
**“IS GANDHI THE HERO?”: A REAPPRAISAL OF GANDHI’S VIEWS ABOUT
WOMEN IN DEEPA MEHTA’S WATER**

PILAR SOMACARRERA-ÍÑIGO

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid
pilar.somacarrera@uam.es

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**ABSTRACT**

Set in 1938 against the backdrop of India’s anti-colonial movement led by Gandhi, the film *Water* (2005) by Deepa Mehta crudely exposes one of the most demeaning aspects of the patriarchal ideology of Hinduism: the custom of condemning widows to a life of self-denial and deprivation at the *ashrams*. Mehta has remarked that figures like Gandhi have inspired people throughout the ages. Nonetheless, in this essay I argue that under an apparent admiration for the figure of Gandhi in the context of the emancipation of India in general and widows in particular, *Water* questions whether Gandhi’s doctrines about the liberation of women were effective or whether, on the contrary, they contributed to restricting women to the private realm by turning them into personifications of the Indian nation. In this context of submission and oppression of women in India, Gandhi did try to improve their conditions though he was convinced that gender is destiny and that women’s chastity is connected to India’s national honour. I argue that Mehta’s film undermines Gandhi’s idealism by presenting images of him and dialogues in which he is the topic. As a methodological approach, I propose a dialogic (Bahktin 1981) reading of the filmic text which analyses how a polyphony of voices praise and disparage the figure of Gandhi in *Water*. I will also analyse the film in the light of Bakhtin’s views on the hero (1983) and his notion of the “chronotope” (Bahktin 1981).

KEYWORDS: Gandhi’s ideas on women; Deepa Mehta; Hinduism; Indian-Canadian cinema; Indian widows; Pre-independence India; Dialogism; Indian feminism.

RESUMEN *¿Es Gandhi el héroe? Una revaluación de las ideas de Gandhi sobre las mujeres en Water de Deepa Mehta*

Ambientada en 1938 durante el movimiento a favor de la independencia de la India liderado por Gandhi, la película *Water* (2005) de Deepa Mehta expone en toda su crudeza uno de los aspectos más degradantes de la ideología patriarcal del hinduismo: la tradición de condenar a las viudas a una vida de autonegación y sacrificio en los *ashrams*. Según Mehta, la figura de Gandhi ha inspirado a muchas personas a lo largo de la historia. Sin embargo, en este artículo defiendo que, ante una aparente admiración por la figura de Gandhi en el contexto de la emancipación de la India en general y de las viudas en particular, *Water* cuestiona si las doctrinas de Gandhi sobre la liberación de la mujer fueron realmente efectivas o si, por el contrario, contribuyeron a restringir a las mujeres al ámbito privado convirtiéndolas en personificaciones de la nación india. En este

artículo argumento, por tanto, que la película de Mehta socava el idealismo de Gandhi a través de imágenes suyas y diálogos en los que la figura de Gandhi es el centro de atención. La metodología propuesta para el análisis es una lectura dialógica (Bahktin 1981) de la película que analice la polifonía de voces que, en algunos momentos, elogia y, en otros, critica la figura de Gandhi. Asimismo, analizaré la película de Deepa Mehta siguiendo las teorías de Bahktin (1983) sobre el héroe y su concepto del “cronotopo” (Bahktin 1981).

PALABRAS CLAVE: filosofía de Gandhi; Deepa Mehta; hinduismo; cine indo-canadiense; viudas indias; pre-independencia de India; dialogismo; feminismo

Introduction: *Water* and Deepa Mehta’s humanistic cinema

Gandhian thought establishes a semantic continuity between the three films of Deepa Mehta’s “Elements Trilogy” — *Fire, 1947-Earth*, and *Water* — (Jain, 2007: 68). In *Fire* (1996), Ashok practices Gandhian chastity as a test for his own strength; *1947-Earth* (1998) blames Gandhi for the division of the country, whereas in *Water* (2005), Gandhi is seen as the saviour who will bring about change (Jaidka, 2011:68). A graduate of Hindu philosophy at Delhi University, Deepa Mehta (1950, Amritsar) is a reputed Indian-Canadian director, producer, screenwriter, well-known for “challenging cultural traditions and bringing stories of oppression, injustice and violence to the fore” (McIntosh and Fung, 2019: n.p.). In her latest film, an adaptation of Shyam Selvadurai’s novel *Funny Boy* (1994), her broad humanism and her political preoccupation are still very much alive, as reflected in some of the early reviews: “In many ways, *Funny Boy* reflects the times of divisiveness we are living in today, the call for a just society, a call for humanity is finally being heard.” (Simonpillai, 2020: n.p.).

