Critical South Asian Studies
July 2025
Volume: 3, No: 1, pp. 81 – 91
ISSN: 2753-6734 (Print) | e-ISSN: 2753-6742 (Online)
journals.tplondon.com/csas

TRANSNATIONAL PRESS® LONDON

Received: 11 December 2024 Accepted: 31 March 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33182/csas.v3i1.3581

Bodies of Water: Hydrofeminist Perspectives on Gender, Religion, and Social Exclusion in Deepa Mehta's *Water*

Shaista Irshad[1]

Abstract

This paper adopts hydrofeminist theory to analyze Deepa Mehta's film *Water* (2005), exploring the intersection of gender, religion, and social exclusion. Embedded in Astrida Neimanis' concept of hydrofeminism, it positions water as both a material and metaphorical concept that structures and designs social identities and cultural structures. The film portrays the predicament of Hindu widows in 1930s India, presenting how water signifies both life-giving and oppressive elements. It presents itself both as a juncture of purification, and salvation, and a framework of socio-religious control, interacting with boundaries of purity and power that restrict women's agency. The Ganges River embodies and exhibits these dualities, demonstrating Neimanis' idea that water holds both redemption and regulatory potential. By emphasizing the relationship between water, gender, caste, and religion, this paper critiques cultural dictates and ideologies that impose female subjugation and explicates water as a metaphor for resilience and social change, advocating for feminist and ecological approaches to address deeply stratified contexts.

Keywords: feminism, hydrofeminism, gender, environment, culture

Introduction

Since antiquity, traversing across cultures, we have seen that water has been impregnated with dual connotations as the provenance of life, fertility, resurrection, purity, cleansing, and an instrument of social restraint. It cascades down varied religious sacraments, christening ceremonies, and atonement rituals. To mention a few, we find in Hinduism that water is revered and deemed sacred with rivers like the Ganges being deified as an epitome or embodiment of purity and is pivotal to rituals encompassing spiritual purification and purgation. Rivers in India are also seen in the embodiment of women and are connected with the essential function of nourishing, fostering, and unleashing havoc as a flood when angered. Nevertheless, these symbolic allusions to purity bring about instances of social restrictions and restraints, levying rigid boundaries on social practices, and erecting social hierarchies to reinforce exclusions that indecorously impact marginalized communities, specifically women. When seen through the lens of history, we realize that water has been associated with influencing both social and physical boundaries. As a trend in umpteen cultures, women are expected to adhere to sanctification rituals related to widowhood, childbirth, menstruation, etc which sketches a boundary and presents a prerequisite for when and how they can access

[1] Dr Shaista Irshad, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Iswar Saran Degree College, a constituent PG College of the University of Allahabad, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, India. E-mail: shaistairshadisdc@gmail.com.

water. These practices encapsulate a bigger societal penchant to oversee and scrutinize women's bodies and lives through the lens of religious and cultural sanctity.

Deepa Mehta's *Water* (2005) portrays the insipid life of widows, who are ostracized and restricted to subsist by the river. Subtracted from normal life they are denied the prospects of remarriage, labelled as inauspicious, subjected to social stigma, poverty, and exploitation. They are even propelled towards the periphery of their survival- into begging or prostitution under the pretext of religious sanction. The river is seen as the symbol of defining both physical and ideological boundaries signifying the isolation of widows from mainstream society and highlighting the repressive influence of purity mandates linked with water.

This paper adopts hydrofeminist theory to analyze Deepa Mehta's film *Water* (2005), exploring the intersection of gender, religion, and social exclusion. Embedded in Astrida Neimanis' concept of hydrofeminism, it positions water as both a material and metaphorical concept that structures and designs social identities and cultural structures. Hydrofeminism is used to demonstrate Neimanis' idea that water holds both redemption and regulatory potential. By emphasizing the relationship between water, gender, caste, and religion, this paper critiques cultural dictates and ideologies that impose female subjugation and explicates water as a metaphor for resilience and social change, advocating for feminist and ecological approaches to address deeply stratified contexts.

