

UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL

**Diasporic Identities, Divine Presences and the
Dynamics of Power in Deepa Mehta's Filmography
(1996-2008)**

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Abstract

This dissertation explores Hindu diasporic identities through the medium of four films directed by Deepa Mehta. The analysis of *Fire* (1996), *Earth* (1998), *Water* (2005) and *Heaven on Earth* (2008) reveals the contrary nature of Hindu culture, while simultaneously providing measures to negotiate a culture that is thousands of years old. The film texts were selected as they have caused controversy while also initiating debate, both within the Indian sub-continent and the Indian diaspora. Utilising post-colonial and feminist discourses, I explore the ability for marginalised individuals (women, children and queer individuals) to gain access to power through structures that have previously resulted in oppression and subjugation. These structures include culture, gender, sexuality and the forces of colonialism. I reveal how subjects, despite their oppression, are able to gain some agency, voice and cohesion. Within contemporary society the social standing of women, both within the diaspora and the Indian sub-continent, needs re-evaluation. My research therefore illustrates how marginalised individuals are positioned within Hindu culture and demonstrates that there is no justification for the mistreatment of such individuals. Hindu culture is one of the few cultures that is primarily devoted to the worship of the female figure. An in-depth and critical analysis of Hindu mythology places the Goddess and female figure at the centre of Hindu culture. This stands in contrast to the patriarchal elements that have come to define Hindu culture. Re-affirming the place of women within Hindu culture bestows them with power, equal to that which men wield. Through her filmography, Mehta uses Hindu mythology to reveal the double standards that Hindu culture embodies. Mehta also exposes the endless possibilities that mythology exhibits for the change in treatment towards marginalised individuals.

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Declaration

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, in the Graduate Programme in English Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

I, Samiksha Laltha, declare that:

1. The research reported in this dissertation, except where otherwise indicated, is my original research.
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Introduction

This dissertation explores Hindu identities, both indigenous and diasporic. I will engage with diasporic filmmaking and Hindu mythology to produce a textual analysis of four films directed by Deepa Mehta. These films are: *Fire* (1996), *Earth* (1998), *Water* (2005) and *Heaven on Earth* (2008), the first three of which comprise the Elemental Trilogy. Mehta is an Indian Canadian film director. Born in Amritsar, India, in 1950, she moved to Canada and thus became part of the Indian diaspora which is scattered across the globe. Much like Mehta, I also find myself belonging to the Indian diaspora here on the African continent. At the heart of this dissertation lies the ability for marginalised individuals (women, children and queer individuals) to gain access to power through structures that have previously resulted in oppression and subjugation. These structures include culture, gender, sexuality and the forces of colonialism. I will show how subjects, despite their oppression, are able to gain some agency, voice and cohesion. I will go on to explore and develop this idea and show how it is depicted through film and its creation by an individual who is marginal, interstitial and diasporic.

A cultural studies perspective will be used to illuminate the relationship between the four films, post-colonial theory, and feminist and diasporic studies. A study of transnational cinema will serve as a useful tool in my exploration of diasporic Indian culture and its relationship to the selected films. After this theoretical discussion, I thereafter go on to acknowledge some significant predecessors who have contributed to the field of study that explores the Elemental Trilogy. The analysis of the final film, *Heaven on Earth*, will be based on an individual and unique contribution to the field of Indian film study, as attaining material based on the film has proven to be challenging. Through a subtle analysis of Hindu culture I will carve out a niche for this dissertation.

Hinduism, existing as a pliable culture, is also receptive to cultural change. This can have a direct impact on the ways in which marginalised individuals are treated. The site of Hindu culture is a fertile ground for the study of gendered power dynamics and its wider impact on Hindu society, indigenous or otherwise. Mehta explores this field of study to produce thought-provoking and analytical pieces of work. Through her films, the double standards that Hindu culture occupies, in terms of gender, are made evident. Deemed as one of the oldest traditions in the world, Hinduism is constantly responding to various social, literary,

political and historical changes. Hinduism is dependent on its prolific pantheon which consists of both male and female Gods given equal representation within the vast array of Hindu religious literature. Despite this, patriarchy still seems to prevail. Mehta, through her filmography, offers a different perspective on gender and highlights the essential role of the divine feminine. Through a textual analysis of the four selected films, I will accentuate this role to reveal the variety of contemporary positions that Hindu women occupy. I will also delineate the reasons for the violent protests that Mehta's films have incited within the Indian sub-continent.

To accompany the discussion of power dynamics within Hindu culture, I will employ the theories of post-colonialism articulated by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (1998). The authors discuss varying post-colonial terms that I will relate to the four selected films. The scope of theory articulated by writers extends to make reference to various historical occurrences, such as the British presence within India. This will be particularly useful for the second chapter which deals with Partition in India. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2006) also make reference to important individuals such as Edward Said (1984) and Nicholas Dirks (1992), who have contributed significant pieces of work to post-colonial studies. Edward Said in "The Mind of Winter" (1984) negotiates a diasporic identity and the implications of straddling numerous identities, while Nicholas Dirks focuses on the role of culture within the colonial project (specifically within India), in "Colonialism and Culture" (1992).

The films under scrutiny are created within a post-colonial context. They address both the effects of colonialism and its aftermath. Significantly, post-colonialism "deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1998, 186). The 'civilising mission', as it expanded across the globe, was culturally dependent on Christianity. The topic of colonial discourse was thus steeped in controversy. In his article entitled "Colonialism and Culture" Nicholas B. Dirks (2006, 59) comments, "Colonialism is now safe for scholarship, and culture seems an appropriate domain in which to measure the effects of colonialism in the contemporary world." In a discussion of the importance of cultural roots to any given community, Stuart Hall (2006, 435) grapples with cultural identities and their constantly changing nature. While suggesting that "cultural identities [...] have histories", he also points out how they are not fixed "in some essentialised past". Cultural identities have the capacity to respond "to the continuous 'play' of history, culture

and power.” In keeping with a discussion of colonialism and culture, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2006, 7) engage in a discussion centred on the concept of the “sacred” and cite its importance to post-colonial studies. The authors foreground the relevance of discourses that focus on the tradition, culture and religious “beliefs of colonized, indigenous and marginalized peoples” (7).

As it is depicted within the title of this dissertation, power, as it is wielded within the four selected films, refers directly to the manner in which the concept of agency will function within this discussion. Agency, in dealing with its associations to a post-colonial context, “refers to the ability of post-colonial subjects to initiate action in engaging or resisting imperial power” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1998, 8). This aptitude determines the amount of power that one is able to wield in social, sexual and religious structures. Many of the female characters within the four films resist the imperial forces of colonialism either in a colonial (as in the case of *Earth*) or post-colonial context. India has, after all, been under the rule of empire for over 200 years. This has ultimately impacted on social, sexual and cultural structures, as well as the movement of people from the Indian sub-continent to other parts of the world.

A diaspora, within any given society, often constitutes a small percentage of the population due to their small, concentrated numbers. There is a tendency to “other” the diasporic community, resulting in a collective marginalisation. The discussion of the concept of “marginality” is steeped in power dynamics. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1998, 135), the “marginal” individual is defined by “the limitations of a subject’s access to power.” This results in a double-edged subjugation for those of the diasporic community who are already deemed as subservient and inferior. This includes women, children and individuals who occupy a queer sexual orientation. These oppressed individuals often occupy a difficult and ambiguous position within patriarchal culture.

Feminism and post-colonialism are interrelated concepts, as the forces of patriarchy have a direct impact on the lives of those which it subjugates, specifically women. Both feminist and post-colonial studies that centre on the oppressed strive to equal out the balances of power and make various injustices visible. Patriarchy and colonial “oppression” are contested points of debate that compete for superiority in the lives of women (101-102). Shohini Chaudhuri (2006, 3-4) summarises the scope of feminist studies. She says:

As a movement, feminism has a diversity of branches and approaches but generally speaking it strives to analyse and change the power structure of patriarchal societies – this is, societies where men rule and where their values are privileged. Feminists make women's positions their primary concern, but their analysis of power relations is often relevant to, and encompasses, other subordinated, oppressed and exploited groups.

This dissertation will show how not only women, but children and queer individuals, are positioned within Hindu culture as represented by the four films. Using Hindu culture and the selected films I will claim that there is no justification for the mistreatment of what are deemed as subjugated individuals.

Indian communities are scattered across the globe due to the forces of both colonialism and post-colonialism. In a book entitled *Beyond Bollywood*, Jigna Desai (2004, 4) situates the diaspora within “feminist and queer studies”. This forces one to analyse its links to “globalization and postcoloniality” (4). The history of colonialism forced both the coloniser and the colonised to move across the globe for various reasons. The diasporic Indian community in South Africa is a result of indentured labourers that were brought from India on ships to provide labour on sugar cane fields, more than 150 years ago. The system of indentured labour was undisputedly linked to the colonial project, specifically within the British Raj. The system displayed its injustices by claiming that it used voluntary labour, but instead functioned through “forced labour, with many of the labourers impressed rather than recruited” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1998, 215). Vijay Mishra (2002, 236), in his book *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*, refers to these labourers as “the old Indian diaspora of plantation labor”. The post 1960s saw another movement of people which Mishra refers to as the movement “of late modern capital” (235). Mishra creates a distinction between these two movements of people. He says that “the diaspora of late capital [...] is very different from the traditional nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century diaspora of classic capital, which was primarily working class and connected to the plantation culture” (236). It was the latter diasporic selves that provided a consumption market for “popular cinema” and its “production” (236). Today, the lives of some Indians in South Africa still revolve around culture. This is evident in the various Indian festivals that occur in South Africa. These include the annual Fire walking events held at various temples in Durban and Pietermaritzburg. Indian cinema is an important contributor to the Indian diasporic experience. Rachel Dwyer (2006, 1) suggests that Indian cinema will always play a crucial

role in the Indian diasporic imagination through its construction of the Indian nation, and, I would argue, Hindu culture. South African Indian society occupies a “cultural zone that is open and yet closed, something many Indian South Africans are a bit ashamed of”, declares Thomas Hansen (2005, 247). Referred to by the colloquial term of “*charou*”, being Indian is linked to “superstition, gullibility, [and] funny accents” (247).

The diaspora has cultural connections that are both internal and external. While analysing the formation of any given diaspora we are made aware of how power dynamics come to play an important role in our wider understanding of the diaspora and its formation. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2006, 425) observe how uncommon it is to refer to an English diaspora. Colonised, oppressed and subjugated peoples constitute diasporas around the world. They are seldom found to hold political, cultural or sovereign power in the nation that they occupy. It is unlikely that the coloniser can ever be described as entering into “an exile” (425).

Hybridity characterises the diaspora and the diasporic self. This post-colonial term describes the mixing of two entities to create a nuanced, third kind. This occurs through “transcultural forms within the contact zones” (1998, 118) created by both the colonising and decolonising processes. The hybrid is evident in various “linguistic”, “cultural”, “political” and “racial” (118) forms, among others. It is this very hybridisation that is evident through the course of an analysis of the four selected films. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin trace the etymology of the word “diaspora” via the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, where it is defined as “the dispersion”. First appearing in Deuteronomy 28, Verse 25, it was written that “the Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies[;] you will come up from one direction and flee from another and you will become a thing of horror” (cited in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2006, 425). Diaspora is characterised by “scattering”, “exile” and in this particular context, from Deuteronomy, as an “exile” which within biblical terms is considered a “punishment” (425) handed down upon one by God himself. This idea of punishment within biblical terms mirrors the story of Moses and the Israelites who went into a 40 year exile, wandering the desert, in search of the Promised Land. To counter this negative view of the diasporic self, I would argue that it is adaptability and hybridity that characterise the diasporic individual. As outsiders, Indian diasporic entities look towards the Indian sub-continent and are able to be critical of what occurs within. The diasporic individual is thus able to look in dual directions – towards a “historical cultural identity on one hand, and the society of relocation on the other” (425). The notion of a split identity also involves allegiance to the “nation” and by

extension, feelings of nationalism. In “The Mind of Winter” Edward Said (2006, 440) points out, “Nationalism is an assertion of belonging to a place, a people, a heritage. It affirms a home created by a community of language, culture, and customs; and by doing so, it fends off the ravage of exile”. The diasporic self is forced to grapple with issues pertaining to identity and belonging. Nationalism plays an imperative role in subscribing a form of identity to the split diasporic self. Therefore, diasporic identities can be described as fluid and in a constant state of flux. This fluctuation is made apparent in “The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema”, where Andrew Higson (2006, 17) maintains, “At times, the experience of an organic, coherent, national community, a meaningful national collectivity, will be overwhelming. At other times, the experience of diaspora, dislocation and de-centredness will prevail. It is in times such as these that other allegiances, other senses of belonging besides the national, will be more strongly felt.” The split identity of the diasporic self has the capacity to find “home” in various places, regions and nations.

