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## Subtle Acts of Widows' Resistance in Deep Mehta's *Water*

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### Abstract

This article examines subtle acts of widows' resistance to gain their agency and dignity in Deepa Mehta's film *Water* (2005) in the light of the notion of passive resistance developed by M. K. Gandhi. It explores circumstances and instances of subtle acts of resistance mainly by Chuyia, Kalyani and Shakuntala Devi. Resistance, in general, is connected with an explicitly political or social action. However, in this film, widows are engaged in subtle acts of resistance to patriarchy. These understated acts are embedded in widows' daily routines, gestures and interpersonal relationships. These acts complicate conventional notions of resistance. To illustrate, Karl Marx and Engels consider "the history of hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (14). The widows' subtle acts of resistance in this context surpass any conventional notions of class struggles. This study examines how such quiet forms of defiance emerge, what cultural, religious, and power structures they encounter, and how they extend the theoretical understanding of resistance. By fighting quietly against the authority, the widows claim their agency and dignity. To elucidate this assertion, M.K. Gandhi's concept of passive resistance has been used. Through this lens, Chuyia's rejection of widowhood and instinctual resistance, Kalyani's craving for love and refusal to be commodified, and Shakuntala Devi's journey from contemplation to quiet rebellion are unraveled. The aforementioned acts of these widows reflect subtle acts of resistance, which help them to live with their freedom and dignity, and even raise awareness among widows to fight against austerity and marginalization.

**Keywords:** Agency, dignity, patriarchy, resistance, subtle acts, systematic injustice

### Introduction

Deepa Mehta's film *Water* was set in 1938, when widowhood laws were still enforced. In this context, she dramatizes the widows' lives of austerity, celibacy and social exclusion through her film. The film exposes the brutality of patriarchal and religious values that deprive widows of basic human dignity, freedom and love. The representative widows include Chuyia, Shakuntala Devi and Kalyani.

Chuyia is a recently widowed girl, who is sent to live in the ashram, where life is dictated by norms and values of *Manusmriti*. Through these three widows, Mehta exposes both the suffering of the widows and the possibility of resistance, reform and hope.

The film critiques the traditional text like *Manusmriti*, which prescribes a life of chastity, suffering and renunciation for widows. Highlighting how these so-called scriptures continue to shape societal behaviors and justify the subjugation of women, critics take this film as a visual and thematic rejection of these ancient laws. The characters such as Pundit Shadananda and the in-charge of the ashram, Madhumati, embody the hypocrisy of those who preach morality while exploiting the widows like Kalyani and Chuyia for economic and social gains. Therefore, the film critiques *Manusmriti* that legitimizes a systematic inequality by enforcing rigid, hierarchical and patriarchal oppression against women. Despite their confinement, widows like Chuyia, Shakuntala Devi and Kalyani come up with subtle acts of resistance to claim their freedom and dignity.

This qualitative article is based on the analysis as well interpretation of the visual representation of widows in *Water*. The relevant dialogues and still images from the film have been derived as data for the textual analysis. To analyze the widows' subtle acts of rebellion, Gandhi's discourse of passive resistance has been used as a theoretical framework. The article is divided into four parts. The first part introduces the subject matter and discusses the literature published on the film. The second part focuses on the methodology and theoretical framework of the study. The third part analyzes the widows' subtle acts of resistance. The final section presents findings and implications.

Mehta's *Water* has remained under persistent critical examination by critics since its release. Her film offers a compelling portrayal of widowhood and social rejection in the 1930s colonial India. It has been widely discussed in academic and cultural studies for its depiction of religious customs, gender roles, and traditional family structures that limit women to the margins of society. Regarding the connection between religion and its impacts on daily life, Rachel Dwyer argues that Indian cinema often reflects the "complex relationship between religion and everyday life" (112). In *Water*, this relationship is dominant as Hindu orthodoxy is used to justify the isolation and suffering of widows. Dwyer notes that films like *Water* bring attention to "how religion can be used both as a tool of comfort and oppression" (114), highlighting the film's layered critique. In this sense, Dwyer critiques the use of religion to justify the widows' isolation and unnatural suffering. Men, too, perform a crucial role in the film. Shadananda, as a pundit, indoctrinates widows with the ideas of religious practices. Sharma posits, "Shadananda is employed as a pundit who injects Hindu holy texts, philosophy, doctrines, disciplinary rules and regulation in the psyche of widows and the people of the society" (17). In this vein, the film revolves round the agents of patriarchal society who control and shape women's psyche to perpetuate their power and rhetoric.