Hydrofeminism

Hydrofeminism may be defined as an ecocritical feminist approach that identifies water as both an essential material substance and a metaphor for perceiving relational dynamics and the interconnectedness across human, non-human, and environmental domains. The term coined and explored by theorist Astrida Neimanis, articulates feminist ideologies with ecological and posthuman perceptions, situating water as an integral element in our cognition of bodies and social structures. Slamming the traditional norms that serve as a breach between human beings and the natural realms, it favours the fluidity and interdependence that connects all forms of life. Neimanis hails, "We are all bodies of water" where human beings are the amalgamations of "the cultural and metaphysical investments" and "biological, chemical, and ecological implications" (Neimanis 2017, 1). Referring to Braidotti (2013) and Haraway(1985), she questions and negates the accepted notion of humans as discrete, autonomous beings, and underscores the idea that we are bridged together into a more-than-human assemblage, where human entities are entwined with other forms of matter and life. Addressing our fluid connections within more-than-human hydro-commons, she leads us towards a rethinking of humanness as watery and interconnected both biologically and conceptually, alluding to the shared existence with the environment that transcends anthropocentrism. Neimanis further views our bodies, as being composed of water acting as nurturing foetal milieus for other forms of life, comprising those both similar to and different from us. It also accentuates that our wet beings are in stark contrast with the masculinist ideology of unyielding individualism as favoured by phallogocentrism.

Identifying our bodies as "watery" (Neimanis 2017, 2) questions three established human ideas: individualism, anthropocentrism, and phallogocentricism. These perspectives connive together in ascertaining a human-centric male-oriented mindset. Visualizing ourselves as bodies of water hinders these notions and promotes, "posthuman politics of location" (3) that merges us with shared "hydrocommons"- a system of relationships where all forms of life

communicate through water. This form of embodiment is based on feminist ideologies, which is recontextualized through modern feminist and posthuman insights like agential realism, transcorporeality, and non-normative (queer) temporalities. It posits that "posthuman gestationality"(4)- the nurturing potential of bodily water to sustain different species- deconstructs the perception surrounding human-centered heteronormative procreative sexuality as the principal form of reproduction, while at the same time maintaining the significance of maternal and gendered bodies. With the help of evolutionary studies of science and shared physical histories that link us with the past and future bodies, posthuman gestationality transcends the strict binary propositions. It emphasizes that while we are unique individuals, we are also profoundly interconnected through our shared compositions of water. This watery perception urges us to admit our politics of location or our distinct position within the grand scheme of life and at the same time acknowledge that this positioning mingles, flows, and connects with other lives and temporalities beyond our reach.

The concept surrounding bodies of water is grounded in three interlinked theoretical foundations. First Neimanis explores embodied phenomenology by Maurice Merleau-Ponty to delve into the lived experiences of the bodies. Second, it navigates through Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's (1994), rhizomatic thought which leads to the reconceptualizing of phenomenology in posthuman or non-normative terms mingling embodiment with intricate interconnected networks. The third one was inspired by the French écriture feminine by Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. All these philosophers adopted bodily materiality while rejecting biological essentialism, visualizing embodiment as a location of possibilities and transformation despite restrictive cultural ideologies of phallogocentrism. These contexts enable us to envisage embodiment as a dynamic, transformative process that puts down traditional notions of boundaries and fixed identities emphasizing becoming rather than being.

The phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty moves into the domain of the theory of embodiment which informs that the body cannot be assumed as anything we "have," but rather as something we undeniably are. His idea of phenomenology celebrates the intrinsic connection between the body and consciousness, explaining how subjective experience is deeply engraved in our embodied existence. His philosophy invites us to visualize perception as an interactive lived experience drifting away from abstract theorizing to portray the immediacy and fluidity of lived experience. This opposes the long-held Western notion of looking at bodies as separate units and promotes a relational approach, "nature outside of us must be unveiled to us by the Nature that we are … We are part of some Nature, and reciprocally, it is from ourselves that living beings and even space speak to us" (Merleau-Ponty 2003, 206). William Connolly takes this further to explore "preliminary affinities" between what is human and non-human nature, taking the idea towards, "organiz[ation of] experimental investigations to uncover dimensions of human and nonhuman nature previously outside the range of that experience" (2011, 45). Neimanis seeks to club the feminist approach with this exploration, presenting a situated politics of location that influences and designs lived experiences. This approach is reflected and illustrated through analysis of water and inquiry about bodily engagements which assist in our comprehension of embodiment. Ultimately, this study invites a posthuman feminist phenomenology that peruses the complex connections between bodies, environments, and lived experiences, augmenting phenomenological analysis of a more inclusive understanding of existence.