Being exposed to numerous other cultures and multiple identities, the diasporic individual does not fit into a rigid representation of social structures and/or the nation. Benedict Anderson (2006, 125) proposes that the nation “is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them [...] has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind.” The diasporic self must imagine at least two nations and/or communities. In his world-renowned article, “Imaginary Homelands”, Salman Rushdie (2006, 428) describes the condition of the fractured Indian identity. He notes, “the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time.”

During the course of this dissertation I will engage with the four selected films as viewed through a diasporic lens. This will make evident how they contribute to a transnational study of film and gendered structures. The transnational has been defined by Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (2006, 1) as “the global forces that link people or institutions across nations.” Transnational cinema exists in the fissures between “the local and the global” (4). The concept of the transnational and its relation to diasporic film studies is highlighted by

the permeability of national borders (itself determined by local and global political and economic conditions) to the physical or virtual mobility of those who cross them. In a similar way, cinema is borderless to varying degrees, subject to the same uneven mobility as people. (5)

Since its commencement, cinema has been transnational as it has moved “across borders” while more often than not, employing the use of “international personnel” (2). Borders are carved out with intent and are thus spaces of contestation, permeability and movement (Higson 2006, 19). Transnational studies entail cultural, global and post-colonial studies, thus directly related to a diasporic study. Transnational cinema emerges through the making of films from various countries created by people of different nationalities. New Media lies at the forefront of our transnational world, and it is of crucial importance to Indian cinema and the diaspora. Technology is rapidly developing at rates unseen in our history. A world without modern technology is unimaginable; however, once it did exist. Song, dance, theatre, poetry and paintings have been used in Indian religious practices for decades, and are still used to this very day; however, film is directly dependent on evolving technologies. The first of these technologies is the VCR (Video Cassette Recorder) and the second is cable satellite, both of which have come to play a prominent role in how Indian diasporic “homeland culture” has developed (Mishra 2002, 238).

Transnational cinema encompasses material that is produced in South and East Asia and does not exclusively include content from Europe and North America. Through social, cultural and economic globalisation, films from South and East Asia have come to occupy the centre of contemporary debate and study (Ezra and Rowden 2006, 2). All four films by Mehta, under scrutiny within this dissertation, have actors and actresses that are considered the giants of the Bollywood industry. Mehta’s films are available to a wide variety of audiences and critical reception has arisen from a variety of individuals of different nationalities. Shabana Azmi plays Radha in *Fire*, Aamir Khan plays Dil Navaz in *Earth*, John Abraham plays Narayan in *Water*, and Chand in *Heaven on Earth* is played by Preity Zinta. Transnational spaces allow for the exploration and highlighting of liminal spaces. The liminal is an interstice where “cultural change may occur” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1998, 130). Liminal spaces are useful when engaging in a discussion of the diasporic self, the diasporic identity and the diasporic setting. Additionally, liminal spaces can be described as a “transcultural space” in which cultural, communal or individual identities may be constructed; “a region in which there is continual process of movement and interchange between different states” (130). The diaspora has more obvious qualities of transcultural spaces; however, within the context of the Indian sub-continent, transcultural spaces bring about various religious sect and belief systems within Indian culture.

Writing from within a Senegalese context, Maria Maasilta (2006, 1) situates transnational cinema. She reveals:

The films of diasporic filmmakers are in dialogue with both the home and the host societies and their respective national cinemas. They have to reflect the needs and aspirations of at least three different interpretive communities: national audiences at home, national audiences of the host country, and transnational diasporic audiences living in the new host country in situations similar to that of the filmmaker her/himself.

The process of globalisation has a direct impact on transnational and diasporic studies. Post-colonial studies is shifting to encompass the forces of globalisation and its impact on the lives of people. This is perhaps “the ultimate and unavoidable future” of post-colonial scholarship (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2006, 6).

Over the course of approximately a decade, a large number of scholars have written about the filmography of Deepa Mehta in varying degrees. My research functions within the field of post-colonial studies which is linked to Indian diasporic discourses. Mehta’s filmography is critical of, and thus can be differentiated from, the characteristics of Bollywood cinema. A feminist viewpoint can be discerned through each of Mehta’s productions. It is around this notion that various studies have evolved to also include a transnational perspective. While a large number of academics have written about only one of the films that form part of the Elemental Trilogy, intellectuals from both within the Indian sub-continent and out of it have produced research on the trilogy. Subeshini Moodley (2003) and Sukhmani Khorana (2010) have written from South Africa and South Australia respectively, while Snigdha Madhuri (2009), Jasbir Jain (2007) and Manju Jaidka (2011) have written from within the Indian sub-continent.

Subeshini Moodley, writing in 2004, in her Master’s dissertation entitled “Postcolonial Feminism Speaking Through an ‘Accented’ Cinema: The Construction of Indian Women in the Films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta”, centres her theoretical framework on Hamid Naficy’s intriguing book entitled *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (2001), as she appropriates Naficy’s term of “border-crossing”, which she applies to each female character within *Fire* and *Earth*. While Moodley’s dissertation discusses female characterisation within these two films, my dissertation will be expanded to include *Water* as

well as one other film, (*Heaven on Earth* (2008), by Mehta. Moodley (2003, 73), in a summarised article of the same name as her dissertation observes, “Religion and social rules governing the behaviour of Indian women have ultimately led to their oppression and patriarchal control of their bodies.” My dissertation will challenge this rigid thought. While Moodley’s assertion has been true for centuries and still has some validity today, Mehta uses religion and Hindu social practices to show how women can use Hindu mythology as grounds to assert their voice, agency and cohesion. During the course of my dissertation I will argue that it is the very Hindu religion that has oppressed the Hindu female for centuries that is also able to offer autonomy, individualism and liberation to the individuals it has been used to subjugate.

Moodley (2004, 80) says that “Mehta’s subject construction of Indian women not only allows them a resistant, expressive space but reveals that these Indian women, even though they have suffered with history and myth having been inscribed on their bodies, have the power of choice.” Moodley insists that Hindu mythology is oppressive and has resulted in the suffering of Indian women. I will argue against the grain of this thought and illustrate that within *Fire*, Mehta uses a divine, liberated, female presence to depict a nuanced understanding of Hindu mythology. This can be responsible for social and sexual liberation. In an article entitled “Strike a Woman, Strike a Rock” Gopal Das (2013, 11) develops the obsolete view that men are associated with reason and culture, and women with emotion and nature. While this portrays a binarist stance, Das does suggest that Hindu culture, through its worship of the “*Devi* [female Goddess]”, allows women to exercise various liberties and “to reach [their] full potential in life” (11). Hindu culture is a distinctive religion allowing feminists to be receptive to positive elements of various aspects of the mythological representations of the Goddess. Patrick Maxwell, Alleyn Diesel and Thillay Naidoo (1995, 184) say that “Among world religions Hinduism is virtually unique in its worship of the goddess as supreme being.”

“Women’s Bodies as Sites of Signification and Contestation: An Analysis of Deepa Mehta’s Critique of Narratives of Home, Nation and Belonging” (2009) is the title of Snigdha Madhuri’s Master’s dissertation. This body of work engages with the Elemental Trilogy by Deepa Mehta and its specific relationship to Indian nationalism. Madhuri grapples with violence that is enacted on women’s bodies in dealing with “patriarchal nationalism” and how this contributes to violence against women. While Madhuri refers to “homoerotic desire” that forms between Radha and Sita, I will argue that this desire can be fruitfully analysed as

bisexual. Madhuri's chapter which discusses *Earth* places a large emphasis on the national project, whereas I concentrate my focus on the characterisation of Dil Navaz. Arguing that Hindu culture is oppressive with relation to *Water*, Madhuri sees no way out of the confines of Hindu patriarchy. In dealing with this oppressiveness of Hindu culture, I suggest that culture embodies dual aspects. Making these visible can enable and empower women without forcing them to renounce their religion, such as many of the female characters within the four films.

During the course of my dissertation I will develop the idea of a Hindu cultural project, independent of any particular nation, in an attempt to shift away from Hindu nationalism and its purported influence on Mehta's work. While Hindu nationalism is indeed represented in Mehta's work, an abundance of literature exists which explores this notion. Hindu culture permeates borders and travels through the medium of film and literature, more so than the project of Hindu nationalism. Hindu culture, I would argue, is the paramount factor that has come to define diasporic Hindu identity across the ages. Hindu culture, here in South Africa, has survived colonialism, apartheid and various other socio-political events within the course of the last 150 years and still persist till this day. It has not been absorbed into mainstream religion that already exists in the diaspora. In their chapter entitled "Hinduism in South Africa", Maxwell, Diesel and Naidoo (1995, 200) note, "Since their earliest days the South African Hindu communities have shown an ability to survive considerable privations and upheavals." Mehta's use of Hindu culture and mythology seems an appropriate domain through which to analyse her work.

Both Western and Indian reviews of the Elemental Trilogy are juxtaposed within Sukhmani Khorana's PhD thesis entitled "Crossing Over: Theorising Mehta's Film Trilogy; Practising Diasporic Creativity" (2010). Khorana develops the idea that Mehta's trilogy moves beyond the transnational and is rather sited within "diasporic practise" (4). The modes of production and distribution of the trilogy are explored within this thesis. My dissertation differs from this piece of work as I will engage with the films to produce a textual analysis.

Published in 2007 and edited by Jasbir Jain, *Films, Literature and Culture: Deepa Mehta's Elements Trilogy* is a compilation of 19 illuminating essays by various authors. While Khorana refers to this collection of essays as an "[i]nadequate" (6) response to the trilogy, I believe that it is useful but different from Manju Jaidka's *A Critical Study of Deepa Mehta's*

Trilogy: Fire, Earth and Water. This study is a textual analysis of the trilogy. Published in 2011, Jaidka's book attempts to "re-write history" by making a female voice take precedence over a male voice through a study of the trilogy. A professor at the Panjab University, Jaidka focuses on the positive reception of the film by females within India. With regard to women within Hindu society, Jaidka (20-21) sets up a binary opposition between the sexual appetite of women and their devotion and duty. In setting up this opposition, Jaidka refers to religious literature that has fashioned women into the rigid confines of service to mankind, devotion to their husbands and family as well as duty. According to Jaidka, "[t]he idea is to fix them [women] on a pedestal and keep them in place" (22). I would argue against this kind of suggestion, as women, and human beings in general, tend to be far more complex in thought and are thus able to occupy various strata of society. Contemporary society maintains its unequal treatment of women. Culture can play a crucial role in justifying equal treatment of both men and women. Through a study of the four selected films by Deepa Mehta, I suggest that a subtle analysis of Hindu literature and mythology can depict Hindu culture's liberating abilities. I will contribute to this discourse by arguing that a more critical interpretation of Hindu culture and mythology can open up spaces that liberate and result in a growth in agency on the part of subjugated individuals. However, Mehta's films include some female characters who collude in the oppression of other women, simply because they have more power than these women. Despite the fact that many wealthy and shrewd women have agency, they do not use it to benefit other female characters. Many of the subjugated female characters within the films utilise Hindu culture for their empowerment by embodying the characteristics of the Goddess, and this allows for their empowerment and agency by which they are able to break out of cultural confinements. Dirks (2006, 59) depicts a definitive association between culture and power. He foregrounds how "Culture can be seen both as a historically constituted domain of significant concepts and practises and as a regime in which power achieves its ultimate apotheosis." Various female characters in the four films under inspection deploy Hindu culture and mythology to gain liberation and freedom from patriarchy. They develop their agency within the confines of patriarchy which enables them to transcend a constricting niche.

