

Displacing Androcracy: Cosmopolitan Partnerships in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water*

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Abstract

This study contributes to the current cosmopolitan debate by highlighting equal recognition and inclusion as a viable social engagement towards diversity, through which dominator binary rankings are transcended by valuing mutually empathic relationships. Set against the backdrop of Gandhi's Freedom Movement, *Water* pushes the boundaries of India's male-dominant cultural narratives beyond patriarchal predicaments by questioning the religious tradition and the oppressive constraints imposed on Hindu widows. By applying Riane Eisler's 'partnership model' to the analysis of the novel, with a brief reference to Deepa Mehta's homonymous film, I explore how Sidhwa's characters move toward more caring and life-enhancing scenarios by portraying relationships of mutual support, thus overcoming the rigid discourses imposed by dominator hierarchies.

The need to open up new ways of promoting respect for the variety of world cultures, languages and literatures, at local and global levels sets the primary purpose of this paper. This is even more crucial and timely as, in our current age of transnational flows, social and cultural environments are increasingly transformed and enriched by ongoing migrations. Under the impact of these continuing global interconnections, economic, social and cultural structures go through significant changes and at the same time authoritarian social systems of rigid rankings, hierarchies of domination, robust nationalisms and ethnocentric histories are brought into question, and, as Dipesh Chakrabarty aptly reminds us, 'may be renewed from and for the margins' (2000 p.16). Providing a conceptual framework that rejects the colonial binary model of constructing knowledge and overcomes the dominant ways in which the relations between western and non-western people are represented, has therefore become fundamental. In order to move beyond the epistemic violence of (neo) colonialism and allow transnational encounters to fruitfully grow, overlap and borrow from each other, intercultural configurations and global aspirations need to be recognized as invaluable opportunities for productive alliance and cooperation, 'grounded on the critique of all possible fundamentalism (Western and non-Western, national and religious, neoliberal and neosocialist)' (Mignolo 2002, p. 181).

In this respect, anthropologist and macro-historian Riane Eisler enhances such visions in what she calls the ‘partnership model’ or *gylany*,¹ a cultural paradigm which emphasizes mutually respectful and caring relationships as an alternative to the usual unilateral patterns of domination based on gender inequalities, top-down hierarchies and violence. Supported by the archaeological discoveries of Marija Gimbutas (1974; 1982; 1991), she gives evidence of ‘another history’, that of the Neolithic Europe before the violent invasion of the Indo-European nomads, in which an equalitarian² mode of living was far more central than a dominant one, resulting in relations of reciprocity rather than relations of control. In *The Chalice and the Blade*,³ hailed by Ashley Montague as the most important book since Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, Eisler describes both partnership and dominator systems that organize personal and social relations in world cultures across time:

one result of re-examining human society from a gender-holistic perspective has been a new theory of cultural evolution. This theory, which I have called Cultural Transformation Theory, proposes that underlying the great surface diversity of human culture are two basic models of society. The first, which I call *dominator* model, is what is popularly termed either patriarchy or matriarchy—the *ranking* of one half of humanity over the other. The second, in which social relations are primarily based on the principle of *linking* rather than ranking, may best be described as *partnership* model. In this model—beginning with the most fundamental differences in our species, between male and female—diversity is not equated with either inferiority or superiority (Eisler 1987, p. xvii).

According to her cultural transformation theory, history is neither linear, cyclical nor random, but the result of the interaction between two evolutionary movements:

the first is the tendency of social systems to move from less to more complex forms of organization largely due to technological breakthroughs or *phase changes*. The second is the movement of *cultural shifts* between two basic models or “attractors” for social and ideological organization which I have called the dominator and partnership models—or more specifically, *androcracy* and *gylany* (Eisler 2002b, p. 160).

¹ The neologism is composed of the prefix *gy-* (*gyne*, woman) and *an-* (*andros*, man) linked by the letter *l* for *lyen* (to resolve) or *lyo* (to set free) to indicate that the female and male halves of humanities are linked rather than ranked.

² ‘Equalitarian’ is used instead of the more conventional ‘egalitarian’. The reason is that ‘egalitarian’ has traditionally only described equality between men and men (as the works of Locke, Rousseau, and other ‘rights of man’ philosophers, as well as modern history, evidence). ‘Equalitarian’ denotes social relations in a partnership society where women and men (and ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’) are accorded equal value’ (Eisler 1987 p. 216).

