



Counter Gaze in Deepa Maheta's *Water*

The essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) by Mulvey is considered as one of the milestones in feminist film theory and film studies. Clifford T. Manlove notes that this essay influenced "something akin to gaze theory" in early 1990s and Mulvey's argument about "patriarchal structure of an active male gaze spread its influence far beyond feminist film critiques of Alfred Hitchcock and Hollywood, film and culture theory and theory of perception" (83). The essay uses "Psychoanalytic theory as political weapon" to prove that "the unconscious of patriarchal society structured the film form" (802).

The term Gaze has various implications. Lacan explains it as primarily part of human subjectivity- the power of eye, the idea of "spectatorship" and the visual nature of 'agency' (84). Another implication is about "the hierarchical power relation" (84). This essay discusses 'male gaze' in narrative cinema of 1960s and argues women are objectified because men are in control of the camera. The body of female becomes the object of male's visual pleasure through the eyes of camera. She further argues women also look themselves through the eyes of men. In her verbatim "Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within a screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of screen" (809). She uses the term "Scopophilia" means "taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze (806). She relates it with Voyeurism.

Through the essay Mulvey intends to reveal the patriarchal hegemony in narrative cinema and also hopes for chances for alternative cinema to develop which can be radical in political and aesthetic sense and can challenge basic assumptions of the mainstream. However, she says that these types of cinema still exist as a counter point (805). Some female directors have challenged male gaze and made counter cinema. Agnes Varda's *Vagabond* (1985) is the best example of it. There are certain techniques in cinema by which such directors create counter gaze. This paper reads *Water* (2005) by Deepa Maheta as such counter point. How gaze operates in it? How the director uses cinematic tools to counter the perception of heterosexual male audience? How the setting, sound, light, costumes are used to reverse or to create counter gaze?

The movie got worldwide acclamation after it released. It sets in Varansi, India and shows India of 1938 when the nation was under influence of Gandhi's thoughts and attempts for independence of India. However the movie faced controversies because of its subject of widowhood. If we go in the history of its making, Maheta had to shift the location because of the objection and attack by Hindutvavadi organisations on her set in India. She had to put aside the project for five to six years. Later on she restarted with different actors and title in Sri Lanka. So her set designer must be credited to create Varansi in Sri Lanka. The location is beautiful with serenity, not romantic. The movie uses light, colour, background, costumes in such a way that the audience can connect with life showing on the screen rather than objectification of female bodies as discussed by Mulvey.

Water is the third in sequence in Mehta's trilogy. The first is *Fire* (1996) and second is *Earth* (1998). *Fire* also remains in controversy because of its theme of female sexuality. *Earth* is based on the novel by Bapsi Sidhwa *The Ice Candy Man* (1988) and deals with theme of partition and lives affected by it. So keeping that in eyes her feminist stance Mehata depicts lives of women under the politics of patriarchal society where nationalism and religion remain oppressive on women's lives and sexuality.

The movie shows gruesome realities of widow's life. It revolves round to the lives of widows in widow-*ashram*. The movie brings four generations of widows under the same roof. It opens in the early hours of morning and shows a small girl named Chhuiya. Her husband is ill and unaware to it she is chewing sugar-cane with relish. When her husband dies her father comes to inform her. He says: "Dear daughter you have become widow now". She asks, "*Kabtak*" (How Long)? She is sent to widow- *ashram* forcefully, where she makes company with Kalyani and Sakuntala. Kalyani is a young widow who has accepted the circumstances but wanted to change it after her meeting with Narayan. Sakuntla is a middle-aged woman who has created her space and place in that surrounding. Madhumati the old widow who tries to control all however, Chhuiya, Kalyani and Shakuntla challenge her authority in one or another aspect. They all have different understanding of their lives. Madhumati has company with transgender Gulabi, who works as an agent for Jamindars. She sends Kalyani with Gulabi to the Jamindar for money to their survival. The male protagonist, Narayan is a young lawyer, son of Jamindar but inspired by Gandhian thoughts who falls in love with Kalyani. They both decide to marry. When Madhumati comes to know she cuts Kalyani's hair but Sakuntala with her clarity of thought helps Kalyani to run away. However, when Kalyani comes to know that Narayan is the son of the same Jamindar, she comes back to the *Asharam* where Madhumati puts the same condition to take her back. Kalyani has no place to go then the river. She drowned herself in the Ganga. Madhumati sends Chhuiya with Gulabi. Sakuntala gets late to save her. In the next scene Sakunta is seating on the *Ganga ghat* with Chhuiya in her lap, where she listens news about arrival of Gandhi at railway station. She starts walking in that direction and *Vaishvajan...* song is playing in the background. Sakuntala decides to send Chhuiya with Gandhi. She runs after the train requesting all to take Chhuiya with them. She sees Narayan in the train and gives Chhuiya in his hand and tells him to take her to Bapu. The movie ends on mid-shot of Sakuntala.

The sordid lives of widows are shown with binaries. There is no difference in the life of prostitute, widow and house-wife. On the name of religion patriarchy deprives them from all aspects of living life and makes them available to male's sexuality. Madhumati weeps on the death of her parrot but sends Chhuiya with Gulabi. Buva ate *Laddu* on her wedding day and from that moment to her death she has nostalgia for sweets. All are victims of the same system.

If we try to understand the aspect of gaze with given story-line, all female characters are with shaved head and in white sari directly challenges male-gaze. The narration of the movie is mainly from the eyes of Chhuiya. What we see is the filtered version of director's gaze to child's gaze. Not a single shot in the movie which provides visual pleasure to the male audience. Because the movie has handled very problematic issue of Indian society where prostitution and rape do not have loud reaction. Everything goes on behind the closed door.

The correlation between title of the movie and its setting on *Ganga-ghat* is aptly shown. The water of the river and activities going on the river bank has prominent place in the movie. The movie opens with pond full of lotus like life full of liveliness. The second sequence is on the river- bank where the burning body of Chhuiya's husband and removal of her hair. Except two-three scenes, all scenes open at river-bank, where all important events of life go on simultaneously, whether it is marriage or

cremation, preaching or day to day routine. The river water and its bank has special place in the lives of the widows too. They have only place then Ashram to go.

The colour has its own place in this setting. They are dull, mainly white. The light is generally created appropriate to early morning and late night hours because the daily routine of the widows start before all awake and their nights pass in Bhajans. Chhuiya's husband's dies at late night and she is brought in the Ashram in the early morning. Gulabi takes Kalyani at night and brings her back in the early morning. Klayani meets Narayan in the early morning time. So, most of the scenes are in dark light. Music has Indian classical touch, where songs are play accordingly. When Buva eats *Laddu* and satisfied her old wish the music in background is very appropriate. The time period is before independence where Gandhi is in the centre of the country. Somewhere the hope is seen in the character of Gandhi. Narayan and Pandit talk about Gandhi as a person who can change life and that is proved by the action of Sakuntala in the end of the movie.

Thus, the movie successfully reverses the gaze by using various techniques of visual narration. The intermingling of director's gaze and child's gaze is going on. Most of the actions are from the point of view of Chhuiya: the gloomy or rather dull faces of widows, their white clothes, the walls of the ashram etc.

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Hetal D. Dave
Research Scholar,
Central University of Gujarat,
Gandhinagar

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