Set in 1938 against the backdrop of India’s anti-colonial movement led by Gandhi, *Water* crudely exposes one of the most demeaning aspects of the patriarchal ideology of Hinduism: the custom of condemning widows to a life of self-denial and deprivation at the *ashrams* (places for retreat in the Hinduist tradition). Deepa Mehta was inspired to make *Water* in Varanasi when she met an old widow who took her to the *ashram* where she lived. In the film, the plight of widowhood is exposed through a “trinity” of widows of different ages who live in the same *ashram*. In order of appearance, the first widow is Chuyia, an eight-year-old girl; the second is Kalyani, a beautiful young widow who has to prostitute herself in order to support the widows’ home and who falls in love with Narayan, a young and educated Brahmin who is a follower of Gandhi’s ideas. Shakuntala, the third widow, is a middle-aged, learned and convinced Hinduist who is fully aware of the injustices to which the widows are being subjected. *Water* heavily relies on melodrama and pathos —

understood as a complex dialectic between emotion and thought (Williams, 1998:42) — that is deployed to raise awareness of social issues and reach large audiences. However, unlike standard melodrama, in which powerless women and children are the usual protagonists (Williams, 1998:65), these three widows are empowered in Mehta’s filmic imagination.

In a conversation with the actor John Abraham (who plays Narayan), Deepa Mehta highlighted the fact that Gandhi embodied tolerance while Abraham explained that he had at first thought he was the protagonist of *Water* but, on second thoughts, he had realized that the real protagonist was Gandhi (Chopra, 2007: n.p). Descriptions of Gandhi as a hero abound. Barak Obama wrote in the Guest Book of the Gandhi Museum in Mumbai: “a hero not just for India but for the entire world” (quoted in Mulchandani 2012:6). Mehta herself has remarked that figures like Gandhi — and Martin Luther King — have inspired people throughout the ages (Crusellas and Bernet, 2005: n.p.). Nonetheless, in contrast to this perception that Gandhi is the “hero” of *Water* — and, by extension, of India — I am going to argue in this essay, under an apparent admiration for the figure of Gandhi in the context of the emancipation of India in general and of widows in particular, that *Water* questions whether Gandhi’s doctrines about the liberation of women were really effective or whether, on the contrary, they contributed to restricting women to the private realm by turning them into personifications of the Indian nation. In order to illustrate how Mehta approaches the figure of Gandhi, I will also draw on Bakhtin’s theories on the hero as articulated in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. Just as happens with Mehta, the hero interests Dostoevsky not as some manifestation of reality that possesses socially typical or individually characteristic traits ... *but as a particular view on the world and on oneself*¹ (Bahktin, 1983:47).

As Fincina Hopgood points out, the story of the production of *Water* is as compelling as that of the film itself (2006:142). In 2000, the filming of *Water* in the Indian holy city of Varanasi was interrupted by violent protests from Hindu fundamentalists who destroyed the sets and threatened the safety of the director and her cast. The fundamentalists alleged that Mehta’s film denigrated their religion and the sacred river of the Ganges which is a key symbol throughout the film. After the local state government in

¹ Italics in the original.

Uttar Pradesh shut down the production on public safety grounds, Mehta was forced to abandon her film and ultimately shot it in secrecy four years later, re-locating to Sri Lanka, where she has recently returned to shoot *Funny Boy*.

