

Paper

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Water and Adajya: Contextualizing Widowhood In the Social and Family Space

Abstract:

The concept of widowhood has been an adjunct to the institution of Hindu marriage. The socio-political and economic deprivation of the widows has been a much-debated topic among scholars. The socially constructed image of Hindu widows enforces their roles and codes of behaviour, undermining the existence of the individual. The loss of identity for a widow is followed by the loss of her privileges- over her body as well. A white cloth and a tonsured head become the symbol of the woman. The plight of the young widows within the periphery of family and their vulnerability in the vast social landscape become the cause of concern in Adajya and Water. The paper tries to look into the depiction of the life of a Hindu widow in the family and social space. While the visuals (socially constructed image of a 'widow') mirror the social construction of widowhood, the narrative transgresses the condition to articulate a protest against the widow's institutionalised marginality.

Keywords: widow, Adajya, Water, image, space

Introduction:

The image of a widow is a social construction. What she eats, what she wears, and how she lives are all decided by various social codes and norms. Negating her individuality in society gives her a marginal space in the vicinity of the social and the family. While in *Adajya*, the plights of a young widow are depicted within the spaces of the home, in *Water*, the widow dwells in the spaces of the society. They live a life of deprivation and isolation; they are almost a burden to their families and society. The life of these widows, their struggle to rise above the

mundane and their will to rebel become the subject of the two films. The films are based in almost the same era of colonial rule and the seeping of Western liberal thoughts through various agencies into Indian society. Both films are a critique of the Hindu religious and social traditions regarding the positioning and treatment of widows. The directors attempt to break the shackles of religion and tradition to achieve independence and dignity for these widows. Indira Goswami's novel, *Dotal Hatir Uiye Khowa Howda* becomes the base for Santwana Bordoloi's *Adajya* and Deepa Mehta's *Water* gives the background for Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water: A Novel*.

The ill-treatment of a widow is a reflection of a gender-imbalanced society that perceives women to be incapable of surviving without a male super hand. Women are often perceived as *paraya dhan* in their natal home in Indian culture, and after marriage, they become the property of their husbands. However, with the death of the husband, the woman becomes free from the bondage. She is feared as a potential danger to social construction because she is a single adult woman whose body and sexuality are no longer contained within a marital relationship, to be controlled by her husband (Young, 2006). The rituals and customs pertaining to widowhood may be read as a sign of the will of these women.

Adajya and *Water* have woven a narrative whereby an attempt has been made to change these power relations in society. The family and society have tried to restrain their free will, which the film's protagonists challenge. Giribala, Chuiya, and Kalyani try to find their freedom and escape the bondage. Their tales are situated when the nation transitioned from tradition to modernity and from incarceration to freedom.

The depiction of a Western man (Mark Sahab) in *Adajya* as the propagator of widow's rights/ freedom in the film is not coincidental. It instead suggests Assam's socio-political and historical situation of that particular period. During that period, Assam was influenced by different people and circumstances. Assamese people were threatened by the immigration of "labour, new skills, new vices and new ideas" (Guha, 2006, p. 20). They found themselves 'to be an insignificant minority' amidst the immigrant Marwari traders, Bengali clerks, doctors,

lawyers, etc. Even, according to Guha, under this situation, they "could not bring about a radical transformation within the local society itself" (Guha 2006: 21). Therefore, at this juncture, the British, along with Christian Missionaries, played a vital role in the process of modernisation. From that point of view, including a Western character in *Adajya* can be read as a replica of such historical facts.

