

Water

Deepa Mehta is a provocateur. This Indian-born, Toronto-based filmmaker has specialized in delving into provocative themes questioning the premises of her own culture. In 1996, she directed *Fire*, a shocker for many because it presented a lesbian affair, a situation barely acknowledged in Indian society. In 1998 came *Earth*, which offered a hard look at societies torn asunder by religion during the 1947 Partition. Both of these films were banned in the sub-continent. Now, with *Water*, her “elemental” trilogy is capped with an unvarnished look at traditional Indian widowhood and its travails, a theme no more likely to endear her to the that country’s authorities (*film opens May 5*).

For historic effect, Ms. Mehta has set her story in a town in the colonial India of 1938, with the Gandhi phenomenon a-building, and with most Indian cities still mired in long-held rituals and practices. One of the strangest--for us in the West--requires that widows, of any age, be ostracized from the general society so they may remain “virtuous.” Since, according to sacred writ, “a wife is part of her husband,” she is nothing without him and must be socially isolated--thus, untainted. The practical effect such a practice has hits us right at the film’s opening, when we meet sweet and chubby young Chuyia (Sarala), all of eight years old but promised to a groom, become a widow when her much older betrothed dies, leaving her a child “widow,” yanked away from her family forever to live in a compound of other solitary women, her head shaven and her resting place a mud floor.

The kid cannot, of course, comprehend what has happened to her, but--though feisty and a fair tester of limits--she learns to adapt, and to accommodate to her elders, a coarse, mountainous grande dame, a sniveling crone she comes to call “Auntie,” and a decent mother figure, the melancholy Shakuntala (Seema Biswas). She is also befriended by the younger, lovely Kalyanli (Lisa Ray), who has been able to live somewhat apart from the others. Kalyani dominates a sub-plot wherein she falls in love with the earnest young Narayana (John Abraham), a promising student from a prominent Brahmin family. Kalyani, it turns out, is already involved with that family as the mistress of Narayana’s dissolute father (a situation about which he knows nothing). How Kalyani eventually resolves her dilemma with father and son, and how Chuyia becomes a part of that family dynamic become the heartbreaking and gut-wrenching finale of *Water*. The dramatic--and tentatively hopeful--finish also involves the triumphant appearance of the Mahatma himself.

Pieces of other films from South Asia kept coming back to me as I watched *Water*. There are moments reminiscent of the fine documentary *Born into Brothels* in the depiction of a constricted all-female environment, or of the poignant *Osama* (from Afghanistan) for its unblinking look at the tribulations of a discarded young girl, or, inevitably, of scenes from Satyajit Ray’s monumental *Apu* trilogy. Still, Ms. Mehta makes this her story and keeps it coherent and moving, and--especially when following young Sarala as Chuyia--generally captivating. The tale, which contains incendiary elements, avoids real pyrotechnics by developing at a measured (sometimes too s-l-o-w...) pace. We are dropped into a world we may struggle to understand, but the director helps us decode what that world was like and what it might become.

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