Gilles Deleuze contributes to our posthuman understanding and new material thoughts, more precisely the notion of bodies as fluid, linked beings instead of distinct individuals. His work, along with Félix Guattari challenges conventional human-centric views, proposing "body" being any unit with a specific fortitude or threshold of endurance, beyond which it no longer exists in its current state. This idea repudiates the perception surrounding anthropocentrism, advocating that humans are entangled within a system of material and interconnected forces. For Deleuze, bodies represent the confluence of physical, cultural, and semiotic forces, stressing the process of becoming instead of being stationary and fixed. His concept of rhizomatics lays down a structure that moves beyond fixed hierarchies and focuses on how bodies navigate and interact within multiple planes, providing a significant conceptual base for posthuman phenomenology.

Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous's understanding of embodiment moves towards stating its materiality in the most perceptible and tangible form, highlighting the bodies being fluid and dynamic. Their theory of écriture feminine explores that while these bodies are being impacted by cultural retrains and the ideology of phallogocentrism, their materiality presents a new viewpoint on sexual difference. Water and fluid embodiment are the dominating themes in the work of these writers. Iriagaray in her work *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* directly engages with phenomenology along with contemporary material feminism and new material feminism. Her analysis portrays the fluidity of bodies as both a metaphor and a vital source for exploring and understanding interactions between embodiment, identity, and the natural world.

Neimanis states in *Undutiful Daughters* (2012) that the fluid body isn't confined to women but still raises important queries for feminist theory. Perceiving embodiment as intrinsically watery could confront the insistent feminist debate that portrays "commonality (connection, identification) and difference (alterity, unknowability)" (Neimanis, 90). Similar to Irigaray's approach this viewpoint recognizes that the patterns of fluid embodiment echo Gayatri Spivak's idea, "the species of alterity" (2003,72) a condition that protects plurality. Irigaray posits that no body is self-contained in its fluid embodiment instead each body rises from different waters that have nourished us both "evolutionarily and maternally (Irigaray, 12-13)" Water thus maintains its fluvial process through and across variations. Water does not make it mandatory to choose between either the uniqueness of otherness or the connection to materiality. Water unquestionably flows between as, both: a new hydro-logic. Neimanis's (2012) exploration of this standpoint channelizes our thoughts toward ethics and politics embedded in the understanding that the incomprehensibility of others pervades our bodies, the way we pervade theirs. Labelling our bodies as containers of water that conceive, endure, and connect with other bodies – a singular connection yet shared- brings out a critically materialist feminist view that rejects essentialisms while establishing itself beyond existing as merely a discourse. This watery feminism leads us to the realization that our embodied relations are material as well as deeply entangled.

Deepa Mehta's film *Water*

"Water makes the screen a fluid and interconnecting threshold between two places, between here and there, between present and past, conscious and unconscious, waking and sleeping, life and death" (Bradley 2017).