Rini Bhattacharya discusses *Water* as a historical narrative that rewrites India's nationalist past by bringing widows' experiences into focus. She claims that "the widow in *Water* is not merely a social subject but a historical reminder of how nationalism sidelined women's real conditions" (137). Her analysis suggests that the film challenges the dominant historical memory by centering on characters usually silenced in political and social discourses. As a matter of fact, status of widows in the *bidhwa ashram*, i.e., widow shelter, has also been the subject matter of discussion for researchers. R.P. Adhikary views "widows in the ashram as the ones regarded as a burden of family and society with a belief that they will bring misfortune for the rest of their family" (44). In this regard, women are forced to live in the shelter adhering to the strong discipline of renunciation.

Patricia Uberoi's sociological analysis of Indian family systems revolves around how widows are often rendered invisible within joint and extended households. Uberoi explains, "Widowhood in traditional Indian families is often linked to social shame and spiritual impurity" (275). In *Water*, this shame manifests in the character of Chuyia, a child widow, and the institutional ashram setting where widows are removed from mainstream society, reinforcing Uberoi's argument about exclusion within familial frameworks. In another context, the film has been scrutinized from the perspective of the connection between gender, religion and social exclusion through the lens of hydro feminism. Shaista

Irshad “criticizes 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” (11). In this regard, water embodies the site of faith and purification as well as the agent that marginalizes widows.

Partha Chatterjee's foundational work *The Nation and Its Fragments* provides a context for the historical period depicted in *Water*. He discusses the dual roles assigned to women during colonial times as “spiritual keepers of the home and passive subjects of tradition” (126). The widows in the film embody this contradiction: spiritually revered yet materially discarded. Chatterjee's view helps one contextualize the film's portrayal of women caught between religious devotion and social neglect. Beyond cultural and historical assessment, the film has been interpreted from the perspective of colors. Rakesh Rana asserts that “the colors used are blue and white, resonating the white dress worn by widows” (75). In this sense, the white color used in the film and the white dress worn by widows coincide, connoting the widows' oppression.

In essence, the critical voices here reflect *Water* as a movie embedded in questions of tradition, gender and historical memory. However, they have left the scope for the researchers to analyze the film from the perspective of subtle acts of widows' resistance. Explicating subtle acts of resistance is important as it highlights the subtle ways through which widows assert their agency when open defiance is impossible. Such a study helps to broaden our understanding of resistance, reflecting that even small, often undocumented gestures can shake the roots of oppressive systems and inspire societal transformation.

### The Concept of Passive Resistance

Mahatma Gandhi's groundbreaking message of passive resistance as expressed in *Hind Swaraj* (1909) is useful here to assess subtle acts of women's resistance in the film *Water*. Widows treat resistance not as an armed confrontation, but as an ethically grounded, non-violent response to systematic injustice. *Hind Swaraj* provides the theoretical lens through which widows' subtle acts of resistance will be examined through their response to oppression of patriarchal society and orthodox Hinduism.

There are a number of ways to fight discriminatory practices. Gandhi defines passive resistance as “a method of securing rights by personal suffering; it is the reverse of resistance by arms” (47). Gandhi, in this context, focuses on moral strength and inner strength even if resistance is passive in nature. Unlike physical resistance which uses arms and physical force to overpower the adversary, passive resistance awakens the adversary through personal suffering, ethics and non-cooperation.

Moving on the track of passive resistance, using *satyagraha*—i.e., soul force—and disregarding unjust commands of rulers come to forefront. Gandhi, in this sense, asserts, “True men disregard unjust commands. We cease to cooperate with our rulers when they displease us” (78). This remark is against the body or brute force, but in favor of a commitment to inner truth. It also deals with non-cooperation and fearlessness as well as soul force that enable individuals to resist injustice through subtle resistance but powerful ones. All these acts truly constitute the core of passive resistance.

Similarly, shedding light on the use of fighting unjust systems through non-violence and passive resistance, Gandhi explains, “When we do not like certain laws, we do not break the heads of law givers but we suffer and do not submit to the laws” (75). That means soft and silent gestures—fighting back injustice without violence—can still be immaculately political. Therefore, resistance, according to Gandhi, is not confrontation but conscience, especially in the lives of those who have been, denied voice or power.