Plot of the films:

Adajya: *Adajya*, meaning one that cannot be burnt or destroyed, is the story of a young widow from a wealthy Brahminical family. Giribala, the young widow, is brought to her paternal home after her husband breathed his last. The film critiques the rituals, tenets and social decree that widows have been asked to adhere to. After being widowed, Giribala returns home in anticipation that she might be able to lead the life before her marriage. She is asked to assist Mark, a British researcher, translate the old Satra manuscripts. This is the only activity where she is allowed to participate. She helps him with the writing work in the cattle shed as Mark, a non-Hindu and an outsider to the community, is not allowed inside the temple or the home. Norm dictates that a Hindu widow wear white clothes and eat plain vegetarian food. Giribala is not ready to follow the dictates that engulf her personality. As a show of definitive rebellion, Giribala embraces Mark in the view of the elders, leading to her purification by fire. She refuses to emerge after the fire is lit and is finally burnt inside the hay hut. She refused to end her life by the dictates that were supposed to plan her life.

Water: With a line quoting Manu, *Water* depicts the institutionalisation of widowhood in the socio-cultural sphere. The film's opening shots depict a little girl's transformation into a widow and her being left at a shelter house for widows on the bank of the Ganges. The little girl's presence in the story's centre allows the viewers to critique the conditions and sanctions placed on the Hindu widows. With her innocence and curiosity, Chuiya brings a new life to the otherwise drab lives of those within the shelter house. She refuses to understand the predicament that she is put into and denies losing her childhood. A young woman, Kalyani, lives in the same house. She is pawned for prostitution by the head of the shelter house, Manorama, to wealthy men on the other side of the river for money. Kalyani soon befriends Chuiya, and they spend time with each other. Kalyani has a chance to meet with a young man, Narayan, and falls in love. Narayan, a man with a modern education and belief in Gandhian philosophy, proposes to marry Kalyani. However, Kalyani learns that Narayan is the son of the same man to whom she is sent every night and kills herself by drowning in the river. Enraged at Kalyani's defiance, Manorama now sends Chuiya across the river. She is recovered by another inmate of the house, Shakuntala. To secure a safe future for the child, Shakuntala hands her over to Narayan, who is on his way to join the freedom struggle, which is a journey to bring about change.

A Battle of Spaces:

Space, as we know, means a room, an apartment, a marketplace, etc. Theoretically,

space is defined in three fields- physical, mental and social. For a mathematician, space is a set or collection of sets where the members have specific properties in common. Social scientists relate space with human existence. For Marx, space is a means and force of production under capitalism. At the same time, Georg Simmel considered space to be an essential area for understanding forms and content of social interaction. Michel Foucault analyses space "as a factor of 'bio-power', that is to influence and mould individuals and populations according to the meanings, values, priorities, morals and ideologies of those with power" (Zieleniec, 2007). Thus, he inter-relates space with the exercise of power. Drawing ritualistic boundaries and strictures to limit the reach of those residing within the peripheries of the space leads to the exercise of power. The widows in *Adajya* and *Water* are bound to a life of rituals and strictures that limit the periphery of their existence and thus give more space for others to spread their assumed territories. For Giribala and the other widows in *Adajya*, obeying their late husbands is a daily ritual. In *Water* for the women in the shelter house, prayers in the temple and begging in its footsteps are routine. Denying property rights may be another aspect of limiting a widow's space in the family and society. Giribala and Durga, devoid of economic freedom, are at the mercy of their natal family. Kalyani and others live in a house that belongs to none and thus must remain within a set of rules to occupy some place in the alien space.

Henry Lefebvre's notion that (Social) space is a (social) product can be taken as the main argument for our discussion. Lefebvre's

notion of this thesis is that space is not in itself but constantly produced and bound up with social reality. According to him, space is an integral part of social practice and is society-specific. “The space [.....] also serves as a tool of thought and action; that in addition to being a means of production, it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power” (Lefebvre, 1975). Non-conformity with the rules and regulations to inhabit an alien space is highly punished. Giribala is a rebellious young woman who is not ready to conform to the fate that she is tied to. The scene that introduces her to the audience depicts a calm and peaceful person negating all expectations of her plunging into despair and sorrow. Although she wears a widow’s garb, her expressions are not that of mourning. She rebukes the neighbourhood women who had come to express their sympathy. However, her independent self and strong mind cannot be tolerated. Her mother searches for prescribed rites to purify her after being treated by Mark for snake bites. An elaborate purification ritual follows after eating meat from the pantry. Giribala subverts these rituals and rites in the end. She does not need a rescuer but finds her rescue from the inverting norms that vow to bind her. As she advised her aunt, she took the liberty to decide at least the circumstances of her death. She refuses to emerge after the fire during another purification ritual and is finally burnt inside the hay hut. She declines to end her life by the dictates that were supposed to plan her life.