Deepa Mehta's *Water* plunges into the predicament and suffering of Hindu widows in colonial India, brought to the screen through five major characters- Chuyia, Kalyani, Shakuntala, Madhumati, and Narayan. It highlights innocence, oppression, resistance, and the desire to escape and gain freedom. In the opening scene of the movie, Chuyia, a 7-year-old bride, is shown to be casually accompanying her dying husband on his passage to eternity. The movie represents the Indian landscape of 1938, endorsing the traditional Hindu text "that widows have three options." The most honourable decision would be to "burn with the dead husbands". If they are permitted by their husband's family, the widow may marry the husband's younger brother." For Chuyia, the only valid option is in the form of leading a dull and drab "life of self-denial". She is left by her father mercilessly on the doors of the widow's compound where from now onwards, like other widows, she will have to spend her life in atonement and self-restraint with a shaven head and white saree. This is validated by the Laws of Manu, which are consecrated Hindu scriptures and present the epigram for the movie, "A widow should be long suffering until death, self-restrained and chaste." Chuyia's incessant cries and rigid denial of her fate rip the hearts open. Her childlike insistence to go back home to her mother highlights her ignorance of her fate and the harshness of widowhood. Her naivety and innocence paint her tragic image when she is forced to follow rituals and routines in the ashram to groom herself for a life comprising oppression and undesirability.

Kalyani (young), Shakuntala (middle-aged), and Madhumati (old) have different responses towards widowhood. Kalyani longs for love, companionship, and freedom, and Shakuntala's heart is aligned with spiritual callings imparted by the holy man on the banks of the river Ganges in Varanasi. Madhumati, as different from Kalyani and Shakuntala, executes a toughened, sarcastic response to widowhood. As the eldest widow and manager of the ashram, she has ingrained cruelty and dictatorship and utilizes them to exercise domination and control over the other widows, including their commodification for financial gain.

As the narrative unravels, Chuyia is exposed to the adversities, destitutions, and challenges of a widow's life. Kalyani falls in love with a young nationalist Narayan, who stands to challenge the socio-religious restrictions imposed on her. It is after his relationship with Kalyani, that he is exposed to the murky realities, hypocrisy, customs, and oppressive forces surrounding the lives of widows. Madhumati, a hypocritical lady, strongly opposes Kalyani's marriage to Narayan, using the bait of religion that condemns widows' remarriage as a sin. She validates her exploitation of Kalyani and other widows as a survival mechanism, labelling their actions as a denial of God's will. This verdict stands in contrast to her forced prostitution imposed first on Kalyani and later on Chuyia and displays her hypocrisy in manipulating societal and religious ideologies in governing the lives of widows. As the plot unfolds, Kalyani discovers that she had been exploited by Narayan's father as a prostitute, leading her to return to the ashram. In a state of dilemma, shame, and despair she commits suicide by drowning herself in the river. Shakuntala in an attempt to align her spiritual beliefs with the harsh realities of her life tries to seek liberation through religious texts. Her failure materializes in the death of Kalyani and then Chuyia's exploitation into prostitution manipulated by Madhumati. Toward the end, Shakuntala, to save Chuyia, carries her to the train station and hands her to Narayana asking him to take her to Gandhi in the hope of a better future.

The film *Water* casts a poignant portrayal of the intersections between gender, religion, and social exclusion and can understood within the context of Astrida Neimanis's hydrofeminism. The film's projection of the narrative of widows living in an ashram by the river Ganges

reflects broader themes of oppression, identity, and the complex relationship between humans and water. This perspective brings about the multi-layered relationships that the widows have with the Ganges—an element that is deeply entwined with their social status, identity, and spiritual ideologies. The interactions of the characters with the river emphasize how their identities are being, constructed, reframed (reorganized), confined, and suppressed by gender expectations and religious beliefs. The river symbolizes both the subjugation and the resilience of widows; it witnesses their imposed marginalization while symbolizing the possibility of cleansing, regeneration, and resistance against restrictive social mores.

Gender, Religion and social Exclusion

Chuyia symbolizes innocence and the catastrophic influence of social norms. Her arrival at the ashram brings her face-to-face with a world dominated by rigid norms of patriarchal and religious society. Shortly after her husband's cremation on the riverbank, Chuyia's shaven head symbolizes the loss of her identity, individuality, and beauty signifying her transition into widowhood. The river Ganges is not only physically present but also stays there as a testimony and mute witness to the effacement of Chuyia's innocence and childhood. The river functions as an active participant in the Chuyia's ritualistic transformation. Through the hydrofeminist lens, the duality of the river can be seen as both a spectator and a complicit force in the socio-religious traditions that restrict her. This moment presents a blunt visual portrayal of societal control over women's bodies to control their identities and reinforce their status within a patriarchal framework. The sacred association of water with purity is used as a device to dictate and delineate the margins of adequate behaviour and lifestyle for widows, more precisely for the concepts surrounding purity and sin. This imposed purity robs Chuyia of her former identity, socially excluding her, while the river -paradoxically a life-giving serves a location where her agency is reduced rather than renewed.