Women in Hinduism and Gandhi’s views about women

The extreme reaction against *Water* can be read as symptomatic of the film’s exposing of the misogynist strain in Hinduism which undercuts the complexity of beliefs about women in Hindu sacred texts. The concept of the female in Hindu doctrine presents an essential duality: on the one hand, she is fertile, benevolent — the bestower; on the other, she is aggressive, malevolent, the destroyer (Wadley, 1977: 113). Two facets of femaleness reflect this duality. The female is, firstly, *sakti* (Energy/Power), which Jain calls “the concept of the superwoman manifested in Goddess Durga, Kali or Parvati” (Jaidka 2011: 21). On her first day at the *ashram*, Chuyia sees Shakuntala as the embodiment of the Goddess Durga, a warrior and a protective mother, who saves her from Madhumati’s evil intentions. An ideal woman is a Goddess if she manages to stay away from sexual desire, but she becomes a monster if she is possessed by passion, (Jaidka, 2011: 21). Secondly, a woman is also *prakriti*, Nature, the undifferentiated Matter of the Universe, a role incarnated by Kalyani in Mehta’s film. Unable to conceive children because of their husbands’ deaths and the prohibition to remarry, the Hindu widows in *Water* are no longer considered benevolent or powerful but “inauspicious” (Mukherjee, 2008: 37).

As K.M. Sen observes, in Vedic ceremonialism, women had a relatively inferior status, but in the *Upanishads* they enjoy equal eminence, though there were fewer prominent women than men (1982:55). Although women have always been respected in India, throughout the centuries this respect turned into excessive protection until they were eventually deprived of all their civil rights (Zinkin,1966:101). The feminist writer Malladi Subbamma highlights the fact that Hindu society has instilled in women a sense of submissiveness, as everything in an Indian woman’s life — her childhood and education — is oriented to the single goal of marriage (1992:3). The ideal models for Hindu women are the goddesses Sita, Savitri and Parvati who had to go through much suffering for their husbands’ sakes (Subbamma 1992:4-5).

In this context of submission and oppression of women in India, Gandhi strove to involve women in politics for three main reasons. Firstly, he wanted to ensure that women would become active participants in the construction of the Indian nation and that they would also fight for its independence. Secondly, he was convinced that if women did not become engaged in the struggle, men would not follow them; thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, women comprised half the population of India (Zinkin, 1966: 101). Therefore, when Gandhi focused his Constructive Programme on building the unity and self-confidence India needed to fight against colonial rule and eventually obtain its independence, he strove to obtain women's equality (Parekh, 1997:19). Although the Mahatma saw women as "his sisters" (Drevet, 1962:95), his take on women's issues is far from that of contemporary feminist approaches and feminist critics who remain divided between those who approve of his views on women and those who find them problematic. Scholars such as Madhu Kishwar have emphasized Gandhi's role in helping women find a new dignity in public life and in making them aware that they could act against oppression (1985:1694). Debali Mookerjea-Leonard, on the other hand, uses Gandhi's correspondence, speeches, and articles to demonstrate that he was not successful at addressing the gender pathology revealed in violence against women, a pathology to which men were subject, but of which women were the victims (2010:41). Furthermore, Mookerjea-Leonard demonstrates that Gandhi had a very ambivalent attitude towards women, which can be discerned in many passages from his speeches. In his texts, Gandhi presents himself as a paternalistic individual outraged by cruelties committed on women. Concerning the issues depicted in *Water* — child marriage, the differences between widowers and widows and the lack of education for women — Gandhi expresses himself in a condemning tone: "I detest child marriages and shiver with rage when a husband just widowed with brutal indifference contracts another marriage, I deplore the criminal indifference of parents to keep their daughters utterly ignorant and illiterate" (Gandhi, 1958-94, vol. 23: 468-69).

As in other religious traditions, such as Christianity, Gandhi was convinced that "men and women are of equal rank but are not identical" (1958-94, vol. 16: 273). He defended the social equality of the sexes, but he also believed that gender is destiny, i.e., that the social role of the individual is inextricable from the performance of his/her gender (Mookerjea-Leonard, 2010: 39). Furthermore, Gandhi also believed in the strict

dichotomization of the public and private spheres prevalent in Britain in the 19th century, considering home the “natural” realm of women, “the safe space where a woman’s bodily purity was not at risk” (Mookerjee-Leonard, 2010:40). Equally problematic is Gandhi’s identification of women’s chastity with national honour, another Hindu cultural nationalist legacy from the 19th century. The preoccupation with women’s chastity dates from the *Manavadharmashastra* (*The Laws of Manu*), also known as *Manusmriti*, which are quoted against a black screen at the beginning of *Water*. The *Manusmriti* formed the base of Indian law during the colonial period and can be summarized as follows:

- 1) Verses 3.13-3.14 of the *Manusmriti* oppose a woman marrying someone outside her own social class.
- 2) Verses 5.158-5.160 preach chastity to widows.
- 3) Verses 2.67-2.69 and 5.148-5.155 preach that as a girl, the female should obey and seek the protection of her father [...] and that a woman should worship her husband as a god.
[...]
- 4) Verses 5.147-5.148 declare that “a woman must never seek to live independently” (Mahmoud-AbuBaker, 2014:5).