The Indian sub-continent is venerated as the "mother-land" both in the indigenous and diasporic Indian mind. Women represent and contribute to an essential understanding of the nation and Hindu nationalism. Jyotika Viridi (2003, 72-73), in her book *The Cinematic ImagiNation*, argues against this kind of thought. She suggests, "To use women to represent

the entire nation blurs the boundaries contested by different communities. The double-bind; however, is that using women as a stand-in for the nation may work in favour of secular consciousness, but at the same time it continues to promote egregious gender injustice.” To move away from depicting women as national symbols, especially in the third world, has the capacity to reduce violence on the female body during times of conflict and war.

There are four main sections that constitute this dissertation, each centring on one of the four films. The first three films form part of the Elemental Trilogy, namely *Fire*, *Earth* and *Water*. Chapter One, entitled “*Fire*, Female Sexual Desire and Fantasy”, explores the queer relationship that develops between two sisters-in-law, Radha and Sita. I will utilise Gayatri Gopinath (2005) to situate the film within a transnational scope and discuss the use of “queer” with regard to Gopinath’s usage of the word, while tracing the initial usage of the term within queer theory. I will analyse the queer relationship that develops between Radha and Sita through theory based on representations of bisexuality as argued by Jo Eadie (1997). Through the expression of female, bisexual desire, female identity is constructed within the margins of gender and society. The expression of bisexual desire allows access to power and sexual, economic and cultural liberation. Desire and its relationship to dreams, as it is represented within the film, is analysed through the psychoanalytic framework of Sigmund Freud (1899). *Fire* depicts the liberated and modern woman who, via alternative sexualities and a nuanced appropriation of culture, is able to break away from a rigid construction of national femininity.

“*Earth*, Empire and the Effusive”, the second chapter, focuses on Partition in India as a result of the demise of colonialism and the end of imperial rule in the Indian sub-continent. Colonialism is central to the narrative, silently and violently displaying its impact on people and populations. The structure of this chapter will be directly dependent on post-colonial theory. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2006, 7) argue that “Post-colonial theory is very useful in its analysis of the strategies by which the ‘local’ colonized engage with large hegemonic forces.” The film, functioning as a microcosm of division, depicts the separation of a diverse group of friends, which comes to represent the wider division and fracturing of a continent. I will utilise a discussion put forth by Joya Uraizee (2010), who highlights the beastly nature that Dil Navaz comes to embody, and I will discuss the characterisation of Dil Navaz and how the effusive and unrestrained nature of human beings is revealed through his characterisation. Both women and children are victims of horrific violence that scars not just

physically but emotionally and psychologically. Through *Earth*, the precarious position that women and children are placed in during times of conflict, is made evident.

In Chapter Three, I will engage with issues that depict class, caste and culture, thus bringing an end to the trilogy. Entitled “*Water, Widows and Wives*”, the chapter focuses on culture that confines the female to certain roles and how these confines can be transgressed through a deeper understanding of the socio-religious and economic structures. Also, a re-examination of religious literature can provide a way out of cultural confinement and constraint. Wendy Doniger (1991) and Dorothy Figueira (1999) will form an integral part of this discussion. They each make reference to the Laws of Manu and show how these laws came to function within Hindu culture, and how they can be discredited with regard to the hegemony of the caste system. *Water* depicts women and children who are caught in the rift between culture and colonialism. In *Water*, Mehta shows how patriarchal power forces the ‘chaste’ widows to live in appalling conditions, which include forced prostitution. The double standard that Hindu literature and society force upon the widow in order to survive is made evident.

Of the four main chapters that constitute this dissertation, the final chapter is of particular interest to this study. *Heaven on Earth* provides an illuminating examination of the depiction of a diaspora as it is directed by a diasporic filmmaker. The chapter engages with diasporic Indian identity while negotiating culture and place. I will site this film in what Hamid Naficy (2001) terms “accented cinema” by making reference to various tropes that have come to define this concept. I will also make reference to theory put forth by Jyotika Viridi (2003), who analyses the importance of the female figure to Hindu culture. Culture, within the diaspora, is represented as an access point to power and liberation from the confines of family and duty. During the course of *Heaven on Earth*, we, the spectators, are forced to confront a fractured diasporic identity through the characterisation of Chand, the main female protagonist.

As a critic of Indian society, Mehta challenges conventional religious and social structures of Hindu society, indigenous and diasporic. Mehta’s female characters show how women are able to exercise a certain degree of autonomy within their personal and individual lives through the appropriation of Hindu culture. Viridi (2003, 122) comments, “Reinvented traditions affected by the modernization process afflict women in specific ways: dowry deaths, acts of *sati*, and new technologically sophisticated forms of female infanticide” all

function as violence against women. “These rarely appear in the virtual world of women in popular cinema” (122). It is this specific task of cinematic representation that Mehta takes on in her filmmaking. Not only is the violence against women addressed, but the audience is given an insight as to how to overcome this violence through the various female characters within the four selected films. Viridi (122) says that women, within Indian cinematic representation, “are inevitably denied depth and dimension.” Mehta’s films challenge this notion while they portray women who become critical of their environments as the films progress. This allows the viewers to become critical of social, sexual and cultural structures within Indian societies. Mehta belongs to a diaspora and is thus an outsider, who was once an insider, critiquing the structure of Indian culture and society. Edward Said (2006, 441) asserts, “Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience”, and I would argue that this is true of what Mehta does with and through her filmmaking.

Much like the first Bollywood films that were ever produced, Mehta employs the use of myth and storytelling which form a main component in the four films. Ganti (2004, 75) highlights that “the first feature films in India were mythologicals based on stories from Hindu myths which have been part of the oral and performance traditions that predate cinema.” Multiple renditions of Hindu epics such as the *Ramayana* have been worked and re-worked across the ages. Mehta, while employing the use of myth, uses it to critique and provide a subtle understanding of possible re-interpretations. With reference to the varying cinematic techniques used by Mehta, Ganti (75) suggests, “Much of the discussion within the [film] industry is about how most stories are not unique, but that the presentation and treatment of the story should be novel and ‘fresh.’”

Hindu culture centres on the representation of the divine female presence through religious texts such as the *Puranas* and various rituals, some so extreme that they include animal sacrifice, body piercings and walking across hot embers. The annual fire-walking ceremony is an important event in the lives of Indians who constitute the South African Indian diaspora. The act of fire-walking entails devotees walking across hot embers in a pit in worship of the Goddess of fire, Mother Agni (North Indian) or Mother Draupadi (South Indian). Such acts of faith require fierce devotion to the Goddess. Partaking in these rituals shows how women assume masculine qualities such as power, anger and ferocity. Various trance-like states inspire the female devotee to perform acts of jubilant dancing. Thus the docile, meek, subservient woman is nowhere to be seen. On Good Friday each year, the Siva Soobramonair

and Marriamen Temple situated in the heart of Pietermaritzburg host their annual fire-walking event. In 2014; however, something extraordinary occurred. This event was so profound that it made the front page of the local newspaper, *The Witness*, dated 23rd April, 2014. While the wood was being burnt for the fire-walking event later that evening, an armed response security guard, Dinney Harischandra, decided to take a picture of the burning pit as “Fifteen tons of wood were piled high on the pit and then lit” (Pillay 2014, 1). What seemed to appear in the smoke above the pit was a figure of what some believe to be the Goddess Draupadi herself. The picture went viral on social networks and various articles have been published in various media sources in an attempt to investigate whether or not this occurrence can be rationalised [see fig. 1.1].

The Hindu pantheon of Gods and Goddess is as prolific as that of the Greco-Roman pantheon. An occurrence such as the one above has played a significant role in confirming the belief in the Goddess for many devotees, not just within the South African Indian community but within other Indian communities around the world. Mixed feelings have emerged from the Indian community as they have responded to the picture. In an article entitled “Dancing Goddess Comments” (*Public Eye* 2014, 13) which appeared in a local newspaper, the *Public Eye*, only one out of seven individuals deemed the picture as a hoax. It is apparent that many individuals do not view this depiction as untrue but rather attribute it to faith and the power of the Goddess. This incident has acted in confirming and renewing Hindu faith across the spectrum of devotees. This is evidence to suggest that Indian diasporic identity subsists here on the African continent and that culture increasingly plays a more determining role in the construction of South African Indian diasporic identity as well as South African Hindu identity.

The Goddess is believed to possess infinite power in the form of *Shakti*; however, the reality of Indian women, both indigenous and diasporic, is very different. Indian women are required to epitomise subservience, servitude and docility within social, sexual and cultural structures. I will show how this does not have to be the case. Whether in the diaspora or in the Indian sub-continent, cycles of mistreatment toward women and children manifest themselves in different forms, as depicted by Mehta’s films. Rahul Giarola, in questioning whether the subaltern can speak through these films (2002, 314), asks, “Since Hinduism personifies godhead as both masculine and feminine, from what authoritative/valid position can a Hindu

woman speak and bypass immediate refutation?” It is this precise question that I will consider during the course of this dissertation.

The titles of the trilogy, namely *Fire*, *Earth* and *Water*, are steeped in a Hindu tradition that venerates the female. The trilogy evokes the natural elements of fire, earth and water. These components of nature are depictions of the divine female presence within Hinduism. Each of the respective elements are represented by divine female figures who manifest themselves in their varying forms. Mother Fire (Agni Matha) is often depicted as emerging from the flames, holding various weapons in her multiple hands [see fig. 1.2]. Mother Earth (Prithvi Matha) is venerated as the nurturer who possesses creative potential. She is large in stature as she is the embodiment of the Earth and its reproductive capacities [see fig. 1.3]. Within this particular image, Mother Earth is viewed as the maternal presence that resides over the Holy Trinity which consists of Brahma (the creator of the universe), Vishnu (the sustainer of the universe) and Lord Shiva (the destroyer of worlds). Mother Water (Ganga Matha) is easily identifiable as she is always found seated on a crocodile. The river which she inhabits is the sacred Ganges River which is the episteme of her name [see fig 1.4]. The elemental Goddesses are worshipped for both their nurturing and destructive potential within Hinduism. The Hindu Goddess, in her varying forms, is pictorially depicted as the demon slayer. The Goddess engages in physical contestation with predominantly male demons who pose a direct threat to both human and Gods alike. The Goddess is active in the domain of war, one that is characterised by the masculine. Numerous female protagonists throughout the four films display their growing agency and power through a better understanding of Hindu culture and mythology as well as the appropriation of various characteristics that *Shakti* possesses. These include strength (depicted physically by numerous heads, limbs and the wielding of various weapons), confidence, defiance and wrath [see fig 1.5]. The Goddess is able to evoke fear into the hearts of those who do not fully understand her presence. However, to her devotees, she is the benevolent, protective and loving mother.

This dissertation aims to provide a more profound understanding of Hindu culture through the study of the four selected films. The films clearly portray how Hindu culture can be appropriated to view both males and females as equals, placing neither gender at the centre of contemporary debates concerning Hindu culture.

Chapter One

Fire, Female Sexual Desire and Fantasy

This chapter will focus on a textual analysis of Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996). Compared to the other three films that form part of this study, *Fire* evoked the most controversy in India. The first film that forms part of the Elemental Trilogy, *Fire* makes for a particularly enlightening study of Hindu mythology, sexuality and queer social spaces. Produced in 1996, *Fire* delineates how Indian women are able to access some power and agency through the very culture that has been accused of being socially confining and constricting, within the Indian sub-continent and, by extension, the Indian diaspora. In this analysis I will show how Hinduism, despite embodying certain confinements and restraints, is shown to have the capacity to liberate women through Mehta's appropriation and subversion of Hindu cultural and sexual norms.

Fire, created and set in a post-colonial context, depicts a joint family in conflict with emerging modernities and alternative sexualities. Two daughters-in-law find comfort, love and sexual desire in the formation of a queer sexual relationship. Radha, the elder daughter-in-law, is forced to lead a celibate life, while simultaneously being used to test and control her husband's desire, by lying next to him. Sita, Radha's love attraction, is one half of an arranged marriage to Jatin, Ashok's younger brother. Jatin is engaged in an extramarital affair with his Chinese girlfriend, Julie. The characters' respective lives unfold under the watchful eyes of Biji, Ashok's mother, and Mundu, the household servant. Desire is a central theme that runs through *Fire*. The story revolves around Radha's realisation of desire, Sita's implementation of desire and Ashok's attempt to repress his desire. Mundu expresses his desire through masturbation, while Jatin desires Julie.