Gandhi's philosophy of resistance lends me a theoretical framework for understanding the widows' subtle acts of defiance in *Water* and validates my assessment of their resistance. Gandhi highlights moral courage, non-violence, and the power of truth as tools for resisting injustice principles that resonate deeply with the women's subtle acts of resistance in the film. The widows do not take up arms or lead destructive protests; instead, they resist through small but deliberate gestures,

rejecting imposed identities, asserting personal choice, questioning religious orthodoxy, and nurturing solidarity. These acts match with Gandhi's belief that changes begin with individual moral awakening and that even the seemingly powerless can challenge oppressive systems through conscience-driven action. Refusing the subordination and oppression in a suffocating social order, and maintaining their dignity, the widows embody the Gandhian idea that resistance need not be loud to be transformative. In this regard, their quiet defiance becomes not passive submission, but a form of spiritual and ethical struggle that carries the prospects for social changes. Gandhi's principle of passive resistance authenticates my assumption that these subtle acts of widows reflect their principled mode of resistance against ingrained injustice. Following the line of passive resistance, non-cooperation, use of inner strength and soul force, fearlessness, subtle acts of resistance and noticeable and silent opposition to the authority will be considered in connection to subtle acts of resistance of widows in the film.

### **Widows' Silent Agency in *Water***

Deepa Mehta's *Water* reflects the lives of women during 1930s colonial India, where widows were dehumanized and deprived of their agency under the guise of orthodox Hinduism. The film is set in the ashram by the Ganges in Varanasi, focusing on the lives of widows: Chuyia, Kalyani and Shakuntala Devi. Though they are bound by oppressive, non-humanitarian traditions, they engage in subtle yet powerful acts of resistance. Their acts of rebellion are quiet and sometimes in the form of silence. They shed light on defiance of the expectations imposed upon them by a deeply patriarchal and a religiously conservative society. With the help of silent refusals and calm gestures of women, *Water* shows how resistance can emanate from the space like the widows' ashram.

The film starts with a reference of *Manusmriti*, which dictates that a widow must live a life of austerity and the suffering purifies them. The whole movie revolves around this holy scripture. This is a reference to expose the oppressive religious justifications behind the treatment of widows in orthodox Hindu society. In course of the film, Shakuntala Devi enquires what widows are expected to do with Pundit Shadananda: "What can widows do?" (*Water* 1:21:40-1:21:46). To this enquiry, Shadananda, according to *Manu Smriti*, refers to three ways for widows: sati, self-denial, and marriage to the dead husband's younger brother if permitted by the family. He also hints at the amendment of law regarding widow marriage. Shakuntala Devi counters him with her question: "Why aren't we aware of it?" (1:23:00-1:23:16). Not only does this question reflect denial of information by the patriarchal society to women but it also portrays a subtle act of resistance by the widows against the use of holy scripture to maintain patriarchal control.

At the very onset of the film, Chuyia's father declares: "You are now a widow" (00:03:18-00:00:03:21). Chuyia replies, "Till when, father" (00:03:22-00:03:25). This very conversation reflects innocence as well as her spirited resistance to the oppression the society has imposed upon her. She resists the idea of widowhood. Similarly, after she is forced to get into the ashram, she exchanges heated dialogues with Madhumati, the in-charge of the ashram. She retorts, "I don't want to become a widow, you fatty" (00:09:15-00:09:20). This response amalgamates a child's defiance tinged with humor. Although this dialogue sounds seemingly simple, it dramatizes her rejection to the label and the life of restriction that comes with it, challenging discriminatory practices that treat widowhood as a lifelong curse.



Fig. 1. Chuyia buying laddoos, still from *Water*, directed by Deepa Mehta, David Hamilton Productions, 2005.

The above shot captures the scene of Chuyia buying a *laddoo*, a spherical-shaped sweet popular in India, for Buwa, the eldest and most neglected widow in the ashram. When Buwa remembers about her marriage, it takes her back to the time of tasting a *laddoo*. She always craves for it because she had tasted it on the very day of her wedding. During the 1930s India, widows were not expected to buy such delicacies. The very act of this purchase is a subtle yet powerful act of resistance. This act challenges a social restraint imposed upon widows in relation to the food habit. It is also a humanitarian act as it fulfills Buwa's long-awaited desire. Such scenes appeal to the society to pay heed to the state of widows. As human beings, widows must be seen, valued, and loved. Chuyia's act presents a symbolic rejection to the norms that seek to erase their humanity.