Gandhi did manage to change the societal perception of young widows (Mahmoud-AbuBaker, 2014: 15). However, just as with other aspects of his doctrine, Gandhi’s views are ambiguous since they fluctuate between a voluntary widowhood, which is considered a priceless blessing in Hinduism, and what Sen refers to as the desirability of “the remarriage of virgin widows” (1960: 241). However, as Narayan observes in the film, the ultimate reason for sending the widows to an *ashram* is more economic than religious: “Four saris and a bed which are spared. It masks as religion but it’s money”.

The presence of Gandhi in Deepa Mehta’s *Water*

Vijaya Singh suggests that Gandhi, his philosophy, his allegiance to truth, and his theory of passive resistance, inform the underlying narrative of *Water* and establish his figure as the conscience of the nation and the saviour of Indian women (2007:196). However, in this essay I argue that Mehta’s film undermines Gandhi’s idealism by presenting images and dialogues in which the Indian leader becomes the “chronotope”, the term which Mikhail Bakhtin uses to refer to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships

that are artistically expressed in literature (1981:84) or, this case, in a filmic text. While Keith Harrison proposes a polyglot reading of the film (2017:210), I propose a dialogic one, using the alternative meaning Bakhtin attributes to the term, which is “dialectical”. As Roger Fowler points out, the dialogic relationship confronts unresolved contrary ideologies, opposing voices in a conflicting world (1989: 79). Although Uma Parameswaran describes the dialogues of the films as “stilted” (2007:20). I would like to argue that they are illustrative of the divergent views about Gandhi which existed in pre-independence India.

The allusions to the Mahatma in the film form a dialectical continuum going from sheer idealism to mockery. The figure of Gandhi and his ideas are a central sub-text of *Water*, and there are at least seven references to him in the film, either only in image or by mention in a dialogue between characters. This series of allusions to Gandhi in the conversations of the characters sounds like gossip, a kind of discourse whose “unlocated but insistent authority” (Spacks 1985: 212-13) should not be neglected. Only when he appears in the flesh at the train station at the end of the film can we finally listen to Gandhi’s verbatim words.

In the remainder of this essay, I analyse how a polyphony of voices praise and disparage the figure of Gandhi in *Water*. The image of Gandhi appears for the first time when Narayan returns to his parents’ home after obtaining his law degree in England and replaces his high school group photograph with Gandhi’s and then gazes at it as if he were looking at himself in a mirror. As Uma Parameswaran suggests, this scene presents “a new leader, a cause, and followers who seek to realise the dream of a new India” (2007:18). Gandhi’s idealism embodied by Narayan — named perhaps after Gandhi’s friend Narayan Hemchandra — appears futile in the light of the harsh and ignominious lives of the widows portrayed in the film. Although there is no verbal allusion to the change of portraits, Narayan’s gesture is significant because immediately after changing the photographs, he tips the servant of the house, Sadburan, recommending him not to spend the money on drinking. This action speaks volumes about the young man’s condescending paternalism towards his servant, who is probably a dalit.

Furthermore, Gandhi’s portrait in Narayan’s homecoming scene stands for the blatant ambiguities and contradictions that characterised pre-independence India and can

be easily projected onto present-day India. In the absence of other representations of Hindu Gods and Goddesses, Gandhi’s image becomes a God on Narayan’s personal “altar”. On the other hand, given that Narayan has most probably received a Western education in a Christian school as a boy, and that he is returning to India after obtaining his law degree in England, as did Gandhi himself, the replacing of portraits appears ironical, since it takes place in the same house where his future betrothed, Kalyani, prostitutes herself to his own father. Narayan’s father callously and fatuously justifies his exploitation of women on the grounds of caste privilege by stating that “Brahmins can sleep with whomever they want, and the women with whom they sleep are blessed”, an opinion which is clearly distant from Gandhi’s ideas about the abolition of untouchability.

