

From Verbal to Visual; Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water* and Deepa Mehta's Film

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Abstract: *This paper explores the intertextual relationship between Bapsi Sidhwa's novel Water and Deepa Mehta's 2005 film of the same name. Set against the backdrop of 1938 British India, the narrative examines the plight of widows in Varanasi through the eyes of an eight-year-old protagonist, Chuyia. This study analyzes how the transition from screen to page (and vice versa) affects the portrayal of patriarchal oppression and religious fundamentalism. By examining the visual metaphors of Mehta and the linguistic nuances of Sidhwa, the research highlights how both mediums challenge the marginalized status of women in Hindu orthodoxy.*

Keywords: Screen Adaptation, Bapsi Sidhwa, Deepa Mehta, Widowhood, Post-colonial Feminism, Social Realism

1. Introduction

The adaptation of literature to film is often a journey of "translation" where the internal monologues of a book are traded for the visual syntax of the camera. However, *Water* presents a unique case: Deepa Mehta wrote the screenplay first, and Bapsi Sidhwa later adapted it into a novel. This paper investigates how this symbiotic relationship serves to critique the "living death" imposed upon widows in pre-Independence India.

2. Research Methodology

This research employs a **Qualitative Comparative Method**, utilizing:

Textual Analysis: Examining Sidhwa's use of sensory language and internal character development.

Cinematic Analysis: Analyzing Mehta's use of color palettes (specifically white), framing, and the recurring motif of water.

3. The Visual vs. The Verbal: Comparative Analysis

3.1 The Symbolism of Water

In the film, Mehta uses the Ganges as both a site of purification and a dumping ground for the "socially dead." The visual contrast between the flowing river and the stagnant life within the *ashram* is striking.

Sidhwa, conversely, uses prose to internalize this. She describes the "heaviness" of the water and the physical sensation of the cold river, turning a visual element into a tactile, psychological burden for Chuyia and Shakuntala.

3.2 Character Shade: Chuyia and Kalyani

While the film relies on the ethereal beauty and silent suffering of Kalyani (played by Lisa Ray), Sidhwa's novel provides a deeper backstory.

The Film: Uses close-up shots to capture the innocence of Chuyia, making the audience a voyeur to her confusion.

The Novel: Sidhwa uses a "child's eye view" narrative technique to expose the absurdity of the laws governing widowhood, often using wit to highlight the tragedy—a "Sidhwa-esque" touch of humor that softens the grim reality.



4. Discussion: Socio-Political Context

Both works are set in 1938, a pivotal moment when Gandhi's rise challenged the caste system and the treatment of "untouchables" and widows.

The Conflict: The tension between *Dharma* (religious duty) and *Nyaya* (justice).

The Climax: The sacrifice of Narayan and the liberation of Chuyia serve as a metaphor for a nascent India trying to break free from its own internal shackles.

"One less mouth to feed, four less sari's a year, and a corner of the porch. A widow's life is cheap." — *Water* (Deepa Mehta)

Challenges in Screen Adaptation

The screen adaptation of *Water* is perhaps one of the most fraught examples of "art under fire" in modern cinema history. The challenges faced by Deepa Mehta were not merely technical or narrative—they were visceral, political, and physically dangerous. To understand the adaptation of Bapsi Sidhwa's novelized version and Mehta's vision, one must look at the external and internal hurdles that shaped the final product.

1. The Physical and Political Siege

The primary challenge was the violent opposition from Hindu fundamentalist groups in India. In 2000, when production began in Varanasi (the holy city where the story is set), protestors burned film sets, issued death threats against Mehta and lead actors, and even threatened mass suicide to stop the filming.

The fundamentalist critique was centered on the "insult" to Hindu culture, specifically the portrayal of the mistreatment of widows. This forced a **five-year hiatus** and a total relocation of the project to Sri Lanka.

Adaptation Impact: To maintain the "authenticity" of the Ganges in a different country, Mehta had to painstakingly recreate the *ghats* of Varanasi. This geographical displacement created a "synthetic realism" where the environment had to be meticulously constructed to match the historical and spiritual weight of the original setting described in Sidhwa's prose.

2. Casting and Emotional Continuity

Originally, the film was to star high-profile Bollywood actors like Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das, both of whom had shaved their heads for the roles. Due to the multi-year delay caused by the riots, the entire cast had to be replaced.

The Challenge: Mehta had to find a new cast (John Abraham, Lisa Ray, and Seema Biswas) that could carry the heavy emotional baggage of the script.

The Result: Lisa Ray's portrayal of Kalyani brought a specific "ethereal" quality that Sidhwa later emphasized in the novel, focusing on the character's internal silence as much as her visual presence.

3. The Sensory Gap: Page vs. Screen

A significant challenge in adapting this story—which exists both as a screenplay and a novel—is the "unfilmable" nature of internal suffering.

Internal Monologue: In the novel, Sidhwa can spend pages describing the psychological trauma of an eight-year-old Chuyia, detailing her hunger and her confusion between religious ritual and personal loss.

Visual Syntax: Mehta had to translate these internal states into visual metaphors. She chose **minimalism**. The film uses long, static shots of white-clad women against the brown stone of the ashram to represent the stagnation of their lives.

4. Linguistic and Cultural Translation

The film was shot in Hindi to maintain cultural integrity but was intended for a global audience (eventually becoming Canada's Oscar entry).

The Dialogue Challenge: The script had to balance the archaic, scriptural language of the 1930s priesthood with a narrative that felt modern enough to critique those same traditions.



Sidhwa's Contribution: When Sidhwa adapted the screenplay back into a novel, her challenge was to "fill in" the gaps left by the camera, adding historical context about the British Raj and Gandhi's movement that the film only touches upon visually.

The adaptation of *Water* serves as a case study in how external social pressures can dictate the creative process. The film's eventual success was a triumph of persistence over censorship. The "Water" we see on screen is a battle-hardened version of the story—tempered by the very real-world religious tensions it sought to portray on celluloid.

5. Conclusion

The adaptation of *Water* is not merely a change in medium, but a reinforcement of a social message. While Mehta's film captures the haunting aesthetics of oppression, Sidhwa's novel captures its pulse. Together, they form a holistic critique of a society that uses religion to mask economic and sexual exploitation. The transition from screen to page allows for a more profound exploration of the characters' spiritual crises, ensuring that the story of Varanasi's widows is not just seen, but deeply felt.

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