

Water

Canada/USA 2005 117 mins

Crew and Cast

Director	Deepa Mehta
Screenplay	Deepa Mehta
Cinematography	Giles Nuttgens
Kalyani	Lisa Ray
Chuyia	Sarala
Madhumati	Manorma
Shankuntala	Seema Biswas
Narayan	John Abraham

Synopsis

Varanasi (Benares), 1938, On the death of her 'husband' – a man she's barely met - eight-year-old Chuyia is condemned by Hindu tradition to lifelong widowhood and consigned by her father to the House of Widows, a bleak place presided over by the venal, drug-addicted Madhumati. As a widow Chuyia has her head shaved and is dressed in white, the colour of mourning. She's befriended by Shakuntala, a woman in her thirties who comforts her and looks after her.

Chuyia meets Kalyani, a beautiful young woman who lives by herself in an upstairs room and, alone among the widows, is allowed to grow her hair. This is because Madhumati pimps her out to men in the town, with the help of the eunuch Gulabi. Among Kalyani's regular clients is a rich Brahmin, Seth Dwarkanath. While Kalyani and Chuyia are bathing at the ghats, Kalyani's puppy runs away and is caught by a young man, Narayan, an enlightened follower of Gandhi. Narayan falls in love with Kalyani and, to the horror of his mother, proposes to marry her.

Extract from Sight & Sound, Jun'07

Born in India, **Deepa Mehta** received a degree in Philosophy from the University of New Delhi. In 1991, she produced and directed her first feature film *Sam & Me*, which won the very first Honorable Mention by the Critics in the Camera D'Or category at the 1991 Cannes Film Festival. In 1993, Mehta directed her second feature film, *Camilla*. Mehta then wrote, directed and produced her third feature film, *Fire*, which won 14 international festival awards. *Earth*, based on Bapsi Sidhwa's critically acclaimed novel *Cracking India*, was the second film in Mehta's elemental trilogy, of which *Water* is the final instalment.



Review

The story of the making of Deepa Mehta's *Water*, the third in her "elemental" trilogy, is worth a movie in itself. It began in February 2000 when the director was scheduled to begin shooting in India. The location was the holy city of Varanasi, a place where the 'widow houses' depicted in the film still exist. But the first day of filming was disturbed by a riot, with over 2000 protesters destroying the main film set and casting the ruins into the river. Effigies of the director were burnt. Threats were made on her life. In response, the local government withdrew its location permits, claiming (correctly, it seems) that the safety of the crew and actors could no longer be guaranteed. Mehta went to Delhi to meet with the Minister of Information and Broadcasting, and returned a few days later with permission to shoot. Under the protection of the Indian Army, filming re-commenced - only to be halted after just two takes, amid further bomb scares and threats of suicide from protesters.

In fairness, Mehta could hardly have been unprepared for difficulties. This film's predecessors, *Fire* (1998) and *Earth* (1999), each generated fierce controversy within her homeland - the former, in particular, infuriated fundamentalists with its onscreen depiction of a lesbian relationship, resulting in riots and the destruction of cinemas in Mumbai, New Delhi, Pune and Surat. But for the filmmaker, who had mortgaged her home in Canada to provide necessary funding, it seemed ruinous. ("I never wanted to make another film again" she said, a year later.)

Then, almost five years later, *Water* appeared: recast, shot in Sri Lanka under a fake title - yet in every other respect, perfectly congruent with the rest of Mehta's trilogy. Lensed once again by Giles Nuttgens, it not only boasts the high production sheen of her best work, but reconnects the filmmaker with her political conscience. Set in 1938, during the struggle for independence from British colonial rule, it describes the plight of a group of widows, women of various ages, consigned to live in poverty at a temple. Tellingly, the final credits note that, in 2001, there were over 34 million widows in India - the majority of them subsisting in conditions of extreme economic deprivation. As such, it represents a conspicuous disappointment for those who espoused the political philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, and throws into sharp relief that otherwise admirable leader's failure - despite his criticism of certain aspects of caste-based oppression, such as the segregation of widows and the notion of "untouchability" - to adequately challenge the political and economic foundations of the caste system. Still, the film exists at last, splendid and defiant - and perhaps the highest compliment one can pay it, is to note that fundamentalist Hindus will revile it.

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