Subeshini Moodley (2004), in her Master's dissertation, applies Hamid Naficy's concept of "border-crossing" to the two female characters which occurs through the development of a queer sexual relationship. Moodley (80) puts forth the suggestion that Indian women "have suffered" as a result of "history and myth" being "inscribed on their bodies". By contrast, within this chapter, I will show how Mehta adapts and utilises Hindu mythology in aid of female sexual liberation. Through the many voices that speak through mythology, Hinduism opens up spaces for the female voice to be heard.

In this chapter I will argue how access to social and sexual power occurs through the initiation of what I view as a bisexual relationship that develops between the two female protagonists, Radha and Sita. Deepa Mehta, in an interview with Suparn Verma (*Stereotyping women as film-makers*, 1997) notes that the theme of “bisexuality” is evident within her film. During the course of this chapter, I will explore the figure of the bisexual within *Fire*. Bisexuality reveals interesting links with culture, both within the diaspora and the Indian sub-continent. Bisexuality transgresses the dominant models of heterosexuality; likewise, Hindu mythology transgresses conventional societal boundaries. I will assess the relationship that exists between the mythological Radha and Krishna to show how this transgression is achieved. This relationship echoes in Mehta’s decision to name her main protagonist Radha. Through the study of the mythological Radha, the consort of Lord Krishna, I will show how a divine, liberated female presence can serve as a template for the independent, liberated and progressive Hindu woman who refuses to bend to the will of patriarchal power. In *Fire*, with the help of Sita, Radha experiences a sexual awakening. The trope of desire is threaded through the plot of the film. Through theory formulated by Sigmund Freud (1899), I will investigate the relationship between Radha’s dreams and her desires. Through the lens of theory articulated by Gayatri Gopinath in her book *Impossible Desires, Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (2005), and Jo Eadie’s chapter in a book entitled *The Bisexual Imaginary: Representation, Identity and Desire* (1997), I will offer a textual analysis of *Fire*.

Rahul Gairola (2002, 321), while questioning if the subaltern can speak through Deepa Mehta’s *Fire*, reveals how Mehta’s filmography demolishes cultural and sexual taboos which are evident in the social lives of Hindu women. Gopinath devotes a chapter to a discussion of the queer relationship that develops between Radha and Sita. Gopinath also explores how *Fire* is able to break conventional taboos within Hindu culture. As a result of the depiction of queer sexuality allowing women freedom, voice and power, *Fire* was responsible for a wave of violence that broke out in India. Writing in 2004, Jigna Desai, in a book entitled *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film*, offers an insight into the degree of violence that erupted in reaction to this controversial film. Individuals who belong to the Shiv Sena, a Hindu supremacist group, “vandalized and closed the theatres, identifying the film as lesbian and stating that lesbianism was not Indian” (Desai 2004, 160). The main sentiment expressed by the Shiv Sena and subsequent antagonists is that same-sex desire, and more specifically, lesbianism, is alien to Hindu culture. A leader of the Shiv Sena made it apparent that lesbianism is “not a part of Indian culture” (Jain and Raval, “Ire over *Fire*”,

1998). Due to Mehta's diasporic identity, she has been accused, by protestors, of misrepresenting the social and sexual lives of "real" Hindu women who are native to India (Gopinath 2005, 131). Various protestors brought Mehta's identity and diasporic position under scrutiny. They accused her of being "ignorant" about the "reality" of Indian women living in India (132). This serves to illustrate how "both 'queer' and 'diaspora'" are terms that are "inauthentic and alien within national discourse" (132). These two terms are considered as 'other' and are assembled with lesbian desire as unfamiliar within Hindu society and culture. This reaction by protestors serves to deny Mehta any claim or heritage to her motherland. The message is clear – any opinions about the lives of women within the Indian sub-continent, from women of the Indian diaspora, are unsolicited. Mehta depicts the 'taboo' sexual relationship as tender, loving and liberating, despite the ensuing antagonistic behaviour. This affectionate relationship stands in constant to the violence that the film incited. Through her intricate narrative, Mehta fractures the stringent models of heterosexual marriage, both within the Indian sub-continent and the Indian diaspora.

Hindu mythology punctuates *Fire*. Sikata Banerjee (2010), in an article entitled "Women, Muscular Nationalism and Hinduism in India: Roop Kanwar and the *Fire* Protests", discusses the relationship between *Fire* and Hindu nationalism. While I will not be discussing this relationship during the course of this chapter, Banerjee offers noteworthy commentary about the film. She explains that India, as a nation, revolves around the devotion and veneration of "Hindu divinities, epics and myths" (272). In like vein, Gopinath (2005, 141) observes how the lives of the family members, within *Fire*, occur against the backdrop of the "serialization of the *Ramayana*". Both Radha and Sita are central female characters within Hindu mythology.

The story of the *Ramayana* occurs as a repetitive trope throughout the film. This story centres on Ram, who instead of ascending to the throne of Ayodhya, is exiled into the forest at the behest of his evil step-mother, Kaikeyi. Sita, Ram's devoted wife, accompanies him into the forest. However, she is captured by Ravana, the evil king of Lanka, who lusts after Ram's wife [see fig. 2.1]. The story of the *Ramayana* thus revolves around Ram's journey to rescue his wife from the clutches of the demon king. Eventually slaying the demon, Ram rescues his wife and returns to Ayodhya, taking his rightful place as king. The popular rendition of the *Ramayana* ends at this point, with Ram and Sita sitting side by side, much like the depiction in *Fire* on the film poster in the family's video hiring business [see fig. 2.2].

As the story of the *Ramayana* continues, suspicion arises among the people of Ayodhya, who begin to question the faithfulness of Sita to her husband while she was in captivity. Ram requests that Sita undergo the trial by fire to prove her innocence and faithfulness to him. Passing the test unscathed, and with Ram still being unsatisfied, Sita is banished back into the forest. By submerging herself in flames, Sita embodies “the ideal of wifely devotion and virtue” (Gopinath 2004, 141). Sita, while exiled for the second time, gives birth to twin sons who, after they have reached adolescence, are returned to their father, Ram. Sita thereafter becomes one with Mother Earth, from where she first emerged [see fig. 2.3]. This union with the ‘mother’ figure foregrounds, not a denial and destruction of femininity, but is an affirmation of it. Through her filmography, Mehta succeeds in placing significance and emphasis on the mother-daughter relationship. This is amplified in her production of *Heaven on Earth*, which is discussed in the final chapter of this dissertation. Marriage acts to unsettle the mother-daughter relationship for Sita and Radha within *Fire*. Radha’s relationship with her mother is depicted in a yellow field of flowers, where her mother encourages her to use her imagination to see the ocean. When Radha recounts this event to Sita, Sita requests to telephone her mother as she misses her and is unhappy in her marriage to Jatin. The figure of the daughter yearns for the mother and a reunification with her. This formidable bond occurs between two females and acts as an antecedent for the bond and love that develops between the two female protagonists within *Fire*.

Within Hindu mythology, Radha is Krishna’s object of desire. Belonging to a much later Hindu tradition than that of the *Ramayana*, Krishna and Radha are often seen making physical contact with each other, locked in each other’s mesmerising gaze. They are always found within close proximity of each other and are often referred to as one entity – RadhaKrishna. In certain depictions, their bodies meld together, making it difficult for one to differentiate between separate limbs. Radha’s clothing is also less modest than that worn by other female divinities [see figs 2.4]. Most interesting about this relationship is that it exists outside the confines of marriage. The relationship is one that breaks the taboo of conventional Hindu society, which advocates arranged marriages without a courting tradition. Tracy Pintchman (2003, 328), in an analysis of Lord Krishna and his mythological significance to women and festival, comments that Radha is Krishna’s “lover” and “their relationship is an illicit one.” Radha, within Hindu mythology, epitomises a female who exercises agency and

exerts a powerful force over Krishna, her consort, which is reciprocated by him. Radha is alluring to Krishna and she is his muse. He plays his famous flute in her honour.

In an article entitled “Desire Tree of Love Once Upon a Time”, Nikunja Dasi (2013, 8) describes the profound passion that exists between Radha and Krishna and how they cannot bear separation from each other. The following account utilises highly eroticised imagery to illustrate the love between Radha and Krishna. Dasi narrates:

Radha’s golden feet scurried along the Yamuna’s riverbed. The soft silver sand caressed her feet. Her ankle bells jingled, blending the sound of the river waves and similar harmonious sounds that filled her mind – the hypnotizing melody of her beloved’s celestial flute, the celestial music accompanying their moonlit dance that night, the song of the forest creatures watching in awe, and her pounding heart throbbing from missing Krishna. His smiling face, His ruby lips against His bamboo flute, His enchanting eyes that cast sidelong glances at her, and His bluish-blackish form that resembled a rain cloud rolled like a continuous film strip through her mind.
(8)

This longing and attraction that Radha experiences for Krishna is also reciprocated by him. Dasi (8) reveals:

When Krishna had discovered that Radha had left the dancing arena, He panicked. He could not continue without His dearest devotee, the person who loved Him the most, and who was the treasure of His heart. He abandoned the other *gopis* in pursuit of Radha.

Krishna’s Radha is a liberated female, unbound by patriarchy and unpoliced by a male presence, and she is venerated as the object of Krishna’s desire. A heterosexual relationship outside the confines of marriage is frowned upon within Hindu culture. Radha and Krishna’s tabooed relationship can thus be paralleled to that of Radha and Sita’s same-sex relationship as existing on the boundaries of contemporary Hindu society. Through the evocation of Krishna’s Radha, Mehta draws attention to contemporary social and sexual movements towards homosexual and heterosexual relationships that exist outside the confines of marriage and resemble Western models of social organisation. This is more prevalent within my own diasporic experience. Hybridity characterises the diaspora and class is more prevalent than caste. Nicholas B. Dirks (1992, 61) comments that caste is the most significant reason “why India has no history”; caste is a considerable “threat to Indian modernity.” The

need for arranged marriages has thus dwindled within the diaspora as caste is no longer an organisational tool. The diaspora opens up spaces for the modification of a culture which is thousands of years old. These spaces enable the Indian diasporic subject to explore Western models of intimate relations between the sexes, outside the institution of marriage, among many other aspects of human relationships. Within the film, Radha moves from epitomising subservience and obedience to breaking away from the confines of home and patriarchal culture to fulfil her sexual desires for Sita, thus experiencing a growth in consciousness. Radha thus gains a voice which she uses to loosen the patriarchal vice that her husband exerts over her.

Various examples of literary scholarship centred on *Fire* have referred to this same-sex relationship by an array of terms. Moodley, in her Master's dissertation, refers to this sexual relationship as a "lesbian affair" (2004, 83). Churnjeet Mahn and Diane Watt (2014) engage in a discussion of lesbian desire and place it at the heart of *Fire* in an article entitled "Relighting the Fire: Visualizing the Lesbian in Contemporary India". Taking this into consideration, this discussion has the potential to impact on the ways in which queer desire is viewed within the Indian sub-continent and the diaspora. Mahn and Watt (2014, 225) express their contemporary perspective as their research serves to explicitly include lesbianism within national discourses. By contrast, Gayatri Gopinath (2005) avoids labelling the relationship as "lesbian" and refers to it as "queer". Prior to the late 1980s, queer was utilised as a pejorative and "homophobic term", but it was "reclaimed [...] as a term of self-empowerment" after this period of time (Chaudhuri 2006, 75). The term queer therefore functioned "to transcend mainstream politics and include all who were against set conceptions of gender, sexuality, and power" (Kirsch 2000, 33). The term queer was used to subvert fixed or essentialist notions of sexuality. From the perspective of feminist discourse, the term queer theory was "coined" by Teresa de Lauretis in 1990 (Giffney 2009, 4). Annamarie Jagose (1996, 1) in a book entitled *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, delineates queer as "an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications". Taking this point of view into consideration, Giffney observes that queer "can function as shorthand [and as an overarching term for] the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community" (2). Within academia, queer theory features prominently in "psychoanalysis, sexology, feminism, lesbian and gay studies, postmodernism and poststructuralism, HIV/AIDS activism and the black civil rights movement" (2). Morland and Willox (2005, 3) comment, "Queerness calls at once for the celebration of a diversity of identities". Gopinath (2005, 10), utilising queer as a

reclaimed word, adapts it to her literary context, as “queer” places the diasporic dialogue outside “its adherence and loyalty to nationalist ideologies”.