³ See also Eisler (1996; 2000; 2002a; 2002b; 2007).

The dominator model primarily refers to social systems generally characterized by hierarchic and authoritarian structures, in which power and the central roles of political leadership and moral authority are accorded to only one half of humanity, either female (matriarchal or gynocratic forms of social organization) or male (patriarchal or androcratic social structures). From an equalitarian perspective, both patriarchy and matriarchy are undesirable as they correspond to two sides of the same coin based on relations of control — the *ranking* of one half of humanity over the other, and therefore characterized by a high degree of institutionalized violence. Within the patriarchal system, which has prevailed over most of recorded history, there is not only rape, wife battering, incest, and other structural forms of violence designed to maintain men's domination over women; but also institutionalized violence designed to impose and maintain the domination of man over man, tribe over tribe, and nation over nation. Conversely, in the partnership model social systems are structured on the principle of *linking*, in which 'diversity is not automatically equated with inferiority or superiority' (Eisler 2002b, p. 161). By situating human relationships within Riane Eisler's mutual paradigm, it becomes possible not only to re-inscribe the grids of domination conditioning by unveiling conventional binarisms of hegemonic and authoritative systems, but also to take new steps toward the construction of greater intercultural understanding.⁴ In the same vein, emergent discourses on cosmopolitanism have been articulating the need to ground mutuality toward 'planetary conviviality' (Gilroy 2004), cultivated in everyday encounters and relationships beyond the Manichaeian demarcation of an 'us' versus 'them'. From this rejection of the binarism of 'either/or' and 'us/them' emerges a 'rooted cosmopolitanism', as Appiah puts it, in which 'everyone is a rooted cosmopolitan, attached to a home of his or her own, with its own cultural particularities, but taking pleasure from the presence of other, different, places that are home to other, different people' (2007, p. 113). Here, cosmopolitanism portends new forms of relationships that would promote a global society that has left behind both unequal encounters between different people and dominator hierarchies.

In Eisler's terms, it would correspond to a cosmopolitan partnership that seeks the transcendence of old dominator in-group-versus-out-group rankings by valuing diversity and honouring equal recognition and inclusion of any difference through mutually symmetrical and caring relationships. In this paper, I therefore intend to contribute to the current

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the partnership model in World Literatures, Languages and Education see the Partnership Studies Group (PSG) website <http://all.uniud.it/?page_id=195>

cosmopolitan debate by highlighting equal recognition and inclusion as a viable social engagement towards diversity, through which old dominator binary rankings are transcended by valuing mutually empathic relationships. For this purpose, I have chosen to analyze Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Water* (2006),⁵ as the characters are constructed under conditions of subjugation and, although marginalized and muted, are seen contesting the discourse of patriarchal mastery and projecting toward freedom. I shall demonstrate how they transcend androcracy by exploring their capacities for expressing love and reciprocity. In drawing attention to the novel's main theme – the alienating condition of Hindu widowhood in colonial India – I shall also briefly address the unsettling potency of *Water* as a movie, as it posed a more visible challenge to the *dominator* cultural narratives of *Hindutva*, an ideology that seeks to establish a monochromatic Hindu state in India with its own fascist theory of racial exclusivity (Sharma 2003).

Due to its powerful thought-provoking critique as both fictional and cinematic text, *Water* has been making waves in projecting multiple cosmopolitan trajectories in the ways the filming and the writing of its story have been crossing over local and national boundaries, religious and political alliances and intertwining many people in order to come to its full completion. Since the first attempted shooting in the holy city of Varanasi, numerous riots led by extreme right-wing political parties (the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Kashi Sanskrit Raksha Sangharsh Samiti and Raksha Sangharsh Samiti)⁶ took place to stop the production of the movie. Effigies of Deepa Mehta were burnt, several militant protesters threatened to set themselves ablaze whilst one of them attempted suicide by jumping into the Ganges, resulting in local authorities forcing the filming crew to evacuate the location. As Bapsi Sidhwa points out in her open letter to the Hindustan Times in defence of Deepa Mehta (2000), the riots were orchestrated by the fascist RSS party which targeted the offending 'anti-Hindu' movie script with the intent of garnering more support from their electorate. At a transnational level, the Indian government blamed the director for portraying a backward India still steeped in blind religious fundamentalism, revealing an anxiety of being globally represented as an uncivilized country. However, Mehta was aware that *Water* was more centrally engaged with human suffering at large, transcending borders and evoking themes relevant to all human beings as traditions should never become rigid, they should

⁵ All page references in this paper are from the following source: Bapsi Sidhwa (2006).