The ashram's manager Madhumati tries to prepare and construct her identity as a widow by imparting the religious mandates of Hinduism "In grief, we are all sisters here and this house is our refuge. Our Holy Books say a wife is part of her husband while he is alive. Right?" She further adds the catechism "When our husbands die, God help us, the wives also half die. So how can a poor half-dead woman feel any pain?" This statement represents hydrofeminism's account of how water and its related meanings can be weaponized to regulate and shape femininity. Chuhiya's prompt reply to Madhumati asserting the fact of being "half alive," challenges the rationale of the collective identity levied on them, and points out the intrinsic conflicts within the religious dictates. This scene accentuates and celebrates the voice of individual agency within a collectivist account, stressing that even in the extremes of oppression, voices of dissension can emerge.

Kalyani's character in the film embodies the complex layered identity that widows endure in a society saturated with gendered and class oppression- a society that marginalizes her as a widow and commercializes her as a beauty. Isolated from others, she lives upstairs, and is young, beautiful, and attractive, with her uncut hair. Social exclusion owing to widowhood not only deprives her of her agency but also traps her in the unending loop of physical and emotional exploitations of prostitution devised by Madhumati. The commercial nature of her role, in which she is ferried across the Ganges to the abodes of high-class Brahmin men, whose wives are complicit in prostitution, emphasizes the trend in which widows are degraded, robbed of agency, and limited to monetary utility in the corrupt system of society.

This duality embedded in her character discloses a broader social double standard: while religious ideologies lay down the mandates of supposed purity and piety widows must uphold; these same dictates are maneuvered to validate the oppression of these women by those in power. Kalyani being ferried for prostitution across the Ganges symbolically addresses the interconnectedness of the fluidity of water, femininity, and societal exploitation. This imagery of water acts as a source of sustenance and a process of regulatory framework and commodification with a patriarchal system. The river portrays how cultural discourses surrounding water can construct and promote gender hierarchies.

Kalyani eats alone and not with others because, as one widow says "With her uncut hair and 'clients', eating with Kalyani would pollute our food." This food, though, is purchased using the money she gets through prostitution. In another example, Kalyani, while running after her runaway dog, outside the ashram, accidentally crashes with a Brahmin wife, who, we get to know later, is Narayan's mother. The Brahmin woman is dismayed. "What are you doing?" she scolds Kalyani. "Widows shouldn't run around like unmarried girls. You've polluted me. I have to bathe again." The touch of Kalyani is tantamount to polluting; however, her husband is one of her "clients," and it is regarded as the duty of a noble wife to arrange a prostitute for her husband. When Narayan questions his father, he is advised not to marry a widow but to take her as a mistress instead. The holy scriptures explain that "A virtuous wife who remains chaste when her husband has died goes to heaven. [But a] woman who is unfaithful to her husband is reborn in the womb of a jackal." This interpretation of the religious text marks the hypocrisy and selfishness of the father, who goes to the extent of condemning her "in the next life" as well. He proclaims while Kalyani's touch is contaminating; his touch is a sanctification.

The characters of Chuyia and Kalyani criticize the concept of self-governing, autonomous and discrete embodiment, aligning with Astrida Neimanis, who challenges the individualistic, neoliberal patterns of the body. The widows do not have an autonomous life and existence; their bodies are shaped and constructed by religious norms, economic exclusion, and social humiliation. This can be analyzed through posthuman embodiment, where bodies are seen as depending on bigger networks—historical, cultural, and environmental. In the film, the widows' lack of independence and autonomy is deeply tied to the phallogocentric structures that define their roles as non-women, stripped of any space and identity within society, echoing the feminist struggle for bodily autonomy under patriarchal systems.