It is worth mentioning that the chronotope of Gandhi also appears in the dystopian series *Leila* (2019), produced by Netflix and directed by Deepa Mehta, Shanker Raman and Pawan Kumar, based on Prayaag Akbar’s eponymous novel first published in 2018. In episode 2 of the series, set in the late 2040s in the autocratic state of Ayavarta ruled by Dr Joshi, the protagonist, Shalini, escapes Purity Camp —just as Kalyani flees from the *ashram* — and ends up in a convenience shop where she tries to phone her husband. In the TV series, a portrait of Gandhi is displayed in the shop as an allusion to the Mahatma’s support of tolerance and his defence of women and the untouchables at times when such values are dismissed. The portrait is not too visible at the beginning but later appears in full sight. In a later scene, the police of Ayavarta enter the shop and the shopkeeper hides Gandhi’s portrait by turning it over to reveal a picture of Dr Joshi on the reverse. Mehta *et al.*’s series has to be understood as a more or less explicit criticism of Narendra Modi’s current right-wing nationalist government, which pays lip service to some of Gandhi’s advances but fails to endorse the most important point of his doctrine: non-violence. Modi acknowledges Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the far-right Hindu supremacist accused of participating in Gandhi’s assassination as his political mentor (Mishra 2018: n.p). Savarkar was the founder of the Hindutva (“Hinduness”) ideology in the 1920s, a nationalist movement which came to political prominence in the 1980s (Burton, 2013: 6). The Hindutva movement equates Indian identity with Hinduism and thus marginalizes or excludes minority groups and minority religions. The presence of Gandhi’s portrait in this recent visual text by Mehta (the TV adaptation of Akbar’s first published novel *Leila*) proves the continuity of the film director’s view on the dangers of equating women’s

chastity with national honour. Furthermore, *Water* and *Leila* are both narratives about women struggling for freedom.

To continue with the analysis of Gandhi's images in *Water*, after the scene of Narayan hanging Gandhi's portrait in his room, the leader of Indian independence becomes the topic of a conversation held between Madhumati — the ruling widow of the ashram — and Gulabi, the eunuch or *hijra* who helps her organize the transportation of the prostitute widows to the mansions of the Brahmin lords on the other side of the Ganges. When Gulabi asks Madhumati whether she has heard of "Mohandas", the widow replies with a question: "Is he another client?" Once again, this scene strikes the viewer who is knowledgeable about Gandhi's life as satirical, in the light of Gandhi's well-known vow of chastity or *brahmacharya* which, in accordance with his biographer Louis Fischer, he kept steadily from 1904 — when he was thirty-seven years old — until his death in 1948 (1983: 51).²

Likewise, as the topic of prostitution is introduced for the first time in the film, a few words on the Mahatma's view on this topic are in order. As I have already mentioned, Gandhi is very concerned with women's chastity as an issue inextricably interlaced to nationalism (Mookerjea-Leonard, 2010:45). Gandhi refers to prostitutes as "his fallen sisters" in an article he wrote for the journal *Young India* that was based on a speech he delivered to an audience of Indian sex workers:

Of all the evils for which man has made himself responsible none is so degrading, so shocking or so brutal as his abuse of the better half of humanity to me, the female sex, not the weaker sex. It is the nobler of the two, for it is even today the embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge [...]. Before these unfortunate sisters living on the sale of their own honour, two conditions must be fulfilled. We men must learn to control our passions, and these women should be found a calling that would enable them to earn an honourable living. (Gandhi 1958-94, vol. 23: 225-26)

It is easy to see that Gandhi's address to prostitutes contains some problematic aspects. He sees the end of prostitution in his own doctrine of *brahmacharya* ("controlling our passions"), which equals chastity, a practice to which not all men will be willing to submit. Paradoxically, Gandhi's views on women as morally superior creatures, transmitters of faith and ready to accept suffering and sacrifice recall those of the British Victorian

² As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Ashok's vow of celibacy mirrors that of Gandhi's in the first film of Mehta's Elements trilogy, *Fire*. The outcome of Ashok's self-imposed chastity results in the neglect and mistreatment of his wife, Radha, which triggers the lesbian relationship of the latter with her sister-in-law, Sita.

colonisers of India. Like Gandhi, the Victorian moralists were very preoccupied with “the fallen woman” and her rehabilitation and believed that a woman’s most precious gift was her purity. As Martha Alter Chen states, the reason why Hindu widows evoke such preoccupation “lies in their symbolic power as the ultimate expression of the condition of the Indian woman and the Hindu social order” (quoted in Chadha 2007:93).