⁶ These political parties were held responsible for communal violence such as the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992 and the Gujarat riots in 2002.

flow like good water' (Mehta 2005). When the production was eventually shut down under the rubric of Public Safety, the international film community was outraged at the blatant denial of the right to free expression, with prominent filmmakers and intellectuals from around the world raising support for her work, including director George Lucas placing a full-page ad in *Variety* to encourage her to keep on fighting.

Deepa Mehta is not new to fierce political and religious controversies. Her previous works have been consistently unpalatable and indigestible to Hindu fundamentalists: *Fire* (1996), openly depicts the romantic and sexual love between two women beyond their repressive marriages, and *Earth* (1998) tells of the bloody Partition of India and the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh violence against each other that followed.⁷ As Mehta strongly felt that *Water* had to complete her courageous elemental trilogy, the movie underwent a turbulent five-year production, causing the loss of eighty percent of the original budget and compelling her work to be secretly filmed eventually in Sri Lanka. As an independent film maker born in India and living in Canada since 1973, Mehta inhabits a transnational and interstitial position, through which she subversively mediates her challenging stories of human drama based on meaningful empathy, understanding and caring relationships, even when confronted with the most demeaning violence. In an interview she declares that she felt confused about her identity for a long time:

I've never felt Canadian. I used to be upset about being called a 'visible minority', that's what they called colored people there. I used to come to India and was called an NRI [Non Resident Indian] here. The problem was not about belonging anywhere; it was a dislike for labels...Now I feel very happy being who I am, Deepa Mehta' (Ramchandani 1998).

For Bapsi Sidhwa, her feeling of belonging to the world has been enriched by her life experiences in India, Pakistan and the United States, which coexist simultaneously within her, as she declares in an interview: 'a Parsi first, then a Pakistani, specifically a Punjabi. I am a woman simply by gender. I don't feel American at all. My consolidated 3 P identity has enriched my writing' (Karkaria 2005). As an eight-year old girl, she witnessed first-hand the

⁷ Both movies are adaptations of South Asian fiction: *Earth* is based on *Cracking India* (originally published as *Ice-Candy Man* in 1988) by Bapsi Sidhwa (1991), and *Fire* loosely based on Ismat Chughtai's short-story *The Quilt* ([1941] 1996).

horrific violence of the Partition, later becoming a supporter of women's rights.⁸ She married and lived in Bombay for a while and subsequently moved to Houston in 1983, where she currently resides. This overlapping of multiple territories is also visible in her chosen language: at the time when most of Pakistani writers wrote in Urdu, she wrote only in English and therein found herself at ease:

My written Urdu is not very good, though I speak it fluently. As for Gujarati, hardly anyone in Pakistan knows the language. In Britain, of all places, people say. 'Why don't you write in your own language?' And they bring very heavy political overtones to bear on this. But I think, well, the English don't have a monopoly on the language. It is a language of the world, now. And it is a means of communicating between various nationalities and the most immediate tool at hand. So I use it without any inhibitions or problems (Montenegro 1990 p. 523).

Emblematically, the novel is set during the 30s at the time of Gandhi's Freedom Movement against the British Raj, which also focused on social justice, particularly the expansion of women's right and untouchability, thus promoting new forms of knowledge. The story opens with a prologue through which the main character Chuyia, a six-year old girl, is introduced to the reader through her carefree and playful time in the jungle near her village on the Bihar-Bengal border. The joyful atmosphere of the first pages vividly contrasts with the unfolding of the sombre events into which she is forcefully thrown by the orthodox customs of her Brahmin family. Her father Somnath, a poor Brahmin priest, decides to marry her off to a 44-year old noble Brahmin, ignoring his wife Bhagya who has no say in family matters as the sacred scriptures already clarify: 'a girl is destined to leave her parents' home early or she will bring disgrace to it. She is safe and happy only in her husband's care (...) In the Brahmanical tradition, a woman is recognized as a person only when she is one with her husband' (p. 8). Chuyia is hardly aware of the implications of this predicament and when she is seen pampered and celebrated during the numerous wedding rituals, she innocently enjoys the enticing offer of new clothes and the festive celebrations of her community. After the wedding, Chuyia lives in her parental home as was the custom with wedded pre-pubescent girls. Not long after, news of her husband's near-death reaches her parents and they feel