To Chuyia Kalyani looks angelic, an incarnation of beauty and feminine grace. Narayan, a disciple of Gandhi, sees her in the image of a sacred feminine, a goddess, falls in love, and proposes to marry her. His visualization of her reflects a promising revolt against the oppressive forces situating her on the threshold of resistance and the prospects of a liberated life transcending societal limitations. Narayan's perception of Kalyani, in the embodiment of the sacred feminine, suggests her identity to be worthy of reverence and protection. Water, in many cultures, is allegorically linked with femininity, alluding to fertility and life and also the fluidity and adaptability of women's role in the patriarchal setup. By looking at Kalyani as a goddess, he situates her within the narrative that follows the quest of restoring and celebrating femininity, which is often subdued and drowned under oppressive societal structures. On the other hand, this idealism may also be seen through the lens of objectifying Kalyani and robbing her of her agency and identity. His dream of marrying her and encapsulating her in an idealized image of purity reeks of saviour or messiah complex- a belief

where the male figure assumes and undertakes the role of a rescuer or liberator while possibly perpetuating the same networks of power he aspires to demolish. This dilemma points toward the necessity of comprehending empowerment and liberation in hydrofeminism. This understanding invokes the need of oppressed women like Kalyani to reclaim their agency and identity and steer their way to liberation without completely relying on male support and interference.

Despite all, the union of lovers is doomed by fate. While on the ferry with Narayan, not as a prostitute, but to meet his family as his future bride, she is taken aback when she recognizes the house as one of her clients- Narayan's father. She requests to be taken back to her ashram and tells Narayan to find out the truth from his father. This scene aligns with hydrofeminism's idea of bodies as interrelated yet distinct, dripping yet bounded, fluid yet viscous. This reflects the mingling of hydrofeminism and Tuana's concept of "viscous porosity" (2008, 194) in the encounter between Kalyani and Naryana, who accost the social and personal boundaries that seem fluid yet uphold resistance. Kalyani's sudden recognition of the house erects a symbolic impermeable membrane, a juncture of embodied, historical agony that dissipates her fragile hope for liberation and love. Her past and present lives crash when Narayan wafts her on the ferry across the path that bore witness to her abuse and exploitation. The Ganges exhibits both life and prospective danger. Its transcorporeal nature- its flow between and within bodies – emphasizes how we are constantly intermingling with our ambiance, reflecting both nurture and risk. The water at this moment comes out not only as a metaphor for liberation but also as a viscous space where the past afflictions stay, refusing to dissolve completely into another's narrative or world- underlining the limits of fluidity. It resists an unrestricted dissolution of identities, precisely those oppressed and abused, to preserve some autonomy to avoid the erasure of identity.

Kalyani, in despair and hopelessness, commits suicide by drowning herself in the river. Shakuntala, during Kalyani's cremation on the bank of the river, defines her death to Narayan in the words of holy scriptures, "The Holy Texts say all this is an illusion" which is bluntly rebuffed by him: "Kalyani's death is no illusion." Shakuntala, confused and shattered asks a huge question, "Why are we widows sent here? There must be a reason for it." Narayan continues with his bluntness and offers a materialistic response, "One less mouth to feed. Four saris saved, one bed, and a corner is saved in the family home. There is no other reason why you are here. Disguised as religion, it's just about money." She gets a somewhat similar response from the holy man, "a law was recently passed, which favours widow remarriage." She astonishingly asks "A law? Why don't we know about it?"

