (caste birth) husband and lives with a superior (caste birth) man becomes an object of reproach in this world; she is said to be 'previously had by another man'. A woman who is unfaithful to her husband is an object of reproach in this world; (then) she is reborn in the womb of a jackal and is tormented by the diseases born of her evil."

[6]For a summary of the scholarly debate regarding this issue, see Ludo Rocher, "The Dharmaśāstras", in ed. Gavin Flood, *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 114-115.

[7] For a discussion the ambivalent attitude towards women expressed in the *Laws of Manu*, see Anne E. Monius, "Origins of Hindu Ethics", in ed. William Schweiker, *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 336.

[8]William Dalrymple, *The Age of Kali: Indian Travels and Encounters* (London: Harper Collins, 1999), 49-59. See also Bhattacharya, "The Hidden Violence of Faith", 75-83.

[9]Bhattacharya, "The Hidden Violence of Faith", 79-80.

[10]See Kamal Arora, Saydia Kamal and Usamah Ahmad, "*Water*: Drenched in Colonial Benevolence", *Seven Oaks: A Magazine of Politics, Culture and Resistance,* (October 5, 2005). Accessed May 11, 2011. http://www.sevenoaksmag.com/commentary/81_comm4.html

[11]Marzia Casolari, "Role of Benares in Constructing Political Hindu Identity", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 37, No. 15 (2002), 1413. Accessed April 18, 2013. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4411986

[12]See C. Ram-Prasad, "Contemporary Political Hinduism", in ed. Gavin Flood, *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 526-550.

[13]The protest was led by members of the Kashi Sanskriti Raksha Sangharsh Samiti (KSRSS) that includes members of the Sangh Parivar, an umbrella organization for adherents of the Hindutva ideology. See Casolari, "Role of Benares in Constructing Political Hindu Identity", 1413.

[14]Subeshini Moodley, "Postcolonial Feminisms Speaking through an 'Accented' Cinema: The Construction of Indian Women in the Films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta", *Agenda*, 58 (2003), 69. Accessed April 18, 2013. www.jstor.org/stable/4548098

[15]Jacqueline Levitin, "An Introduction to Deepa Mehta", 278.

[16]Lucy Ash, "India's Dowry Deaths", *BBC*, 16 July, 2003. Accessed 11 May 2011. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/crossing_continents/3071963.stm

[17]Paula Richman, ed., *Many Rāmāyanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

[18]Vidyut Aklujkar, "Family, feminism, and film in remaking *Rāmāyana*" in ed. H. R.M. Pauwels, *Indian Literature and Popular Cinema: Recasting Classics.* (London: Routledge, 2007), 45-48.

[19]Moodley, "Postcolonial Feminisms Speaking through an 'Accented' Cinema", 68; Sangeeta Datta "Globalisation and Representations of Women in Indian Cinema", *Social Scientist*, Vol. 28, No.3/4 (2000), 79. Accessed April 20, 2013. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3518191

[20]Anannya Bhattacharjee, "The Habit of Ex-Nomination: Nation, Woman and the Indian Immigrant Bourgeoisie", in ed. Shamita Das Dasgupta, *A Patchwork Shawl: Chronicles of South Asian Women in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 172.

[21]On April 19, 2011, the BBC reported that a man in rural Haryana bludgeoned to death two widows whom he accused of having a lesbian relationship. This disturbing news report combines the themes of homophobia and mistreatment of widows that are the focus of Mehta's two films. See "India; Haryana widows battered to death", *BBC*. Accessed 19 April 2011. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13125674

[22]Sita's name was changed to Neeta in the Hindi version of the film, presumably in an attempt to avoid causing controversy. C.M. Naim, "A Dissent on 'Fire'", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 34, 16/17 (1999), 956. Accessed April 19, 2013. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4407870

[23]Rahul Gairol, "Burning with Shame: Desire and South Asian Patriarchy, from Gayatri Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' to Deepa Mehta's 'Fire' *Comparative Literature*, 54/4 (2002), 316. Accessed April 19, 2013. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4125368

[24]"The 'henchmen' of the Hindu Right [i.e. the Hindu nationalists], including the Mahila Agadhi, the women's wing of the militant and virulently anti-Muslim Siva Sena, and the Bajrang Dal, a faction of the Hindu Right that has become the moral policeman of Indian culture, directed their ire towards the screening of Fire … their mobs disrupted screenings in a number of major cities in India including Bombay, Delhi, Meerut, Surat and Pune". Ratna Kapur, "Too Hot to Handle: The Cultural Politics of 'Fire'", *Feminist Review*, No. 64 (2000), 54. Accessed April 19, 2013. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1395702

[25]Kapur "Too Hot to Handle", 58-59.