⁸ She has also worked as the voluntary secretary in the Destitute Women and Children's home in Lahore for years, and was appointed to the advisory committee to Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto on Women's Development.

heavily burdened by her daughter's fate. They know that 'in Brahmin⁹ culture, once widowed, a woman was deprived of her useful function in society – that of reproducing and fulfilling her duties to her husband. She ceased to exist as a person; she was no longer either daughter or daughter-in-law. There was no place for her in the community, and she was viewed as a threat to society' (p. 24). Here the author attentively observes how Chuyia's father reacts helplessly to the harsh reality of sending her daughter to a widow colony (*vidhwa ashram*), highlighting the fact that in rigid dominator systems every human being is a victim of the violence and un-humanness that support them:

Somnath gazed at her as if he wanted to fix her form forever in his memory. Every line in his weary face reflected his grief at her untimely widowhood and the parting that loomed ahead of them like a curse. Finally, giving way to the pain that seemed to have squeezed his heart into something wrung-out and dry, he lay his head on the stone and began to weep, releasing his anguish in half-stifled sobs that racked his body (p. 31).

The cruelty of Chuyia's descent into her enforced widowhood is powerfully depicted by the smashing of her glass bangles, tonsuring and being dressed in a homespun white cloth: 'as the razor scraped across her scalp, Chuyia's teeth were set on edge. Somnath noticed her toes curl, almost reflexively, in mute protest' (p. 35). Within the dominator and androcratic Brahmanical view, the widow constitutes a threat to society as she is perceived to be inauspicious and polluted — because of her association with death — and sexually dangerous as she becomes desirable and uncontrolled by a male counterpart. In her seminal study of widowhood in rural India, Martha Chen points out that because they have lost their roles as wives,¹⁰ the disfiguring of the body is enforced in order to reduce their attractiveness as women by transforming them into neuter or asexual beings by prohibiting them from wearing the symbols of marriage (vermillion mark, bangles, marriage pendant) and, more deeply traumatic, having their heads shaven (2001 p. 136). The brutal transmutation of Chuyia's body being shorn as a trademark of her civil death and the strict severance from old ties marks the beginning of the miserable life that awaits her in the destitute Widows' House: 'with her white sari and bald, yellow head, Chuyia was a very different child from the girl who had ridden in the bullock cart' (p. 44). She comes across a new world populated by various characters, each one animated by their own humanity transpiring from their stripped

⁹ The difference in spelling occurs as the author uses the term 'Brahmanical' to refer to the ancient tradition of Vedic sacred texts (*Sruti*) and various books of Hindu law, whereas 'Brahmin' indicates members of the priestly caste.

¹⁰ In fact the widow is called *vidhava*, literally, the one whose husband is gone (Chen 2000 p. 28).