Radha and Krishna’s relationship represents a transgressive monogamy. This transgression is reflected through their relationship which exists outside the institution of marriage. They are not bound by specific customary laws and prescribed practices. While the sexual relationship that develops between Radha and Sita can be classified by an array of terms for various sexualities, Radha and Sita can be described as bisexual as they engage in both homosexual and heterosexual behaviour. This relationship, like that between Radha and Krishna, goes against social, sexual and cultural norms. The women’s relationship also transgresses cultural and religious standards that are prescribed to married Indian women.

Jo Eadie explores the characteristics and stereotypes of bisexual characters through the genre of film, one of which is entitled *The Hunger* (1982), where the central character is a bisexual vampire. In *Fire*, Sita is the prime signifier of the bisexual who engages in a sexual relationship with both her husband, Jatin, and sister-in-law, Radha. Sita, by moving beyond the niche that is allocated to her, alters the “limits” (142) of culture, sexuality and gender. She engages in both a same-sex relationship and a heterosexual one, preferring her relationship with Radha to that with Jatin. Radha also exhibits characteristics of the bisexual, to a lesser extent than her sister-in-law.

Within contemporary society, the bisexual individual is defined through a set of negative, coded references. Bisexuality is often associated with individuals who are confused about their sexuality. Society places a social and moral emphasis on attraction to one gender to eliminate promiscuity. The widespread belief associated with bisexuality is that it is inappropriate. Despite these negative stereotypes, both Eadie and Mehta show how the bisexual can be portrayed in an affirmative and optimistic position. Eadie observes that the existence of the bisexual character/s within film points to “a cultural tension” which “is being broached” (1997, 142). Sita pushes the boundaries of sexuality to its limits and engages in a same-sex affair with Radha. Sita is “an outsider” (142) who transgresses the boundaries that society and culture have set for her as a married, Indian woman. She does not adhere to tradition or the limits that patriarchal culture has set for her. Sita is responsible for broaching cultural tensions that place same-sex desire outside of Hindu culture. Mehta’s depiction of the same-sex relationship between the women is tender and contributes to both women’s growth

in agency and power. This depiction incited antagonistic behaviour on the part of members from various religious organisations within India. These protests serve to highlight the negative attitude that same-sex desire incites within communities. These societies are in need of open systems of expression that allow for the freedom of sexual orientation.

Mehta offers the positive elements of Hindu culture as inspiring for women. She also illustrates the positive elements of bisexuality, while still embodying stereotypes associated with this sexuality. According to Eadie, the study of the bisexual in film reveals anxieties about “monogamous commitment” (143). Monogamy is promoted and encouraged (especially for women), within Hindu patriarchal society as it maintains faithfulness, loyalty and devotion. Both Radha and Sita show credence in their respective relationships with their husbands. Both women show that they have the capacity to love their husbands and they are willing to enter into a monogamous relationship. Radha endures Ashok’s humiliating celibacy tests to prove her devotion to her husband. Ashok and Radha’s monogamous marriage sanctions Ashok’s practice of celibacy and thus the repression of Radha’s sexual aspirations. Radha, at one point in the film, describes her marriage as a relationship between a brother and a sister (Mehta 1996). Sita is committed to a marriage with Jatin. She inquires what his favourite films are at the beginning of the narrative, thus illustrating an attempt to get to know him. Sita makes a far more satisfactory attempt than Jatin to create a contented marriage. Their unsatisfying marriages drive the two women towards each other, and Mehta succeeds in showing how bisexuality can be liberating and emotionally fulfilling. Sita embodies a new way of living for Radha. Radha gains a new lease on life as a result of Sita. She is the catalyst for Radha’s desires and her attainment of power and voice. This eventually leads to a satisfying life.

Sita is an “outsider” because she comes from ‘elsewhere’ (Eadie 1997, 142). Bisexual characters are also responsible for “disruption”, as they disrupt “the stability of a settled situation” (156). In *Fire*, Sita enters into a settled, well-adjusted, middle-class family where heteronormative relationships exist and everyone, including Radha, is content. Sita succeeds in disrupting the family and gender dynamic through her desire for Radha. Sita succeeds in providing sexual liberation for both herself and Radha. Within Hindu culture, the eldest daughter-in-law resides at the centre of the household. Radha is the metaphorical glue that holds the family together, meeting the needs of Ashok and Biji. By Sita’s removal of Radha from the household, a wife and caretaker are lost. The family can no longer exist within the

confines of 'normal'. The family unit is thus broken, leaving both of Biji's sons without wives. Sita and Radha's sexual union successfully accomplishes the task of denying Ashok a male lineage, his only desire and fixation.

Sita succeeds in disrupting the husband-wife relationship within the confines of patriarchy. Jatin is occupied with Julie and he expects Sita to be miserable and unhappy as a result. He also expects Sita to desire his love and affection as she is bound to him through marriage. Sita displays selfless behaviour and encourages Ashok to let Jatin see Julie. Sita does not require Jatin to fulfil her desires as she attains this through her relationship with Sita. Sita says to Ashok, "Ashok *bhaya* [brother], please let Jatin go. He has something important to do" (Mehta 1996). This disturbs Jatin as he relishes being desired by his wife. His ego is thus deflated when Sita shows no sexual interest in him. When Jatin wants to visit Julie, he says to Sita, "I won't be back tonight" (Mehta 1996). Sita calmly says, "Okay" and resumes setting the front counter. Jatin waits for a retaliation but is upset that he gets none. Jatin is reduced to depending on Sita for a reaction. Sita has succeeded in making Jatin desire her, in a relationship where Jatin is under the impression that he wields all the power.

The figure of the bisexual is used to represent stereotypes of restlessness, selfishness and intrusiveness in certain texts (Eadie 1997, 148). Sita displays a large degree of restlessness as a wife and a daughter-in-law. She despises tradition and the hold that it has in her life. She says, "Isn't it amazing? We are so bound by customs and rituals. Somebody just has to press my button, this button marked tradition and I start responding like a trained monkey" (Mehta 1996). Sita is even restless within her own gender. She dons Jatin's jeans and pretends to smoke a cigarette while dancing to an up-beat Bollywood song. In a later scene Radha wears traditional female attire while Sita dresses up in male attire – a suit and cap, with her hair pulled backwards. They dance to a classic Bollywood song and enact a heteronormative relationship with Sita embodying the masculine partner. Marjorie Garber, in her book called *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, comments, "clothing constructs [...] gender and gender differences" (1997, 3). Sita, by dressing as Radha's male counterpart, constructs her gender as male while they dance. However, her feminine features and long hair are still evident. While they dance, Sita takes on a male persona and then reverts to wearing her traditional Indian attire (complete with jewellery and make-up) after the dance scene. Garber observes how within a film called *Tootsie*, the cross-dresser incites within the viewer a wish to "redistribute" the "power" that this character personifies (7). As viewers, we

interpret Sita's cross-dressing as emancipatory and cathartic for Radha, and we wish to extend this to the wider society. The women derive happiness and joy from dressing up and dancing together. This scene is entertaining for both the women and the spectators. The "cross-dresser" interrogates "the categories of 'male' and 'female'" (10). Sita, by engaging in the act of cross-dressing, blurs the boundaries between male and female. This is another instance in which Sita broaches boundaries. Sita straddles both a male and female identity as her suit stands in contrast to her sari and traditional adornments worn in other scenes.

Selfishness is more prominent within the characterisation of Radha, who, through her relationship with Sita, discovers that she is selfish. When Radha discovers that Mundu has been masturbating in front of Biji, she says to Sita, "Mundu did what gave him pleasure, he thought only about himself, not about Biji, not about any of us. Is it so bad, to be that selfish? I'm not so different from him" (Mehta 1996). Radha experiences an epiphany at this point in the narrative. She realises that desire, specifically sexual desire, is what defines us as human beings and differentiates us from automatons. Desire is essential to human life, for without desire, life becomes an endless void of suffering.

By the end of *Fire* we find that Radha comes to embody all that is represented by Krishna's consort. Radha's growth in consciousness proliferates throughout the course of the film. It opens with young Radha, who listens to a story her mother narrates to her in an immense, breath-taking field of flowers. This scene progresses as it punctuates the narrative at each juncture where Radha becomes increasingly aware of her sexual desires. The story being narrated to Radha is one about the people who lived in the mountain and aspired to see the ocean. An old woman from the village exclaims, "Don't be sad, what you can't see, you can see. You just have to see without looking" (Mehta 1996). The ocean, within this particular context, refers to the unlimited and liberating sexual possibilities that are available to our main female protagonists. Radha, like the village people, embarks on an imaginative and intuitive journey. The second-to-last scene of the film depicts young Radha in the same field of yellow flowers, with her eyes closed. This foregrounds her ability to look within herself and defy the cultural and patriarchal regulations that circumscribe her. She opens her eyes and smiles; she says, "I can see the ocean. I can see it" (Mehta 1996). Whereas at the beginning of the film young Radha was unable to see the ocean, by the end of the film she is able to see the ocean "without looking" (Mehta 1996). The last scene of the film is a confirmation of Radha's new-found desire and existence. The ability to "see" interpellates the

audience to “see” beyond categories that restrict sexual and social identity. Marriage, as an institution, is also able to function beyond heterosexual relationships. Mehta requests that we construct our respective identities taking into consideration the vast array of possibilities that exist. Our visual and thought capacities should be as vast as the ocean itself. If we as an audience wish to conform to heteronormative models then we should still be mindful of those who wish to embark on alternate ways of being.

The scenes that include young Radha occur right before we see her awakening from a sleep. These scenes can be interpreted as dreams and are related to her sexual awakening of desire. In his ground-breaking book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud ([1899]2005, 112) discusses the importance of dreams and their relationship to the waking consciousness. As the founding father of psychoanalytical theory, Freud observes that the dream “is a psychic phenomenon of full value, and indeed the fulfilment of a wish”. Radha’s wish to see the ocean without actually looking can be paralleled to her quest for desire which is fulfilled through her relationship with Sita. The dreams perforate the narrative and add a psychological dimension to it. Freud (112) questions if the dream has the ability to teach “us something new about our inner psychic processes?” Freud, through his analysis of dreams, articulates how dreams reflect our desires. Radha’s dream echoes her wish for desire and the sexual gratification that results. Through the dream, Radha is able to confirm her desire and capacity to fall in love with a woman, which she expresses to her husband. Radha says to Ashok, “I desire to live. I desire Sita, I desire her warmth, her compassion, her body, I desire to live again” (Mehta 1996). Elaborating on the theories of Freud, Carl Gustav Jung, in his book entitled *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* ([1933]2005), also discusses the significance of dreams and their interpretation. He comments, “The dream gives us a true picture of the subjective state, while the conscious mind denies that this state exists” (5). Radha’s dream makes us aware of her unconscious mind and sexual desires; however, she does not consciously acknowledge these sexual desires until Sita initiates the first actions.

Through Radha’s sexual awakening she is able to liberate herself from her confining household duties. When we first meet Radha, her life revolves around her household chores and responsibility to the mute Biji. After suffering a massive stroke, Biji is unable to look after herself, let alone talk. She is given a bell which she uses to summon the household and express her dissatisfaction with her daughters-in-law. Ashok lets Radha know when Biji is not eating her dinner, expecting Radha to feed her. Radha exclaims, “Why don’t you feed Biji

tonight?” (Mehta 1996). Ashok and Radha herself are shocked by these words. Ashok is unable to generate a response to Radha and he does as he is told. Radha is stunned by her own defiance and she sits down in a chair to come to terms with her actions. Radha forces Ashok to take responsibility for the needs of his ailing mother, and by doing so, plays an active role in undoing her husband’s supremacy over her domestic life.

Radha’s growing confidence and agency are evident through her relationship with Ashok. Ashok’s celibacy tests require Radha to lie beside him so that he may expel his desire. At the beginning of the film, Ashok says to Radha, “Forgive me, my choices have made life difficult for you” (Mehta 1996). Radha responds to this by asking, “What is there to forgive?” (Mehta 1996). Radha refuses to hold her husband accountable for her sexual and domestic repression. As the film progresses, Radha expresses her unhappiness to Ashok when she questions him about how his celibacy tests help her. Ashok replies, “By helping me you are doing your duty as my wife” (Mehta 1996). As the plot develops, we see how Radha is beginning to attain a voice. After a sexual relationship has been initiated between the two daughters-in-law, the following interchange takes place between Radha and her husband. Ashok summons Radha.