Kalyani, on the other hand, is left with disfigured beauty. Her declaration to marry Narayan clearly violated the norms of the social and institutional space she occupied.

Thus, she is punished by being locked up and sealing her long tresses. However, chopping her long locks can also be read as a negation of the traditional norms of beauty, a beginning of a new journey that she will steer.

Widows are neither a part of family nor a society in the true sense- she is alienated from both spaces. Uma Chakravarty (1995) observed that there are two modes of representing the social death of widows: one is intrusive. In this case, the widow is conceived as someone who does not belong because she is an ‘outsider’ (as in the affinal home). In the extrusive mode, the widow who had left her natal home following marriage became an outsider because she no longer belonged. The widow simultaneously - in the affinal and the natal home- becomes the outsider who no longer belongs; in this sense, she shares the feeling of being an outcast. Giribala’s natal home functions according to the dictates of the patriarch of the family, her father. Ever since she steps into the maternal home after being widowed, it has been emphasised by many that the actual place of a widow is at her husband’s home. The same is being said about her aunt Durga, and there remains a debate on whether it was acceptable to bring her from her affinal home. Her father tells Chuiya that the shelter house is her home. She has imparted ‘knowledge’ about the futile existence without her husband. Narayan’s father emphasises how Kalyani may be a source of amusement instead of being his wife. The films give a vivid portrayal of these widows’ battle to exist in the two spaces from which she has been alienated. They are alienated from social life with some prescribed behaviour. She is not supposed to be a part of auspicious.

Sometimes as her existence is negated by the society. Even her appearance is considered as sinful at certain moments.

Most rituals associated with a widow are performed to deny her sexuality. According to Uma Chakravarty, “To enforce permanent widowhood upon women, the community needs to reiterate its authority upon the widow continuously; the enforced tonsure is a way of doing that. It is a reiteration by the community of their power to control the widow’s sexuality” (1995). Her white dress and tonsured head construct a separate identity within that social space. It symbolises the absence of her happiness, desire, and beauty. In the white garb, their youth is lost. The whining and anguish of the three young women in *Adajya* go unnoticed by the others. Interaction with the other sex is always a reason for misgiving and apprehension. Giribala takes advantage of this anxiety and plans her course of action. While within the domestic space, it is a tussle to keep her pristine, society has devised ways to luxuriate on the vulnerability of these women. *Water* gives a glimpse of the sexual exploitation of young widows in the institutionalised form of widowhood. On the contrary, some rules state that such desire must not be expressed at the individual level. Feelings and emotions regarding love and romance are not to be nurtured. While pawing Kalyani for the pleasure of upper-class men is no sin, her desire to marry the man of her choice culminates in a tragic end to her life. It suggests their powerlessness in the hands of the patriarchal social system. Similarly, within the family space, widows are treated as neglected beings. Furthermore, mistreatment by her in-laws is a common practice observed

in Indian society. A widow is considered a burden on her family members.