and primal state. They all have a past, which saves them from utter despair and oblivion. The taming tyrannical presence of Madhumati sternly reigns over the house, dictating instructions to the widows with the help of Gulabi, a eunuch (*hijra*) who arranges the side business of prostitution to financially support the colony. Chuyia is not prone to conforming to the oppressive restrictions which regulates the whole community. Madhumati reminds her that ‘when our husbands die, God help us, the wives also half die. So how can a poor half-dead woman feel any pain?’ but Chuyia’s untainted logic makes her defiantly reply ‘because she is half alive?’ (p. 42). She is too young and feisty to conform to the pressures of dominator orthodox traditions and, unwilling to resign to her fate, she inevitably creates a change in the lives of other widows. She particularly connects with Kalyani, the young prostitute who is forced into selling her body to financially support the Widows’ House, and Shakuntala, a literate middle-aged woman and a very devout Hindu who is aware of the injustices of their plight. Their presence enriches Chuyia’s new life from the beginning through their demonstration of caring and bonding. Even in their forced isolation from the world, they seek companionship and build up collective strength to make their lives more meaningful: ‘You must say the japa, Jai Shree Krishna 108 times a day and you will soon fly away home’ (p. 54), Kalyani encourages Chuyia to never lose hope. Similarly, Shakuntala reads her the story of Dushyanta, reminding her to be brave and strong like him who grew up alone in the forest. They all enjoy a caring and affectionate friendship that is subsequently preserved only by the motherly figure of Shakuntala as tragedy befalls Kalyani. The novel unfolds into deeper dramatic dimensions when Kalyani meets Narayan, a young upper-class Gandhian idealist and follower of the ‘Quit India Movement’ whose love for the beautiful widow poses a threat to the social and moral order of the colony. Yet, the couple secretly meet until Kalyani discovers that she used to visit Narayan’s father as a prostitute and decides to end the relationship. This, and the rejection from the Widow’s House as she is discovered breaking the colony’s rules, pushes her to commit suicide as an ultimate refusal of any further exploitation. Madhumati finds a substitute for prostitution in Chuyia who is taken away to a client by Gulabi. It is too late when Shakuntala finds out, yet, knowing that Gandhi and his followers are visiting the city, promoting his ideas of peace and a casteless society, she courageously resolves to take Chuyia away from the colony and gives her to Narayan as his train departs, confident that the child will be taken care of, symbolically, under the Mahatma’s custody.

In *Water*, the serious challenge to the androcratic traditions is posed by the indomitable spirit of Chuyia who refuses to be enslaved by the oppressive limitations of the monolithic patriarchal system. Animated by her inquisitive innocence, and too young to succumb to the gender norms imposed by society, she persistently asks Shakuntala why there are no male widowers and why only women have to spend their lives in renunciation. She bites Madhumati when the latter orders her around sternly and defiantly shouts ‘I don’t want to be a stupid widow! Fatty!’ (p. 42). In contrast, both Shakuntala and Kalyani reveal a deep-rooted patriarchal conditioning that makes them more obedient and conformed to their widowhood. As soon as Chuyia enters their lives, both women undergo an inner change that moves them to interact fluidly and unpredictably to the rigidity imposed by the colony dominator system. This is clearly shown in the unfolding of two sets of relationships based upon the partnership values of love, care and respect: Narayan-Kalyani, and Shakuntala-Sadananda. The first couple meet by chance when Narayan helps Chuyia to bring her dog back home. Their love is pure and their romance is symbolically reinforced by the cultural signifiers of their names: Kalyani is another name for Lakshmi, the Hindu Goddess of abundance. She is in fact the financial support for the Widows’ House and her beauty radiates the purity of the lotus flower, unsullied by the dirty water in which she resides. Similarly, Narayan derives from ‘nara’ (water) and ‘ayana’ (moving) and represents Vishnu, the all-pervasive preserver of the Universe. In the novel, Narayan is a Gandhian and also a rationalist who questions the archaic patriarchal laws and points out at the end of the story, after Kalyani’s death, the injustice laid down by the law-makers of the ancient age that have institutionalized male dominance over women. The purity of the Kalyani-Narayan romance reaches its highest celebration when Narayan expresses his love by reciting the Sanskrit verses of Kalidasa’s classic *Meghaduta* (‘The Cloud Messenger’), a poem about the pain of separation between lovers, foretelling at the same time their future parting. In the novel, their relationship serves as a powerful contrast to Kalyani’s enforced prostitution, which is enjoyed by Narayan’s father, a wealthy landowner (*zamindar*), who had secretly used her for his pleasure and then hypocritically calls her a whore. Here his condemnation of Kalyani’s prostitution is even more perverse as, in the usual dominator fashion, widow exploitation is condoned for men’s sexual needs, including child rape, as in the case of Chuyia. Conversely, Narayan’s love for Kalyani is far removed from his father’s lust, his feelings being even more noble as motivated by the Gandhian ideals of emancipating her from widowhood by making her his wife. Like Chuyia, Kalyani has been led to prostitution unwittingly. After having fallen in love with Narayan, she finds herself no longer capable of living as a passive victim of