Ashok: You didn’t hear me calling?
Radha: Yes, I did.
Ashok: Why didn’t you come?
Radha: Sita says the concept of duty is overrated.
Ashok: ...[B]ut you know its importance. Radha, I need you.
Radha: No, Ashok. Not tonight. (Mehta 1996)

Radha refuses to comply with her husband’s choice to lead a life of celibacy after her sexual encounter with Sita. The relationship between the two women liberates them from the confines of their respective marriages. The power that the institution of marriage exerts upon the women diminishes as the plot develops.

Sita, within *Fire*, does not experience a growth in consciousness, for she is already a liberated woman with liberal ideals at the inception of the film. Sita comments, “I’m sick of all this devotion, we can find choices” (Mehta 1996). While Sita is already aware of the choices that are available to her, Radha is unaware of these choices at the beginning of the film. It is possibly for this reason that Mehta chooses to name her feisty character Sita as she does not make a profound movement in consciousness such as that which Radha undergoes. Radha, within the film, experiences a growth in consciousness and an awakening.

Mehta's Sita is quite the opposite of the embodiment of a demure and subservient wife. She challenges her husband's authority. She calls Jatin a "pompous fool" (Mehta 1996). She goes so far as to spell "fool" for her arrogant husband. When Jatin slaps her she retaliates by slapping him back. After her first sexual encounter with her cheating husband, Jatin, he says to Sita, "Listen Sita, if you bleed don't worry, it happens the first time" (Mehta 1996). Sita looks between her legs to find that there is blood on her inner thigh. She hurriedly gets up to fetch a bucket of water and scrubbing brush. She kneels down on the floor and energetically scrubs the blood stain on the bed sheet. In many cultures around the world, the blood stain on a bed sheet is considered a sign of honour as it is often displayed outside the home for the community to bear witness to (Sungar 2013, 314). The stain acts as the confirmation of a protected female honour and the claiming of that honour by a husband within the confines of marriage. The stain works as a signifier, also confirming masculinity and placing patriarchy at the centre of society. Patriarchal culture celebrates such practices. Challenging this logic is Sita, who does not take pride in the stain, but rather makes a profound effort to get rid of it and, by extension, its patriarchal implications.

Writing in 2013, Carana Dasa questions whether or not the *Ramayana* is still pertinent to Hindus today. He concludes that this religious epic embodies "timeless values relevant to [us even] today" (54). He asserts a crucial point in his article that condones and opens up different spaces for interpretation. Dasa observes, "the *Ramayana* tradition offers the examples of its protagonists not for imitation, but for inspiration, not for duplication of the particulars of their sacrifices, but for appreciation of the principle of sacrifice" (56). Interestingly enough, Dasa evokes all of the instances of male sacrifice within the *Ramayana* and not that undertaken by Sita, to articulate the re-enactment of sacrifice within Hindu culture today. Scriptures are dramatic for entertainment purposes as they are meant to be dramatised in the public arena. Mehta parodies the story of the *Ramayana* within *Fire*, and she offers an alternate version of the myth that allows women freedom, choice and autonomy. The trial by fire, considered to be a horrific act and directly related to *sati*, becomes essential in the liberation of Radha from household duties and the confines of an oppressive, patriarchal, heterosexual marriage. As Dasa reveals, Hindu scriptures that contain the mythologicals are impossible to emulate because they function within the realm of fantasy. Ashok reproduces Ram's actions within the *Ramayana* and leaves his wife to burn in a kitchen fire. His denial and disregard for human life constructs Ashok as the villain and thus

equates this vindictive and malicious behaviour with patriarchy. Scriptures can be utilised as a moral touchstones while taking into account gender and contemporary sexualities.

Seeing two women passionately desire each other resulted in violence towards *Fire* and its producer. Within the film, Mehta depicts men who embody queer characteristics. Through a particular scene it becomes apparent that Hindu culture depicts a double standard in its response to the different behaviour that it displays towards queer men and queer women. During the course of a particular scene, the enactment of the epic *Ramayana* takes place as entertainment for the community. Two men play the roles of both Ram and Sita [see fig. 2.5]. Interestingly enough, this enactment and display of cross-dressing and queer behaviour are not responsible for public outrage and disapproval. For centuries, Hindu culture has appropriated the use of males playing the roles of females within dramatic performances, much like early Shakespearean theatre. If men are able to cross and blur gender boundaries then why are women not able to do the same? Why is female queer behaviour met with so much outrage whereas male queer behaviour is not? Through a contemporary understanding of male and female gender roles, “we cannot help but realize the hypocrisy here: a man in a sari can actually be rationalized, even applauded, but the reverse is unacceptable in traditional Indian culture” (Gairola 2002, 319).

It is during this very scene that we also bear witness to patriarchy and its manifestation within Hindu society. After Sita has passed the trial by fire, within the dramatic performance, the character of Ram says, “Sita, even the moon has flaws, but you are flawless, and today by being unscathed, you have triumphed in the trial by fire. But sadly, I still have to send you into exile. So take away Sita, and leave her in the forest” (Mehta 1996). Ashok’s *swamiji* (religious teacher) is present; he smugly watches the play, valorising Ram for sending his wife to the forest. The *swamiji* sympathises with Ram by saying, “Poor Ram” (Mehta 1996). Here, we bear witness to the *swamiji* sanctifying the actions of Ram. It is the similar kind of action that he preaches and teaches his students, one of them being Ashok. The *swamiji* thus uses this instance of Ram banishing his wife to the forest as a template on which he not only maps his own life but also that he expects his disciples to emulate. As a result of power relations between men and women within Hindu culture, men are entitled to exert their will over women which results in a lack of female agency.

Ashok can be considered as an ardent devotee of his *swamiji*. It is therefore significant that the first time we encounter Ashok, he is attending a sermon. Desire is Ashok's greatest enemy and when he is asked how to dispel desire, Ashok replies, "You start by keeping all the objects of temptation around you and then you test yourself against them until all desire leaves your mind and body" (Mehta 1996). Mehta, through the dynamic that exists between *swamiji* and student, depicts the dangers of following the 'religious' teachings of a particular individual. This draws attention to Mehta's use of the myth of Radha and Krishna, as a primary source of spirituality and as a tool of liberation from confinement.

Ashok attributes his vow of celibacy to the infertile Radha who feels guilty and is thus complicit with Ashok's tests. Fertility within Hindu culture is associated with abundance only because women have the potential to produce a male lineage. Infertile women exist on the margins of society and are often replaced by a second or third wife. Productivity and thus her social recognition is measured through a women's ability to reproduce offspring. Sita tells Radha about a Mr Parsad from Kanpur who remarried because his first two wives were unable to produce children. As a result, the first wife committed suicide with poison (Mehta 1996). This account serves to draw attention to infertile women. This forces one to re-analyse the treatment of such women by both society and Hindu culture.

The scenes where Ashok forces Radha to lie next to him mimic those that the 'father' of the Indian nation engaged in. It has recently been uncovered that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, commonly referred to as the Mahatma (of a higher spirit), sexually abused his grandnieces Abha and Manu, aged 17 and 18 years, respectively. Gandhi's diary entries and various items of research have revealed that he forced Abha and Manu to lie beside him, naked. While Gandhi preached celibacy and non-violence, his teachings and his actions embody a double standard. In 2011, Jad Adams published his book entitled *Gandhi: Naked Ambition*. This detailed study investigates Gandhi's sexual encounters which are juxtaposed to his vow of *brahmacharya* (celibacy) which he took in 1906 (Adams, *The Independent*, *Thrill of the Chaste*, 2010). Ashok embodies similar moral ambiguity in his relationship with Radha. Radha, while at first complicit with Ashok's celibacy tests, becomes more critical of them through her connection with and understanding of Sita.

Ashok's celibate life results in him giving a large percentage of the family businesses' income to his *swamiji*. Ashok says, "He [*swamiji*] has to have his hydroceles drained, his

testicles are too large for his loincloth” (Mehta 1996). Sita openly laughs at this remark and its irony. If the *swamiji* is a man of celibacy, one wonders why he requires his reproductive organs to be in pristine condition. Hydroceles are not typically life-threatening and do not necessarily require treatment. The film juxtaposes *swamiji*’s scrotum operation with Ashok’s search for a spiritually pure life (Banerjee 2010, 285). Ashok’s marriage is void of sexual gratification for both himself and his wife. In pursuit of his own spiritual aspirations, Ashok utilises his wife as a medium to his goals of celibacy. Banerjee comments (277), “the delicate rejection of the feminine through abstinence marks masculine fear that somehow female sexuality remains a threat to the male heroic quest, whether it be for self-enlightenment or the manly nation.” Within the film, both hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy come across as the casualty of feminism. Both Ashok and Jatin fail in their duty as husbands. The institution of Hindu marriage advocates that both husband and wife uphold the Hindu laws of *Dharma* (righteousness). Ashok’s preoccupation is with his *swamiji* and Jatin’s with the sophisticated and modern Julie. Both Radha and Sita are of no significance in the lives of their respective husbands. For Ashok and Jatin, the only way that hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy can be maintained is through the sexual oppression of both women, that is, until they find comfort in each other.

Gopinath sites the two female protagonists’ queer desire within a homosocial space. The household provides a realm of intimate space for the women. Their sexual behaviour toward each other is only noticed by the spying Mundu. The other men in the household are unaware of the sexual nature of the women’s relationship. Hindu culture sanctions close bonds that exist between women as opposed to those that develop between men. While queer behaviour practised by men in theatres is condoned, within public and private spaces it is prohibited and considered taboo. It is encouraged that married women within a household work in unison to ensure the prospering of the family unit. It is for this reason that Radha and Sita’s relationship does not attract any attention. Ashok is pleased that his wife and sister-in-law associate well with each other. He says, “I’m lucky to have such a good family” (Mehta 1996). Radha and Sita brush and oil each other’s hair, don expensive saris for each other, cook together and go shopping together. Sita even massages Radha’s feet at the family picnic. The women “transform a daily female homosocial activity into an intensely homoerotic one while the other family members unwittingly look on” (Gopinath 2005, 153) [see fig 2.6]. Jatin even encourages Sita to massage Radha’s feet. Queer sexual desire manifests within the borders of the home and the family in opposition to a “safe ‘elsewhere’” (153).

Near the end of the film we begin to see that a life of celibacy, the life that Ashok desires for himself, will never exist and is unachievable. Seated on the steps outside the house, Ashok is bombarded with image after image of the sexual acts that occurred between Radha and Sita. We are reshown the scenes as they flash in quick succession across the screen. These images, imprinted onto the mind of Ashok, have a profound effect on him. He hurriedly closes his legs, possibly indicating that he has become aroused by what he has witnessed in his bedroom. Having failed in his task to avoid sexual pleasure by testing himself with Radha and resisting desire, Ashok begins to cry. He approaches Radha, who is in the kitchen, and requests that she lie next to him, once again, so that he may test himself. Ashok chooses to test himself, instead of actually addressing what he has seen. This failure to address what he has witnessed highlights Ashok's failure to achieve his goals of chastity and celibacy. His preoccupation lies in controlling his desires, while still ignoring those of his wife. Radha refuses to comply with Ashok's wishes, and this infuriates him.

Ashok, enraged by his wife's disobedience, grabs Radha and repeatedly kisses her. Ashok becomes aware of the fact that he is giving in to desire as he partakes in an act in which he vowed he never would. He attempts to fulfil Radha's desires while sacrificing his vow of celibacy. Ashok angrily demands that Radha touch his feet and beg him for his forgiveness. Ashok believes that Radha has acted as a temptress and forced him to lose his sexual restraint. Touching Ashok's feet would mean compliance and acceptance of him as Radha's husband, thus reverting to the patriarchal power dynamic that once existed between the husband and wife. Gairola (2002, 318-9) reveals how Ashok only desires his wife once he is made aware that Radha desires Sita, after which he becomes consumed "by a mixture of desire and rage."