The freedom over one’s own body also defines one’s identity. The freedom to express one’s sexuality is also the expression of one’s identity and individuality. On the other hand, accepting an identity also means recognising one’s presence within the family or social space. Denial of bodily freedom to a widow and the dread and anxiety over restraining her sexuality hence may be read as a scheme to deny her identity and individuality and thus refute her claims to the familial and social space. Body, as defined by Michel Foucault, is ‘manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces’ (1975). Power is directly associated with the movement of the human body. The body has been used as a power source since the classical age. Foucault called it a ‘docile body’ that ‘may be subjected, used, transformed and improved’ (1975). Social systems always control the human body, and it imposes on it ‘constraints, prohibitions or obligations’ (1975). In the twenty-first century, “framing the body” has become “a vital means of establishing structures of power, knowledge, meaning and desire.” (Cavallaro, 2001). Patriarchy exercises its power on women by imposing restrictions on their bodies. Foucault remarked that “made sex not only a secular concern but a concern of the state as well; to be more exact, sex became a matter that required the social body as a whole, and virtually all of its individuals, to place themselves under surveillance” (Lauretis, 1987). Restraining her bodily movements, the family, as well as the society, exercises their power over a widow. They assigned her a new

identity that limits her movement within society and her family, thus curtailing her privileges in these spaces.

Liberty in the Filmic/Cinematic Space:

Henry Lefebvre implied that humans create the space in which they make their lives, and this space is shaped by the interests of classes, experts, the grass-roots and other contending forces. According to Lefebvre, space is not simply inherited from nature, passed on by the dead hand of the past, or autonomously determined by “laws” of spatial geometry. According to him, space is produced and reproduced through human intentions, even if unanticipated consequences also develop, even as space constrains and influences those producing it. A space is thus neither merely a medium nor a list of ingredients but an interlinkage of geographic form, built environment, symbolic meanings, and routines of life (Molotch, 1993). Cinema is perhaps one medium of expression where Lefebvre’s idea of space is being played in front of the human eye. A film exposes the viewer to the various elements that have conspired to produce the final narrative. A film printed on the celluloid presents the physical environment in which it was made. The story it narrates is presented through the director's perspectives, who uses various signs and symbols and established cinematic codes to convey the story to the audience. The space of the cinema frame is thus an assortment of corporeal and ethereal spaces.

As the composition of space and time, cinema incorporates the relationship of the body, memory and place. The ‘look of camera’, ‘look of characters’ and ‘look of

spectators’ in cinema project the director's and the reader's intentionality in the ‘lived image’—the spatial thought in film exercises spatial encounters and dialogues. Space in film, which could be described as “image events”, can be read in three folds- the director’s intention, the reader’s intention and the intentionality of the imagery itself. The analysis of the “shot space”, including the look of the camera and the look of the character, depicts the director’s vocabulary and the approach towards the use and representation of space (Adiloglu, 2006).

Thus, filmic space may be read as a liberal one that considers the viewpoint of an individual, the director. Though some cinematic codes bind the frame, it does not follow the dictate of society's rules, regulations, and strictures. Deepa Mehta and Swantana Bordoloi take the liberty to engage and assign cinematic space to these women (widows) who have been pushed to the boundaries of society. Giribala is recently widowed, and her kin are engaged in lamenting for her when the film opens. However, the introduction of Giribala in the film is a contradictory picture of the grief of her mother and others. Mourning is not in her mind. No effort is made on the part of the narrative to present a grieving Giribala. The construct she is to live with is limited to her bodily appearance. Although she wears a widow’s garb, her expressions are not that of mourning. Similarly, Kalyani does not grieve over her ‘widowed status’ but is hopeful for a better future ahead. Chuiya, on the other hand, very bluntly refuses to accept the situation that she has been assigned to. These women engage in the space of cinema to build their narrative, which has been denied in society.

The space of cinema has been employed to establish a note of protest against the construction of the idea of a widow and the rituals used to reinforce this idea.