Moving on to a different aspect of the descriptions by characters in the film, one should pay attention to Gulabi’s rendering of Gandhi as “coming from the African jungle”, in a racist comment which alludes to the Mahatma’s time in South Africa. In accordance with Bakhtin’s view of the hero in Dostoevsky’s fiction, Mehta’s film is interested in a “*particular point of view*” (Bakhtin 1983:47) about Gandhi. What is remarkable in this dialogue is that this description of racist overtones is ironical in the light of Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed’s findings in *The South African Gandhi* (2015:5), which reveals Gandhi as being a racist himself. Desai and Vahed tell the story of a man who, despite his worldwide reputation as a freedom-fighter, supported the British Empire while disdaining Africans, based on the Aryan connection between Indians and Europeans (2015:5). In addition, Gulabi also disparages Gandhi as an eccentric who “neither drinks or sleeps” or has sex with women and does all these things “because of discipline”. Nonetheless, Madhumati is not interested in hearing gossip about Gandhi and urges Gulabi to focus on their job as a pimp: “What are you doing here? Take her [Kalyani] to Seth Dwarkanath”. The idealism of the future Father of the Indian nation is irrelevant against the pragmatism of the “head” widow who is only concerned with the survival of the *ashram* based on the sexual exploitation of one of its inhabitants. In another dialogue with Madhumati, Gulabi the *hijra*, another outcast of Hindu society, quotes Gandhi on the regenerating power of love: “He says widows are strangers to love, and nobody should be a stranger to love”. Arguably, Gulabi’s quoting of Gandhi’s words about love is at odds with their role “as a pimp working in the context of Brahmin caste prerogatives” (Harrison 2017: 213), organizing the prostitution of the widows at the other side of the Ganges. However, by quoting Gandhi, Gulabi, through the voice of another, voices a half-repressed wish for love in a chronotopic role of social degradation and self-loathing (Harrison, 2017:213).

The next scene of the film does indeed transport the spectator to the other side of the Ganges, the domain inhabited by the Zamindars and the Brahmins, where Narayan and his Anglophile friend Rabindra are also speaking about Gandhi and the widows. Rabindra

remarks that “high classes have an unnatural preoccupation about widows”, despite the fact that his father does not know them by their name, but as “the old one” or “the young one,” thus treating them as replaceable objects. This despicable attitude demonstrates that the British-influenced high class of India may be concerned with Indian widows as a political issue, but not with the human rights of the widows as individuals.

Concerning the issue of Indian independence, Narayan and Rabindra stand at opposite ends. Narayan is a Gandhian nationalist who, like Gandhi himself, fights “for Mother India, who is thus equated with a woman, or to be more specific, the widow woman who needs to be freed of the shackles that bind her” (Jaidka, 2001:68). Rabindra, on the other hand, is an anglicized Indian of the upper class, “a sahib of dark skin”, the same kind of Indian individual Thomas Macaulay imagined in his “Minute on Indian Education”: “We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and intellect” (2004:430).

As an aficionado of English culture, Rabindra enjoys cricket, whisky, and English poets, especially Lord Byron, whom he misquotes: “She walks like a beauty in the night”. In quoting Byron, Rabindra illustrates Bakhtin’s view that every conversation is full of quotations and references (1981:328). Rabindra chooses Byron because this poet is thought to epitomize English Romanticism outside of England. However, Byron’s Englishness is questionable since in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* he refers to himself as “half a Scot by birth, and bred / A whole one” (Byron 1986:442), and he is influenced by many other cultures (Italian, Greek, Spanish, among others). Narayan corrects Rabindra’s literary misquotation of Byron’s poem (“She walks in beauty, like the night”), thus relating his defence of national independence with “a romantic sensibility unafraid of polyglossia and Western cultural influences” (Harrison, 2017:214). Narayan anticipates that “If Gandhi can free India, then think how Byron would sound recited by a free man”, which Harrison interprets as an “aesthetic and polyglot moment into a national future that promises fuller human expressiveness” (2017:214). However, Harrison’s reading is not an appropriate description of a true nationalist because, as Margaret Atwood remarked about Canada, a new nation should have a literature of its own reflecting its national habit of mind (1972:13). Therefore, Narayan should find the speakers for the new Indian nation in

contemporary Indian writers such as R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and Raja Rao who wrote in English.