It is at this moment that Radha's sari catches alight from the flames of the kitchen stove. Ashok watches, picks up his mother and leaves Radha to burn. Ashok thus denies his wife the right to live and condemns her to death by a kitchen fire. This fire mirrors the trial by fire that the mythological Sita underwent. Both Radha, within *Fire*, and the mythological Sita survive the trial by fire. This acts to confirm their innocence and purity. Within the context of *Fire*, Radha's survival condones her same-sex relationship with Sita. By ensuring that Radha survives the fire, Mehta demonstrates that her survival is ordained by mythology, history and culture. Ashok's reluctance to save Radha shows how male wrath is inflicted upon the

female. Ashok believes that Radha's punishment for her 'disobedience' should be death. Radha; however, survives the fire and reunites with her love, Sita, at Nizamuddin's shrine. By Radha's surviving the fire, Mehta breaks taboos relating to female same-sex desire within Hindu culture by depicting it in a positive light. Her survival acts as a confirmation of her queer desire which is established as liberating, affirmative and persistent. The mere fact that it is raining, when the two women meet at the shrine, comes as a relief to the pervading images of fire throughout the film. Radha and Sita are vindicated by being blessed with showers of rain, which also comes as a relief to the dehydrated Radha. The film ends with a shot of the two women at Nizamuddin Dargar, a Sufi shrine (Desai 2004, 173). The secular shrine is associated with those seeking refuge as well as poet figures (173). This meeting is particularly significant as it is associated with Nizamuddin's works which allude to "same-sex love and desire for poet Amir Khurso" (173).

Radha and Sita intend to open their own take-out business, removing the need for financial support from their husbands. Radha and Sita were previously responsible for preparing the food for the family's take-out business. Their decision to continue to provide food for the public emphasises their respective roles as nurturers and those who foster well-being for the needs of wider society. Appetite is evoked through the act of feeding. This mirrors the earlier argument about film and the bisexual's lack of restraint of moral appetite (Eadie 1997, 143). Mehta's positive spin on bisexuality is once again highlighted as the women are directly involved in satisfying the appetites of their customers while also satisfying their own sexual appetites for and through each other within the confines of their same-sex relationship. The women's relationship can therefore be viewed as sanctified and validated as they also intend to satiate the physical hunger of their customers while preserving the boundaries of their sexual relationship. The charter of the bisexual is indeed "fascinating" (142).

Fire proved to be more successful and popular within the diaspora as compared to India. The film gained immense popularity in "mainstream lesbian and gay audiences in the United States and Canada" (Gopinath 2005, 140). Gopinath considers how films such as *Fire* move from one place to another, being viewed by various audiences and in the process gaining multiple meanings (134). A significant argument by "Hindu liberals within India as well as in the diaspora" was that the film did not make use of specific labels such as "lesbian" (157). After Ashok has walked in on the women making love, Sita says to Radha, "there's no word in our language that can describe what we are, how we feel for each other" (Mehta 1996).

Mehta, by choosing not to label the women's relationship, leaves the affiliation between the two women open to various interpretations. *Fire*, therefore, places the women and their relationship within a continuum of various sexualities, including bisexuality, which Mehta refers to outside the confines of the film. It is possibly for this reason that Gopinath (2005) has chosen to refer to them as "queer". Through an analysis of bisexuality and the parallels with the love between the mythological Radha and Krishna, Mehta calls for a change in value systems within the scope of Hindu culture and gender which shows potential for women to assert their agency and power. Within India, the diaspora is characterised as the "other"; however, it is within the diaspora that the "liberating sexual discourses" in connection with the "dominant models of gay and lesbian organizing" occur (Gopinath 2005, 159). The Indian diaspora allows for flexibility of sexual interpretations, whereas within India, heterosexuality is the hegemonic and mandated operating model.

By means of a textual analysis of Mehta's *Fire*, this chapter has shown how women are able to access power through a nuanced analysis of Hindu culture, mythology and bisexuality. Sita and Radha embody characteristics of the bisexual in varying degrees. Sita is the catalyst and facilitator for Radha's bisexual nature. Sita represents a new form of both sexual and social organising within the Hindu middle-class family dynamic. This chapter has also investigated the relationship between desire and dreams and its imperative role in Radha's personal journey. An exploration of *Fire* opens up spaces that liberate and give a voice to women and those of a queer sexual orientation. *Fire*, similar to other films that will be studied within the course of this dissertation, draws attention to various social and cultural issues that affect the lives of Indian women. This is deliberately done in an effort to change the ways in which society and culture consider such women.

Chapter Two

Earth, Empire and Empathy

This chapter will engage in a discussion of Deepa Mehta's *Earth*. Produced in 1998, in a post-colonial context, *Earth* critically explores colonialism and the process of decolonisation within the Indian sub-continent. Partition, as it came to be known, has formed and always will form an integral part of the colonial legacy in India and within the Indian diaspora. This event has played a crucial role in the shaping of a continent. In response to the violent onslaught that *Fire* received, Philip Kemp (2007, 80) observes that *Earth* did not incite aggression. He attributes this to the fact that the film depicts Hindus as "victims" and not as the "perpetrators of oppression" (80). *Earth* has had a profound effect on me despite the fact that I belong to the Indian diaspora. Released 51 years after Partition, *Earth* has succeeded in revealing the wounds that this socio-politically charged period has left behind on Indians throughout the world. Through the narrative, we are forced to relive the horror and helplessness of the victims of Partition.

Mehta's *Earth* is adapted from the 1991 novel by Bapsi Sidhwa, entitled *Cracking India*. *Earth* centres on a group of friends from different religious backgrounds as they respond, in varying degrees, to the violence of Partition, and who are torn apart as a result of aggression and hatred. At the centre of this group is Shanta, who is the Hindu nanny to Lenny Sethna, an eight-year-old Parsi child, who as a result of polio has her leg in an iron brace. The narrative unfolds as two Muslim suitors, Dil Navaz and Hassan, compete for Shanta's attention, with devastating results.

Subeshini Moodley, in her Master's Dissertation, devotes a discussion to the analysis of *Earth* and its female characters, applying Naficy's (2001) concept of "border-crossing" to each of them. Moodley provides a detailed discussion of Shanta and her growing agency. However, I maintain that she fails to attain any agency by the end of the film. Shanta's role within the film is imperative as she is the centre that holds the narrative together. *Earth* differs from the other two films that form part of the Elemental Trilogy in its depiction of the feminine. Shanta, despite being the female protagonist within the film, does not experience a growth in agency and access to power through any institutions, cultural or otherwise. This failure to access agency and power on behalf of Shanta is Mehta's intention as this foregrounds the damaging effects of war, genocide and violence on populations and people.

Earth demonstrates that there is little or no redemption from Partition. Lenny functions as the narrator, and I will analyse the effects of Mehta's allowing the spectator to view the unfolding events through the eyes of a child. As children feature prominently in the film, I will explore to what extent children act as indicators of violence within the narrative.

Through the scope of theory formulated by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (1998), I will analyse *Earth* from a post-colonial perspective. I will also focus my discussion on Dil Navaz and his characterisation. Joya Uraizee (2010), in an article entitled "Gazing at the Beast: Describing Mass Murder in Deepa Mehta's *Earth* and Terry George's *Hotel Rwanda*", analyses the effects that war and genocide have on populations and individual lives. Uraizee, through her article, discusses Dil Navaz, and the beastly nature that he comes to embody. This nature is fuelled and encouraged by the intensity of the political atmosphere. Dil Navaz sets himself on a pre-destined path where anarchy and chaos reign. I will trace Dil Navaz's transformation through the film, from man to beast.

Earth succeeds as a human narrative as it depicts particular male and female bodies and psyches as they respond to the effects of war and socio-political upheaval. The title of the film foregrounds the contestation over territory and land. Even today, contestation over land still takes place. Coupled with the dispute over territory, ethnic lines are drawn with devastating consequences for people behind and between these lines. Partition separated human beings along ethnic lines and it resulted in the loss of many lives. This occurrence mirrors the events of Nazi Germany which attempted to make one ethnic group hold superiority over another. As the narrative of *Earth* unfolds, friend is pitted against friend; lover against lover.

Jeanette Herman (2005), in an article entitled "Memory and Melodrama: The Transnational Politics of Deepa Mehta's *Earth*", discusses the role that memory and trauma play within the film. *Earth* is inclusive of all Indian ethnic groups. This allows the film to appeal to Indians both within the diaspora and the Indian sub-continent. Through the retelling of the story of Partition, all Indians across the globe become united in a shared history and memory. Herman (117) says that the film succeeds in constructing "a multifaceted, transnational, and trans-communal popular memory of partition". Much like *Fire*, *Earth* has travelled across multiple locations and acquired multiple meanings and reactions. The disparity in the film's reception ranges "from deeply affected and enthusiastic to unmoved and critical" (111).

Through the eyes of the eight-year-old Lenny Sethna, we witness most of the narrative. Lenny is a Parsi, who along with her family forms part of the Lahore community. The Parsi community are “a very small group with a long history of political neutrality” (117-8). This position of neutrality allows the Sethna family to secure their place within the altering and shifting political atmosphere of Partition. It is befitting, then, that the narrator has a constant presence within this small community. Later on in the film, this privileged viewpoint manifests into Lenny’s worst nightmare as she witnesses her nanny, Shanta, being snatched from her life.

Shanta’s male friends all belong to various ethnic groups such as Muslim, Sikh and Hindu. Shanta’s friends are Lenny’s friends. Hassan frequently assists Lenny to urinate behind the statue of the Queen, outside the park. Dil Navaz purchases an ice-cream for Lenny and she begins calling him “Ice-Candy-Man”. The Sethna family is responsible for employing individuals from varied ethnic backgrounds. Iman Din, the cook, is Muslim, while Hari, the gardener, is Hindu. Lenny is essentially blind to the various ethnicities around her, and as a result she feels compassion and “sympathy regardless of religious identity or political affinity” (118).

Giacoma Lichtner and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (2008), in an article entitled “Indian Cinema and the Present Use of History”, discuss the relationship that exists between Indian cinema and its use of historical narratives. By utilising the perspective of eight-year-old Lenny and the adult Lenny (at the end of the film), *Earth* is a “contemporary as much as a historical narrative” (438). The film displays the capacity to shift from one moment in time to another. This serves to locate the experience of Partition, not as a distant memory, but rather as an ongoing political state. Lenny is “four times an outsider” because she is a child, a Parsi, disabled and middle-class (438). Lenny’s innocence and her unpretentious nature allow for her characterisation to become etched into the viewer. Lenny’s narrative voice succeeds in offering both a “concerned but neutral” position with reference to Partition (438). Lenny is seen interacting with various individuals from different Indian ethnic groups. If Mehta had utilised a first-person narrative voice, this would have placed Lenny at the centre of the plot and the narrator’s own preferences would become evident. The narrative voice of a child allows for an inoffensive standpoint (438). Lenny’s “lack of prejudice lets her see a common humanity before she sees different religions” (439). Certain scenes occur out of the narrative

viewpoint of Lenny and she is detached from these scenes despite the fact that they will become essential to her understanding of the resultant events. This only serves to accentuate the tragedy of the film as a whole. Lenny's innocence and naivety as a child are constantly pointed out within the film. She is concerned about the effects that Partition will have on her life. She asks her mother, "Mummy, can anyone break a country? What happens if the English make India warehouses? How will I get to the park then?" (Mehta 1998). Lenny's preoccupation lies only in how she will get to the park with Shanta so that she can spend time with the band of friends. Her concern does not revolve around the wider effects of Partition.

By utilising the narrative voice of an eight-year-old, Mehta is able to project a "contemporary" voice which addresses existing issues that face the Indian female (Lichtner and Bandyopadhyay 2008, 439). Lenny is horrified that Papoo, the servant's daughter, is getting married to an older man. This reflects "Mehta's disgust at this practise, already amply voiced in [...] *Fire* (1996) and *Water* (2005)" (439). Lenny's mother, Bunty, emphasises the tender age of Papoo while simultaneously expressing her aversion to the creation of child brides. Bunty says that Papoo is "Only ten, it shouldn't be allowed!" (Mehta 1998). Rustom, Bunty's husband, remarks, "Everything is allowed these days" (Mehta 1998). Rustom is less sympathetic to Papoo's predicament. He assembles the plight of the girl child with the rest of the problems that Partition raises. Mehta, through her depiction of a child bride within the context of Partition, foregrounds the persistence of this practice, even in times of conflict. By drawing Mehta's attention to this practice, the audience is forced to think about children and the compound effects that war has on them.