Kalyani's suicide and Shakuntala's response can be seen through the lens of Neimanis's understanding of ecotones- a zone of transition between different ecosystems. They can be seen not only as representing boundaries or separation but also as "a zone of fecundity, creativity, transformation; of becoming, assembling, multiplying; of diverging, differentiating, relinquishing" (Neimanis, 2012), where life begins and evolves in uncommon ways. The river Ganges offers a liminal and transformative space, a space symbolizing life and death, despair and rebirth, the hope of freedom, and loss of love. Kalyani's death signifies a moment of aching transition, one that shakes Shakuntala's faith in religious scriptures as a source of knowing and enduring the unforgiving realities of the world. Narayan too rejects "illusion" and denies disguising the sufferings as ordained by religion. Ecotones represent tidal zones, a confluence of rich life and diversity, reflecting overlaps and conflicts where differences co-

exist and initiate new forms. In the film, the river emerges as an ecotone, not just as a threshold between life and death but as a location of confrontation, collection, and transformation. It's a site where conflicting faiths clash with painful realities. The river's function in Kalyani's fate and Shakuntala's evolution echoes how ecotones embody both the end and the revival, highlighting the nuances of becoming within a contended social truth.

Shakuntala's act of unlocking Kalyani's door and liberating her to marry Narayan is not a solitary act, rather it unfolds a network of relationships and societal frameworks. Her action signifies an interruption of the movement of water that ties women to their roles as oppressed beings. Just as water keeps flowing and transforming, Shakuntala's decision modifies the dynamics amongst the characters, enmeshing their fate in ways that she couldn't initially predict. It brings home a lesson that feminism should transcend the limitations of sexual difference to encompass environmental and ethical concerns. Her journey enlarges the feminist ideology illustrating that true liberation encapsulates a holistic understanding of women's experiences within a complex societal network. Shakuntala's self-liberation through agency and action in taking keys from Madhumati and facilitating Kalyani's meeting with Narayan is a revolt, a transformation that signals her breaking free from the clutches of stereotyped role.

The repercussions of Shakuntala's actions become apparent with Kalayani's suicide and Chuyia's abuse. She was least aware that her action would end in a tragic situation. Not only does Kalyani commit suicide, but Madhumati, after losing her most money-spinning widow, fixes her fangs on Chuyia, who still desires to go home. She informs Chuyia, "Gulabi will take you [home]". Home is the bedroom of Narayan's fathers. Chuyia hesitatingly enters the room and says, "I've come here to play." This presents the danger and risk intrinsic in seeking liberation in an oppressive system, alluding to what Neimanis echoes "Here is gestation, here is proliferation, here is danger, here is risk. Here is an unknowable future, always already folded into our own watery flesh" (2012, 96).

Shakuntala while struggling with the implications of her decisions, realizes towards the end that Chuyia's destiny conveys a crucial moment of self-liberation. By carrying her to Gandhi, she understands the importance of connecting with a new moral compass that celebrates individual agency and confronts the restrictions imposed by religious dogmas. The overlapping of the holy man's silence and Gandhi's ideology of believing in truth proclaims the shift from traditional confines to a more subtle comprehension of morality, which enlightens her with the importance of truth as a guiding force in the battle against injustice.

The Ashram is purposefully located near the river Ganges, where water serves as a repeated motif throughout the film, symbolizing both physical and spiritual nourishment. This water is at once sacred and profane in its flow. The river is vital to many aspects of life: people submerge themselves to purify body and soul, drink from it, perform religious ceremonies, and use it as "holy water." It receives the ashes of the deceased and cremated and witnesses acts of despair, as people die in its depths. Moreover, the Ganges stands as a barricade, dividing rich and poor, separating individuals from their desires, and keeping lovers tragically apart. The pollution of the river Ganga marks a broader societal erosion felt by widows Kalyani and Chuyia. The sacred waters, once a source of cleanliness and purity become increasingly contaminated by waste defining the ways through which patriarchal practices stigmatize the lives of widows. The abuse and exploitation strip even an iota of joy from their

lives. The norms associated with breaking bangles, draping plain white sarees, and removing ornaments lead to the erasure of their being and identity. In this context, the polluted Ganges embodies both the spiritual and physical degeneration present in their lives, highlighting the interconnection between environmental dilapidation and the lived realities of marginalized women. At this juncture, we must realize that we "reside within and as part of a fragile global hydrocommons, where water – the lifeblood of humans and all other bodies on this planet – is increasingly contaminated, commodified and dangerously reorganized" (Neimanis, 2013, 27-28).