Fig. 2. Chuyia killing the bird, still from *Water*, directed by Deepa Mehta, David Hamilton Productions, 2005.

Likewise, Chuyia's act of killing the bird 'Mithu', as seen in the above image, represents a moment of rebellion against the oppressive system that has trapped her and other widows in the ashram. This incident foreshadows a larger resistance forthcoming in the contemporary colonial India. Moreover, it is an emotional outburst against the unjust society. The cage symbolizes the entrapment of widows in the ashram. They are restricted by religious orthodoxy, casteism and patriarchy. In this regard, the killing of Mithu stands for her desire to overthrow the system. However, such an act can also be considered violent because it involves an act of physical destruction. This moment shows how even a child can challenge oppressive authority, blending innocence with rebellion if he/she feels that oppression has turned unbearable.

Turning towards Kalyani, yet another widow in the ashram, references of subtle acts of resistance can be traced in the film. Kalyani is frequently sent to the places of feudal lords to satisfy their sexual desire. Eventually, she is fed up. When Madhumati calls her give her a new sari, Kalyani challenges the in-charge. Madhumati says, "Take a new sari. You should take care of yourself. If you are, we exist" (1:07:25-1:07:34). At this juncture, Kalyani replies, "It's an ashram, not a brothel" (1:07:35-1:07:40). This statement becomes a powerful act of rebellion. In a society where her exploitation is hidden behind religious pretense, Kalyani's act reflects refusal to comply. Her verbal reply helps her reclaim her dignity and exposes the hypocrisy of the ashram. Her voice is a voice of resistance, asserting that her body is not a commodity and her existence has value beyond its commodification.

In one of the scenes involving a light conversation between Madhumati and Gulabi, Madhumati is being massaged by Chuyia. Gulabi asks Chuyia if she wishes to taste a *puri*, a popular Indian unleavened deep-fried bread. Chuyia answers that she will taste a *puri* on Kalyani's wedding. This makes Madhumati go upstairs and ask Kalyani: "Are you getting married? (1:14:55-1:15:01).

For it, Kalyani does have a straight answer: "Yes" (1:15:02-1:15:03). Her response becomes a subtle but profound act of resistance. In a society where widows are expected to live the life of austerity and celibacy, Kalyani's single word reply 'Yes' directly challenges the oppressive religious and social codes that determine her fate. Her straightforward and clear answer asserts her rights to love, hope, and reclaim her identity beyond the boundaries set by the contemporary society and dogma. This answer not only defies the authority of Madhumati but also symbolically rejects the ideology that binds her to a life of austerity. Indeed, she has fallen in love with Narayan, a young law student, who follows Gandhi. He wants to marry her. At this juncture, her inner desire for freedom, therefore, reflects a subtle act of resistance and a craving for self-empowerment.



Fig. 3 Kalyani drowning into the Ganges, still from *Water*, directed by Deepa Mehta, David Hamilton Productions, 2005.

After she discovers that Narayan's father is one of her abusers, she, however, realizes that her escape from exploitation is impossible within the existing social structure. Then she commits suicide. The shot above captures a scene of Kalyani drowning into the Ganges. Although it is utterly unexpected for audience, it can be interpreted as a silent yet deeply powerful act of resistance against the unjust society that has denied her freedom, dignity and love. In this sense, her suicide is not a reflection of any surrender and cowardice, but a refusal to be commodified any longer. This act also hints at her refusal to return to the ashram where her choices are dictated by others. Through this act of silent resistance, she is trying to communicate the idea that lives of widows should not be dictated by the society.