Narayan’s desperate attempt “to encompass both eros and liberty” (Harrison, 2017:215) becomes a failure due to the Hindu ideology of purity engraved in Kalyani’s mind which leads her to commit suicide. As Rabindra reminds Narayan, “romantics are bad nationalists”. Despite his support of Indian independence, Narayan reveals himself as influenced by English Romanticism as Rabindra because, in the courting scene, he addresses Kalyani as “Kalyani devi” (“goddess”) just as Byron portrays the woman in “She walks in beauty” as a divinity. Rabindra warns his friend that “if he had not met that widow [Kalyani], Narayan would not have become a defender of the widows’ cause”. Moreover, Rabindra considers Narayan’s love for Kalyani preposterous. Therefore, Rabindra mocks his friend as a “failed Romeo” by performing the role of Shakespeare’s Juliet with a cloth over his head and reciting the famous line “O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo”. Courtney Lehman remarks that the presence of *Romeo and Juliet* as an intertext of *Water* is “not to align with the transcendent forces of romantic love but instead with the practice of sex trafficking and the project of colonial power” (2016:436). In Shakespeare’s play both lovers die for love, whereas in *Water*, it is only Kalyani who sacrifices herself for the sake of purity.³

The next character to find out about Narayan’s intention to wed Kalyani is his mother. Like Madumathi in her conversation with Gulabi, Narayan’s mother asks about the identity of the man in the photograph hung in his room and the content of his preaching. Proving to be relatively independent of the “umbilical cord” that ties many Indian men to their mothers, Narayan rebels against his mother’s prejudices, insisting that Gandhi is not a corrupt pundit but a defender of freedom and truth (*satya*). Narayan’s mother counterargues that to speak about truth is easy but to live according to it is more difficult, suggesting that the Mahatma can speak about *satya* but may not be so effective in applying it to his life. In fact, Gandhi’s contradictions and incongruities described earlier in this essay confirm this contradiction. Similarly, there is a gap between Narayan’s idealism and his actions. Firstly, Narayan fails to ask Kalyani why she wants to be taken back to the *ashram* when she discovers that she has been the prostitute of his father, and when he does

³ For a detailed reading of *Romeo and Juliet* as an intertext of *Water*, see Harrison (2017).

inquire after Kalyani at the retreat house for widows, she has already taken her life. Secondly, he forgets about Chuyia's existence when Kalyani dies (Parameswaran, 2007:20). Finally, instead of fighting the cause of widows in Varanasi, he leaves town to take up a respectable lawyer's position in Calcutta.

Amidst these contradicting views, towards the end of the film, the priest Sadanand, who acts as an intermediary between the various groups in conflict in the novel, praises Gandhi as "one of the few persons in the world who listens to the voice of his conscience". Shakuntala replies, "But what if our conscience is in conflict with our faith?", a question posing a dialectical conflict. Her question spells out, once again, the sheer contradictions between Gandhi's ideal of truth and the shattering reality of Kalyani's suicide in the River Ganges which intended to avoid damaging Narayan's reputation had the young widow married the son of one of her landlord clients.

It is this new truth that leads Shakuntala to go from *bhakti* ("devotion") into action. She takes Chuyia, whom Madhumati has chosen to be the substitute prostitute breadwinner after Kalyani's death, to the station where a huge crowd has gathered to listen to Gandhi, who has just briefly stopped at the station on his way to Allahabad. Facing the expectant crowd, Gandhi delivers his famous sentence about truth: "For a long time I thought God was truth. Now I know truth is God" and, after blessing some children, he wishes his audience happiness. The topic of truth remains outside the scope of this essay but, in accordance with Bakhtin, since "the 'truth' at which the hero must arrive at can only be *the truth of the hero's own consciousness* (Bakhtin 1983:55), which is questioned in Mehta's dialogic approach to filmic narrative.