patriarchal oppression. She knows that ‘cast out in the streets she would die, but to live without Narayan and return to a life of forced prostitution would be a worse kind of death’ (p.177). When she makes a final attempt to rejoin the ashram, she is cruelly mistreated by Madhumati who does not show her the slightest affection. She becomes aware that ‘nothing had changed. And yet everything had’ (p.177). By meeting Narayan, her consciousness has expanded to the extent that she would never be able to subjugate herself again to a life of exploitation. Here, Sidhwa invokes rich implications of rebellion—the defiance of institutionalized segregation, the challenge to enforced oppression, and the rejection of patriarchal demands on a woman’s body. For Kalyani, this freedom comes at a tremendous price and suicide becomes a desirable and honorable option, which she lucidly embraces: ‘she clasped her hands in prayer for a moment. Then she calmly walked into the river until her short hair floated in an inky stain on the water’ (p.178). This act situates her death outside of patriarchal discourse as a legitimate and free—albeit dead—woman, and has also a powerful and subversive impact on Narayan, which makes him aware of the hypocrisies of his family and he leaves home.

The same movement from dominator to partnership is traceable in the relationship between Shakuntala and the priest Sadananda. Shakuntala is a very devout and discerning Hindu whose conscience is oriented in finding spiritual liberation. She can read, write and has a good knowledge of sacred texts, and her seeking spirit makes her believe that ‘there must be a reason for it. Why are we sent here?’ (p. 181). She ponders over the meaning of life with the priest Sadananda and courageously asks: ‘Pandit–ji, is it written that widows should be treated badly?’ (p. 157). She entered the Widows’ House as a marginalized widow who escaped the cruelty of her family as ‘she was not only viewed as responsible for her husband’s death, but also as a threat to her husband’s family and, most of all, to that of her dead husband’s spirit, simply because of her vital womanhood and potential sexuality. She felt all eyes were constantly watching her, waiting for her to commit some sin that would bring curses on them and consign her husband to hell’ (pp. 149-150). Like the mythical Shakuntala, the foster girl of the sage Kanva, she suffers on account of respecting her duty and deeply hopes that one day she can find love again. She asks Sadananda why widows are treated so harshly and he tells her of the possibility of being remarried: ‘a law has recently been passed favoring widow re-marriage’. ‘A law? Why don’t we know about it?’ Shakuntala responds. Sadananda’s concern deepens. ‘Men ignore the laws that don’t suit

them', he declares solemnly" (pp. 157-158).¹¹ As Sadananda gives Shakuntala the right support in discerning true faith from blind superstition, her loyal adherence to Hindu orthodox laws gradually widens to the extent that she is capable of breaking the shell of the ideal upper caste Hindu widow, and becomes the agency for alternative scenarios beyond the regime of the Widows' House. Through courageous actions, she sets Kalyani free when she is locked away by Madhumati and eventually saves Chuyia by handing her over to the care of Gandhi, thus signaling the beginning of new journeys, including hers as an emancipated middle-aged widow, and indeed for India at large on the cusp of its imminent independence.

Although the figure of Gandhi appears arguably simplistic and naive in his functioning as a saviour who, by promoting social change in the country, becomes a sort of *deus ex machina* in saving Chuyia at the end of the novel, it nonetheless constitute a powerful subtext permeating the whole story with the possibility of a more humanistic future over systemic oppression and violence. Even if left predominately in the background, his presence intensively reverberates through the diverse comments, at times trenchant, given by several characters such as Madhumati and Gulabi who see him as a dangerous man ruining the country with his efforts to abolish untouchability and caste discrimination:

'Didi, have you heard?' Gulabi asked in her deep, affected voice.
'What?'
'About that Mohandas?' she said.
'Mohandas who? Is he a new client?'
'No, Mohandas Gandhi! He's from the jungles of Africa. He doesn't sleep, he doesn't drink'.
'Why? Doesn't he feel sleepy?'
'Nooo! He doesn't sleep with women. He lies beside them, but he doesn't sleep with them. Self-discipline, he says' (p. 71)
'This Gandhi is going to sink India'.
'What's he done now?'
'Gandhi says, "The untouchables are the children of God!"'
(...) Disgusting! Before he came, everything ran like an English clock. Tick tock!' (p. 103).