[26]She makes this claim in an interview on "Scanning the Movies: TV Special: Part 1" included on DVD disc 2 of Deepa Mehta (2007) *Water:2 Disc Special Edition* (Metrodome). Mehta also identifies herself as a Hindu in an interview with Richard Philips, "Deepa Mehta speaks out against Hindu extremist campaign to stop her film," *World Socialist website* (February 15, 2000). Accessed January 3, 2013. http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2000/02/meht-f15.html

[27]Mehta quoted in Levitin, "An Introduction to Deepa Mehta", 288.

[28]See Arora, Kamal and Ahmad (2005).

[29]She makes this statement in an interview in the documentary "The Making of Water" included on DVD disc 2 of Deepa Mehta (2007) *Water:2 Disc Special Edition* (Metrodome).

[30]Geetanjali Gangoli, "Indian Feminisms. Issues of sexuality and representation" in eds. K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake, *Popular Culture in a Globalised India* (London: Routledge, 2009), 51.

[31]Mehta quoted in Levitin, "An Introduction to Deepa Mehta", 278-279.

[32]*Indian Express* interview, December 13, 1998, cited in Mary E. John and Tejaswini Niranjana (1999) "Mirror Politics: 'Fire', Hindutva and Indian Culture", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 34, No. 10/11, 581. Accessed April 19, 2013. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4407727

[33]John and Niranjana, "Mirror Politics", 582.

[34]For some other Indian films that seek to explore women's subjectivity and 'marginalized female narratives', see Datta "Globalisation and Representations of Women in Indian Cinema",79.

[35]Dilip K. Basu,"On Satyajit Ray's Film Adaptation of 'The Goddess'", *Zoetrope: All-Story*, 8:3 (2004), 100. Accessed April 19 2013. http://www.all-story.com/issues.cgi?action=show_story&story_id=246

[36]Basu, "On Satyajit Ray's Film Adaptation of 'The Goddess'", 101.

[37]See Diana Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). For accounts of women who purportedly have experienced possession by Hindu goddesses, see Kathleen M. Erndl, *Victory to the Mother: The Hindu Goddess of Northwest India in Myth, Ritual and Symbol* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[38]While in Calcutta, Umaprasad is depicted with his friend Bhudev watching a scene from Girishchandra Gosh's nineteenth century play *Sadhavar Ekadasi* (*A Married Woman's Ritual Fast*) in which the patriarchal values of Bengali urban society are satirized. Umaprasad later encourages his friend to marry a woman despite the fact that she is a widow; remarriage of widows was one of the reforms promoted by the Bengali Renaissance.

[39]Darius Cooper, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray. Between Tradition and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 112.

[40]In Mukherjee's story, Dayamayi hangs herself. Ray changed this ending for the final version of the film. The ambiguity of Ray's revised conclusion is arguably more satisfactory; it avoids the melodrama of the original. See Prabhat K. Mukherjee (2004) *The Goddess*, trans. Dilip K. Basu, Zoetrope: All-Story, 8:3, 99. Accessed April 19, 2013. http://www.all-story.com/issues.cgi?action=show_story&story_id=245

[41]Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye,* 124. Ray came from a family that had deep roots in Brahmoism, a 19th century reform movement begun by Rammohan Roy which advocated monotheism and rejected various traditional Hindu beliefs and practices such as *sati*, image worship and prohibitions against widow remarriage. Ray himself renounced his Brahmo faith as a teenager; he was suspicious of organized religion and apparently agnostic in his own personal beliefs. This is an apparent difference from Mehta who, as already mentioned, identifies herself as a

Hindu; however, Mehta's self-proclaimed Hindu identity might be simply a statement of cultural belonging or it might also imply a belief in Hindu spiritual realities. Only in the latter case would there be a clear contrast with Ray's agnosticism. For Ray's views about religion, see Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, 33, 238, 261, 299-300; Chidananda Das Gupta, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray* (Delhi: National Book Trust, 2001), xii.

[42]Chidananda Das Gupta, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray*, 67.

[43]Suranjan Ganguly, *Satyajit Ray. In Search of the Modern* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press), 59.

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