In the final melodramatic scene, as the train starts to move, Shakuntala begs the travellers to have mercy on Chuyia until she lifts the girl into Narayan's outstretched arms, and he receives her in the hope that Gandhi will give her "freedom from a life half-lived" (Saltzman 2005: 274). However, the ending of the film, which shows a meditative Shakuntala throwing angry and accusative glances at the audience as the background fades out into another black screen, does not allow much room for optimism. The film ends with another pessimistic message, emerging on screen: "There are over 34 million widows in India according to the 2001 Census. Many continue to live in conditions of social, economic and cultural deprivation as prescribed 2000 years ago by the Sacred Texts of

Manu”. This final on-screen text closes the film with what Harrison calls the “ongoing politics of protest” (2017:222) related to the chronotope of widowhood.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have read Deepa Mehta’s filmic text in the light of Hindu ideas about women and of Gandhi’s problematic views on women in general and widowhood in particular, since he viewed widows’ renunciation as an “ornament to Hinduism” (quoted in Chaudhuri 2009: 18). Gandhi’s reputation as a hero and a saint was consolidated by Richard Attenborough’s Academy Award winning 1982 biopic based on Louis Fischer’s eulogistic 1950 biography and, in the wake of the 150th anniversary of his birth, continues to be influential today. I have delved into how Deepa Mehta reassesses the figure of Gandhi as an effective liberator of women through the iterative repetition of images and dialogues about him in *Water*. Instead of a “monologic authorial consciousness” (Bahktin 1983:11), Mehta uses a dialogic technique to present different voices and points of view about Gandhi which are sometimes praising and other times disparaging. By introducing voices of characters of different ideologies, genders and castes —women, *hijras*, anglicized and pro-independence Indian men —Mehta echoes “the plurality of voices with equal rights each with its own world” (Bakhtin 1983:6) that Bahktin considers central to the novel. Furthermore, the Indian-Canadian director effectively utilizes the chronotopes of “Gandhi” and “Indian widowhood” as issues which go across place and time.

The backdrop for the three widows’ intersecting stories — Chuyia, Shakuntala and Kalyani — is Gandhi’s freedom struggle. Therefore, the film presents the viewer with a leader, a cause, and some followers who seek to fulfil the dream of an independent and fairer India, whereas other characters would prefer that the status quo of women and the caste system would not change. *Water* depicts a contrast between the inside of the widows’ ghetto where the women remain ignorant of changes; and the external political world and the India of the British Raj in 1938, with “its burgeoning movement toward national independence personified by Gandhi” (Harrison, 2017: 209). However, these changes do not seem to affect individual lives when the economic and social conditions of the widows’ lives as they are portrayed in the film are considered. As Jain observes, some information about the reform of the widows’ situation does reach the *ashram* but a political machinery to enforce them is lacking (2007: 67). Ironically, it was the arrival of the Christian

missionaries (many of them British) what brought about an improvement in the cause of the child brides and widows. The Victorian missionary agenda viewed India as being as badly in need of help as its women. Rescuing women became synonymous to rescuing an entire nation from its obscurantism (Chadha, 2007:92). Thus, widowhood becomes a site for converging and conflicting discourses.

Deepa Mehta acknowledged at the launch of her new film *Funny Boy* that “All [her] films are quite political” (Ravindran, 2020: n.p.). In fact, by translating Gandhi’s ideas about women into a cinematic portrait of the ghettoization and exploitation of widows (including a child), Deepa Mehta rejects “the stereotypical depiction of Gandhi as a symbol of goodness, a redemptive hero” (Chaudhuri, 2009:18) and deals with human rights issues which go beyond those of gender, becoming, in the words of Gandhi’s favourite hymn (“Vaishnava Jana To”) — played over the loudspeakers in the final scene of the film — “a truly realized person ... who recognizes the pain of the others”.

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PILAR SOMACARRERA-ÍÑIGO is Associate Professor at the Department of English Studies at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. Her main research interests are Postcolonial theory, Canadian literature in English, Indian-Canadian writers and filmmakers, such as Rohinton Mistry and Deepa Mehta