Gulabi, a pimp, and a hermaphrodite denotes the queer nature of identity and challenges the strict gender binaries implemented by society. Water, a sign of fluidity, mirrors her capability of surmounting the accepted dichotomy of gender and personifies a queerness that ruptures the conformist narratives woven around gender. This fluid connectivity signifies the interconnectedness of identities highlighting Gulabi's position not simply indicating exploitation but also of adaption and resilience in a society devised to subdue her. Her gossiping and conveying news to Madhumati through the barred window indicates the flow of information and interaction among marginalized groups of people. While she participates in a role that disseminates exploitation, she also promotes a sense of community and connection among the widows of the ashram, underlining the importance of commonality in the face of subjugation. She discards the binary division of supremacy and marginality, exemplifying how one can be both an oppressor and oppressed. Her character is that of a strong reminder that freedom must accept and acknowledge the intricacies of intersectional identities and the fluidity of social relationships.

The film *Water* also brings about two opposing forms of collectivism: one that imposes control and conformity, and another that promotes shared accountability. The ashram's collectivism takes the form of tyrannical uniformity, robbing widows of their individuality and compelling them into a "half-alive" status imposed by religious and social decrees. However, the rebellious response of the widows stresses a second, more equitable form of collectivism: one that invites collective liability rather than unreasoning obedience to restrictive and oppressive norms. Through the illustration of system-wide inequality ingrained in patriarchy, caste, and religion, the film encourages viewers to change from a human-centric, individualistic perspective to a collective responsibility that recognizes the structural nature of the widows' suffering. In doing so, the film reimagines collectivism as a power for social change, where collective ethics empower individual agency and advocate for dismantling oppressive structures.

Conclusion

The question "What can we learn from water? How might an engagement with water inform our politics, our daily living, ourselves?" (Boon et al. (2018, p. 60)- is particularly relevant in the context of Deepa Mehta's film *Water*. The film deeply portrays and illustrates the thoughtful connections between gender, religion, and social exclusion through a hydrofeminist lens, criticizing the oppressive social system that manipulates the lives of widows while emphasizing the dual nature of water as a symbol of both life and marginalization. By analyzing the experiences of characters like Kalyani and Chuyia, the film portrays the punitive realities faced by women rooted in patriarchal systems, wherein religious rituals strip away their identities and agency.

The film inspires a decentring of human understanding to assimilate larger social, cultural, and ecological systems. It's a compelling portrayal for the audience to cogitate on the prospects of collective accountability rather than individual moral responsibility. By suggesting a transition from a human-centric viewpoint, the film conveys how the sufferings and lived experiences of widows are a manifestation of systemic discrimination entrenched in patriarchy, caste hierarchies, and religious mandates. The film compels us to understand and recognize these social organizations acting as co-accomplices in the subjugation of widows and invites a collective re-assessment of conventionalities and ethics. The film gives a call to the audience to encounter and reassess their roles within these systems and identify the urgency for collective effort, accentuating that honest change entails demolishing the oppressive structures that influence and shape our realities.

References

Boon, Sarah, Lesley Butler, and Deirdre Jefferies. *Autoethnography and Feminist Theory at the Water's Edge: Unsettled Islands*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Bradley, Cheyenne. "Analysing Water and Its Significance in Film." Media Factory, April 3, 2017. https://www.mediafactory.org.au/cheyenne-bradley/2017/04/03/analysing-water-and-its-significance-in-film/.

Connolly, W. (2011), *A World of Becoming*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Irigaray, Luce. *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*. Translated by Gillian C. Gill. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

Mehta, Deepa, dir. *Water*. Toronto: Rhombus Media, 2005.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*. Translated by Robert Vallier. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003.

Neimanis, Astrida. "Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water." In *Undutiful Daughters: New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice*, edited by Henriette Gunkel, Chrysanthi Nigianni, and Fanny Söderbäck. First published 2012. Palgrave Macmillan.

Neimanis, Astrida. "Feminist Subjectivity, Watered." *Feminist Review* 103 (2013): 23–41.

Neimanis, Astrida. *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

Tuana, Nancy. "Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina." In *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, 194. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.