A widow is seen as inauspicious and restricted from public and social spaces. Contrary to this, these women have the maximum screen presence in films. From the beginning to the end, it is her image that is splashed on the screen, and it is her narrative that is being said. All that the other characters, who are represented as a force of social sanctions, do is deliberate about them. Thus, the narrative and the frame's space are dominated by those for whom the situation in the social space is a constant struggle. They triumphed when the celluloid carved legends out of them. Their images via cinema have silently seeped into the social space to occupy, which has been a struggle. So intense is their persona that they are even beyond the reach of their suitors. Though Mark and Narayan seem to sympathise with them, they are components of the same society that has denied these women their rights. Thus, Giribala and Kalyani are placed on elevated platforms, even out of their admirers' reach. They are almost powerless to change their situation or accept them in their present assigned status. In *Adajya*, the protagonist, Giribala, takes it upon herself to register a protest against coercion to receive an image that is a construct of others. She goes into open rebellion against the rituals that propose to strengthen such photos. She eats the food that she is forbidden to, wears the footwear of her deceased husband to which she is supposed to pay obeisance, and, as a show of ultimate rebellion, embraces an outcaste man to exploit the norms for final liberation, which

for her is death. Giribala consciously subverts the rituals for purification to obtain liberation, which she had decided was not to be determined by her family or social norms.

In *Water*, Chuiya is a little girl who does not understand the constructs. On informing that she is being widowed, she enquires how long she must remain so. Her outburst may be read as a work of rage or anger rather than an act of conscious rebellion. Her blissful ignorance of her predicament is representative of the tension between nature and culture. There could not have been a better-introducing sequence than Chuyia's transformation into a widow. The innocent face and the harsh rituals and reality clash against one another to re-narrate a tale that is known to all. Kalyani, on the other hand, lives in tangible physical captivity that renders it impossible for her to register a protest. She, on the other hand, hopes for a better future and submits herself to death when that hope breaks. Shakuntala is a woman caught in the perplexity of faith and religion. The director registers the protest here by positioning the images and narratives of these women in the film space. The film space is replete with Chuyia's innocent images and defiance to accept her predicament. Kalyani asserts to Narayan that even the labyrinth of their existence is resilience. Shakuntala, though, is ruthlessly aware of her reality and has faith in deliverance, which, in the end, is met with the call for freedom.

Conclusion:

Adajya narrates the tale of three young widows. While Giribala, the protagonist,

stands in rebellion, Soru presents a picture of the relatively liberal individual. Durga aspires to reallocate to Kashi, which is perceived as a place of deliverance for the widows. Alienated from the familial space, *Water* picks up from this aspiration to inhabit the society. The film not only critiques the social position regarding the widows but also works to refute the parable of institutionalised widowhood announced as a sheltered refuge for young widows. In *Water*, the institution builds the constructs of widowhood, and in *Adajya*, the family enforces them. Fear of sin and exclusion forces the family to reinforce the constructs that the institution builds. However, in both spaces, widows are always subject to being controlled by social and familial commands. However, as both *Adajya* and *Water* show, the marginalised (widows in this case) would always find a leeway to rise above and surpass the institution to speak. Of course, Santana Bordoloi and Deepa Mehta showcase their (widows) journey towards freedom differently. Their individual cultural experiences allow (or restrain) them to offer a suggestive solution to this problem. Being a representative of Assamese society, where patriarchy plays a pivotal role in everybody's experiences, Bordoloi suggests the path to Giribala's freedom through her death.


Through her diasporic lens, Mehta assimilates Chuiya's journey of freedom with Mahatma Gandhi's freedom movement. If one refers to a spiritual space for widows, the latter suggests a larger space within the nation.

Negotiating a woman's experience in the patriarchal space, more so of one not under the shadow of a male super hand (windows in this case), has brought forth various social discrepancies. The complex structure of economic and political positioning plays a vital role. The characters in both films are of different economic statuses. While in *Adajya*, the family's economic and social position shields the widows from society (not undermining the social norms influencing their role in the family space), economic vulnerability leaves them defenceless against many exploitative systems of society. Read in a juxtaposing manner, *Adajya* and *Water* complement each other in depicting the condition of widows in different spaces. The two films stand as a document commenting on the positioning of widows in different spaces. One film text fulfils the space the other did not touch, and though set apart by many miles these women filmmakers their works, the film texts intersect.

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