Even Narayan's parents criticize their son for being a Gandhian idealist, and one of his friends, loyal to the British Empire, openly sees the Mahatma as a nuisance. Conversely,

¹¹ As Uma Chakraborty points out the Widows Remarriage Act (1856) was legislated to provide 'relief' for remarriage of widows of castes that practiced enforced widowhood, mainly the Brahmins and certain other upper castes such as *Rajputs*, *Banias* and *Kayasthas* (2003 p. 123).

Chuyia's mother asks her husband to get her a picture of this 'holy man from far away' to place it along with her pictures of gods and goddesses, while Narayan expresses the revolutionary impact of Gandhian ideals in his reformist commitment to widows remarriage and emancipation. Most importantly, as Santosh Gupta points out, we should at the same time keep in mind that both Mehta and Sidhwa have constructed the holy city of Benares and Hindu society from a specific angle that, although highlighting the backwardness of Hindu orthodoxy in colonial India, it does not pay due attention to the flexibility of Hindu tradition and the changes that were taking place in the same period:

Vasudha Dalmia's study of Bhartendu Harish Chandra relates the rebel poets and thinker to the context of new intellectual spirit of questioning (of tradition) and changing attitude towards the suffering of the widows in the middle of the nineteenth century. In her work, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions* (1997), Dalmia provides extensive support of the view of Banaras as a centre of enlightenment and new learning in the Hindu world (Gupta 2007 p. 248)

Some other critics have also pointed out several inaccuracies in the depiction of Hindu widowhood, which allegedly fail to frame their plight in the right socio-cultural context and anchor the narrative to Orientalist discourses (Arora et al. 2005; Rai 2007). However, to read *Water* as a mere critique of Hindu patriarchal orthodoxy is as much detrimental as it is a denial of its universal appeal in evoking the redemptive potential of all human beings for social change and renewal. Far from representing a precise portrayal of socio-cultural practices and outlooks of Hindu widowhood in pre-Independence India, both authors are legitimately correct in their interpretation of the novel and the film as being against violence, beyond the boundaries of time and space. As they have stated in many interviews, the exploration of the widows' plight served as a main background for a deeper questioning of the difference between moral conscience and religious conservatism, thus transcending local and national boundaries and symbolizing the revolt of all women against physical and psychological violation (Phillips 2006; Mannoni 2007). Such an approach is creatively expressed in both the novel and the movie through the central message of arousing women's awareness and overcoming *dominator* hierarchies. What is also fundamental is that *Water* frames Indian widows within aspects of Indian culture and society that still inhabit several aspects of life, both in economic and regional areas, with a presence of over 33 million widows according to the 2001 Census (Chauhan 2011 p. 240). According to Chen, there are several reasons for this high proportion in contemporary India:

marriage in India is near universal; husbands are five years older on average than wives; male mortality rates are still rather high; women begin to outlive men after their productive years; and, most importantly, widow remarriage is infrequent (...) Most societies have social rules and norms designed to regulate women's life (...) Even now, in some communities in India, girls are married before they reach puberty. As a result, they are child widows, including so-called 'virgin' widows whose marriages had not been consummated before their 'husband' died (Chen 2001 p. 3).

The existing evidence, although more limited when compared to the socio-economic-cultural conditions of colonial India, provides enough reasons for considering widowhood in India as an ever-present social problem. As we have seen in the analysis of the novel, although oppressive dominator values are firmly institutionalized through blind religious indoctrination, gender inequality and enforced sexual exploitation, they are shown to be questioned and unsettled by the partnership values of love, mutual care and respect, which *link* rather than *rank* human beings in their common pursuit of freedom. Both female and male characters appear to be enslaved by unjust social institutions, yet they are shown to gain agency only when they are willing to subvert the restrictive values of their brutal orthodox set up. Far from representing themselves only in ways dictated by Hindu patriarchy, Chuyia, Kalyani and Shakuntala subversively move beyond the oppressive social world that they experienced by establishing overtly dissident partnerships, which project them towards different futures. As Anindita Ghosh puts it, 'everyday' and 'small' (even failed) rebellions are shown as complementing larger meta-narratives of the more successful women's movement, reopening and enriching questions of agency in the process' (Ghosh 2008 p. 20). More importantly, though the ideology of dominator discourse displays its power to control, a challenge to its content and a courageous resistance to its normative system become equally empowering.

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