Besides Chuyia and Kalyani, Shakuntala Devi is yet another resisting hero, who is educated, reflective, inquisitive and decisive. She plays a decisive role in a number of incidents in the ashram. After Madhumati padlocks Kalyani's room, she is limited in the four walls of the room, and she can no longer visit her beloved Narayan. In this context, Shakuntala Devi reaches for a key with Madhumati and asks, "Give me the key of Kalyani's room" (1:23:42-1:23:46). Madhumati replies: "I won't" (1: 23:47-1:23:48). However, she snatches the key, reaches Kalyani, and releases her: "You, go away" (1:24:34-1:24:37). The release helps her visit Narayan. It is a subtle yet courageous act of resistance against the authority and cruelty embedded within the ashram's power structure. By snatching the key away, Shakuntala Devi quietly overturns Madhumati's authority and asserts her own moral agency. Her choice to free Kalyani to pursue her own priorities rather than any ritual duty marks a turning point in her silent but evolving resistance.

Even in her brief chat with Pundit Shadananda, one can notice her resistance. Pundit Shadananda remarks, "Gandhi is the one who listens to his inner voice" (1:40:00-1:40:05). Shakuntala Devi rebuts him: "However, if inner voice goes against our religion?" (1:40:11-1:40:17). This rebuttal reflects a profound, subtle act of intellectual and spiritual resistance. The very question shakes the foundation of a dogmatic society. Her words signal a shift from blind faith to philosophical inquiry, suggesting that an inner voice outnumbers any rigid customs. In this context, her counter question signifies a subtle act of resistance not through outright defiance, but through a thoughtful doubt.

Towards the end of the film, Chuyia is forced to visit one of Kalyani's guests. Shakuntala Devi enquires Madhumati about her and discovers that she is sent across the river. She rescues Chuyia from the boat and heads towards the place where Gandhi is expected to stop. She runs towards the train and pleads with the people on train: "Please, take this child to Babu" (1:49:55-1:49:59). Finally, she hands her over to Narayan, who is in Gandhi's team. This very act suggests that she breaks away from the tradition she upheld as she gets inclined to Gandhi's reformist movement. This act is not accompanied by any spectacular rebellion; however, it carries immense weight. She aligns with a vision of social change and compassion rather than religious orthodoxy. Her courageous action reflects a turning point where courage and conscience can challenge any systematic injustice and subordination.

While analyzing the film, I noticed that the widows' resistance operates largely within the ashram, often going undocumented in official narratives of reform, which tend to focus on large rebellions and movements. However, the film reveals that small, subtle acts – such as Kalyani's verbal defiance, Shakuntala's moral questioning or Chuyia's refusal to accept her widowhood are just as powerful as large scale rebellion in challenging deep-rooted oppression. My article reflects that these underrated gestures, though often invisible in historical and scholarly documents, carry transformative potential by undermining the deep-rooted marginalization. A key finding is that widows' agency in oppressive settings is frequently manifested in emotional, moral, humanitarian and relational interactions rather than large-scale rebellion. This has implications for the way one defines resistance. Even subtle acts of resistance can shake the foundation of oppressive regimes. It may be argued that these subtle acts of resistance lack measurable impacts, however; I rebut this by showing that they plant seeds of change- as seen in Shakuntala's handing over of Chuyia to Gandhi's team and Kalyani's suicide- which can ripple outward into broader reform movements. In other words, *Water* expands the lens through which subtle acts of resistance, especially widows' resistance, is understood and valued.

## Conclusion

On the basis of the analysis of subtle acts of resistance by the widows like Chuyia, Kalyani, and Shakuntala Devi in the light of the discourse of passive resistance, this article concludes that resistance can emerge not only through spectacular revolts, but through quiet defiance and moral courage as well. These widows challenge patriarchal society and orthodox Hinduism through subtle yet transformative acts. Such acts can be illustrated through Chuyia rejecting her widowhood through childlike boldness, Kalyani's refusal to be commodified and limited to the ashram, and Shakuntala Devi questioning religious orthodoxies. All these characters reflect resistance rooted in their conscience and dignity. These subtle acts of resistance, though not violent or dramatic, strike at a system designed to silence their agency and erase their identity. Shakuntala Devi moves from merely reflecting on the hardships faced by widows to quietly revolting against the existing system when she hands Chuyia over to Gandhi's team. This offers hope for a future beyond ritual and systematic injustice. Thus, *Water* is not just a tale of suffering, but a testament to the resilience of women who resist with integrity and empathy to live with freedom and dignity. In this manner, drawing attention to the subtle acts of resistance by the widows in the patriarchal society, this article expects to reignite the ongoing debate on the discourse of resistance.

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