Lenny, Shanta, Dil Navaz and Hassan all attend Papoo's wedding. Papoo, being a Hindu, is married off to a Christian groom to ensure that her family is protected from the ethnic violence of Partition. By converting to Christianity as a result of marriage, both Papoo and her family will be protected by not having allegiance to a specific Indian cultural group. Lenny gives Papoo a doll as a present [see fig. 3.1]. This gift underscores the innocence that these two friends possess. The gift of the doll foregrounds that neither Lenny nor Papoo is ready to make the transition from childhood to womanhood. The toy, while reflecting their innocence and youth, paradoxically reflects the rigid and strict confines that they are expected to occupy as wives and mothers. The doll succeeds in acting as a template on which the girls prepare themselves for motherhood. As the groom enters the room, an older lady viciously snatches the doll away from Papoo, forcing her to take on the role of 'wife' and 'mother',

denouncing her childhood. The groom, seated next to Papoo, has his face covered with garlands of flowers. This forces him to sneeze. He removes the garlands and we learn that Papoo's husband is an elderly man who suffers from dwarfism. Lenny asks Shanta, "Why are they marrying Papoo to that old man?" Shanta replies, "Fear is making people do crazy things these days" (Mehta 1998).

Mehta, through *Earth*, is able to show two sides of the same metaphorical coin, in her depiction of empathy for the colonised and of the coloniser. Partition resulted from the demise of colonialism in India. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1998, 63) define the process of decolonisation as the "revealing and dismantling [of] colonialist power in all its forms". The film succeeds in giving the viewer a glimpse of what decolonisation meant to the colonialist who ruled India for more than 200 years. Lenny's parents host a dinner party, and among their guests is the Englishman, head of police, Mr Rogers. Also present around the table are the Sikh couple, Jaswant and his wife, as well as Hindu and Parsi acquaintances. This dinner table acts as a microcosm for the wider politics of Partition. Mr Rogers and Jaswant get into an argument which quickly turns physical, over the self-rule of India by Indians. After a physical altercation, Mr Rogers sadly remarks, "This bloody country, it's the only home I know" (Mehta 1998). A diasporic audience is able to sympathise with the colonial power on possibly a deeper level than that of individuals who are indigenous to the Indian sub-continent. The diasporic self refers to an alternate country as 'home'. The coloniser created a home out of the colonised countries. This remark, by Mr Rogers, has the capacity to resonate within the diaspora, more so than within India. Despite being knowledgeable about India's colonial history, Mehta also shows us that decolonisation had a devastating impact on the colonisers who were forced to leave India, the only conceivable home that they identified with. Bunty and Rustom make explicit the various developments that can be attributed to the British Empire and its presence within India. The following dialogue is exchanged in an attempt to focus on the positive effects of colonialism:

Rustom: You British have done a lot for us...you've built us roads and given us your exemplary postal system and...

Bunty: Language! Do not forget the English language...beautiful language. (Mehta 1998)

The pain, suffering and dislocation that Partition caused for the colonised is made evident by Jaswant, in a later remark, when he visits the Sethna family. Jaswant plans to leave Lahore

due to the violence of Partition. He elaborates on the effects of decolonisation, and by implication, colonisation on the colonial subjects. Jaswant says:

Bloody English. Playing God under the ceiling fans of Lahore Hotel. Distributing Indian cities like a pack of cards. Amritsar to Indian...Lahore, **my** Lahore, to Pakistan. The bastards [*he has tears in his eyes*]. They break my country into two pieces and hand it to us and say 'Happy Independence.'" (Mehta 1998) [My own emphasis added]

The trope of breaking, shattering, separation and pulling apart is woven through the narrative. Shanta is present at every juncture in which the above trope occurs. Her actions are an objective correlative when she is constantly found trying to fix and piece together broken items and relationships. It is befitting then, that Shanta's Sanskrit name translates to serenity and calm. Her name is closely related to the Sanskrit word *shanti*, which means peace. She constantly attempts to keep the peace amidst the overwhelming violence. At the beginning of the film we witness Lenny colouring in a picture of the Indian sub-continent. Lenny colours different parts of the continent in varying colours, highlighting separation and difference. The physical act of Partition is accentuated by the narrative voice, which says, "The arbitrary line of division the British would draw to carve up India in August 1947 would scar the sub-continent forever" (Mehta 1998). The second instance of breaking and shattering is depicted when Lenny leaves her colouring, enters the dining room and purposely throws a glass plate onto the floor, which shatters into pieces. This acts as a visual metaphor and representation of Partition. Shanta comes rushing into the room and picks up the pieces of the broken plate. At one point in the narrative, Shanta sits with her group of male friends in the park. One of the friends says, "We all hover around you like moths to a lamp" (Mehta 1998). Despite the religious tensions surrounding Partition, the group of friends still meet in the park. Shanta acts as the glue that holds the group together, despite the mounting political atmosphere. During the course of the erupting violence, Dil Navaz, Shanta, Lenny and Hassan witness a Muslim man being torn apart, from the rooftop of Dil Navaz's house. The man is dragged by an angry mob of Hindus. As the man pleads for his life his right hand and right foot are tied to a jeep while his left hand and foot are fastened to another jeep. The vehicles pull in opposite directions and his screams pierce the air [see fig. 3.2]. Blood flows from the man's face and hands. The man makes a clear attempt to plead for his life but all he hears is "Kill the Muslim bastard!" (Mehta 1998). In mimicking the pulling apart of the human being that she witnessed, Lenny makes Adi, her cousin, help her pull apart a ragdoll. When Shanta finds

the ragdoll she frantically tries to pin it back together, while crying uncontrollably. Shanta, despite the increasing levels of violence, still makes an attempt to piece together all that is broken, thus projecting her wishes to piece together her irreparable India.

Shanta functions as the voice of reason within the film. Complementing Shanta in this role is Hassan, the masseur. Hassan is able to display empathy towards those who are ethnically different from him. As a result, Hassan stands in sharp contrast to Dil Navaz, who joins Muslim fundamentalists in their fight for territory. Tensions flare amidst the group of friends while they have lunch at the local restaurant. They turn on each other, creating a Muslim versus Sikh opposition. The following interchange takes place between Yousaf (Muslim) and Sher Singh (Sikh):

Yousaf: Even the British say you Sikhs are a headache, a bloody nuisance.

Sher Singh: We think you're bastards as well.

Yousaf: Listen, once India is divided, all Muslims left on the wrong side of the division line will have their balls cut off!

Hassan: Oy! Have you gone mad? We've lived together like brothers for centuries. We share the same language, food and enemies. (Mehta 1998)

Hassan highlights the positive aspects that Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus share in common. By finding a common ground, Hassan is able to appeal to a shared humanity. As the argument between the two men continues, Hassan says, "Our Holy Koran lies in their Golden Temple in Amritsar. The Sikh faith came about to bring Hindus and Muslims closer. So why fight among friends? We'll stand by each other, won't we?" (Mehta 1998). Hassan, by uttering these words, signifies both the history and resultant unification that various ethnic groups have contributed to the Indian nation. It is this unification that Partition seeks to unsettle. Hassan's words act as an appeal to his friends not to turn on each other.

Partition is first depicted through the eyes of Hassan. He rides his bicycle through an alley and stops when it joins the main road. Hassan is horrified and scared by the endless flood of people that make their way through the street to a refugee camp [see fig. 3.3]. We see close-up shots of people with their belongings and animals, their faces etched with sorrow and heartache. The sound of a baby bawling alerts us to the tragedy of human suffering.

Shanta resides at the centre of the group of friends; she is the only female (other than Lenny). Dil Navaz, while alone with Shanta and Lenny under a Peepal tree, attempts to lift Shanta's

sari to reveal her legs. This upsets Shanta and she says to Dil Navaz, “You’ll never change. Why can’t you be like masseur [Hassan]? He’s such a gentleman” (Mehta 1998). By uttering these words, near the beginning of the film, Shanta instantaneously sets up an opposition between Hassan and Dil Navaz as contenders for her affection. If the kind and tender Hassan is the film’s hero, then Dil Navaz portrays the film’s antagonist. Moodley comments, “Shanta experiences different kinds of love between Hassan, who is gentle, romantic and passionate and Dil Navaz, who is temperamental and erratic” (2004, 98). Dil Navaz and Hassan are set up in opposition to each other. Despite Dil Navaz’s “carefree and funny” nature, he allows “the beast within to surface” when the violence erupts; despite Hassan’s “gentle and understanding” nature, he is brutally murdered “for his efforts to help those in need of protection” (Uraizee 2010, 12).

As the violence of Partition escalates, the film shifts to centre on the individual Partition experience of Dil Navaz. The train scene is crucial to his characterisation. It is the catalyst for his later actions and crucial to our interpretation of them. This particular scene is a decisive moment for Dil Navaz and it occurs out of the ambit of “Lenny’s individual experience” (Herman 2005, 133). The train from Gurdaspur is twelve hours late. Dil Navaz waits anxiously for the arrival of the train. The background music consists of drum beats that mirror the sound of an approaching train and “the sequence of seven notes that was repeated in the film’s opening” (137). Due to the music we feel a deep sense of expectancy coupled with anxiety. A build-up of tension is experienced and this foregrounds shock and then a tragic release.

The train eventually approaches and occupies most of the shot. As the train draws to a stop, we hear flies buzz and a shrill scream pierces the air. People cry in distress and our worst fears are confirmed. Dil Navaz enters the train and touches the floor. His hand is covered with blood and our suspense is heightened as the camera shifts to focus on the scene before Dil Navaz. Limbs hang from various locations, unattached to a specific body. Blood shrouds the corpses and limbs. The excess of body limbs make a single, complete, body impossible to identify (130-31) [see fig. 3.4]. The mass dismemberment acts to confirm the level of violence that has been committed. The camera shot moves to show us that the train is filled with dismembered bodies for as far as the eye can see. Herman (132) comments that the train scene contributes to the trope of breaking and tearing apart as “bodies and community” are broken and maimed.

The implications of the train sequence for Dil Navaz only becomes apparent to the rest of the friends when Yousaf arrives. He says, “A train just arrived from Gurdaspur City, filled with dead bodies. All the Muslim men in it butchered, and four sacks filled with women’s breasts. Our Dil Navaz’s sisters were on that train” (Mehta 1998). The implications for Dil Navaz are made obvious. He is thus the first of the friends to experience, first hand, the brutality of Partition. As a result of losing his sisters, Dil Navaz undergoes a sudden, but intense metamorphosis which sets him on a pre-destined course. This change within Dil Navaz becomes evident in the scene where Dil Navaz, Shanta, Lenny and Hassan are on the rooftop of Dil Navaz’s house. They all watch the violence unfold as faction fights ensue. Uraizee (2010, 14) observes how the mob of angry people bear similarity to an “unruly beast”. This image is maintained with “medium shots of conflagrations and loud explosions emanating from [the burning] buildings” (14).

Dil Navaz embodies the beast, and Hassan’s actions stand in sharp contrast to those of Dil Navaz. On the rooftop, amidst the gunshots and protestors, Dil Navaz says, “What are these Sikh fuckers doing here? Why don’t they go to India?” (Mehta 1998). Hassan says, “It’s not easy to leave one’s home” (Mehta 1998). Hassan is capable of sympathising with various ethnic groups, whereas Dil Navaz moves towards championing the Muslim cause. Before the train scene, Dil Navaz displayed “more tolerance towards” his friends from different religious backgrounds; however, he thereafter moves towards admiration and approval when Muslims burn down the Hindu tenement (Herman 2005, 132). While it burns, the fire-fighters approach, and Dil Navaz asks, “Where did these bastards come from?” (Mehta 1998). When petrol instead of water is sprayed on the building, he says, “They’ve sprayed the building with petrol instead of water. Great! The fire-fighters must be Muslim” (Mehta 1998). Dil Navaz smiles and breathes heavily. The smile on his face disturbs the viewer [see fig. 3.5]. He is caught up in the violence as Hindus are pitted against Muslims. The fact that the Muslims have the upper hand excites Dil Navaz. He is unable to show mercy and compassion towards his fellow human beings. The beast within Dil Navaz rears its ugly head and Shanta looks at Dil Navaz in horror and disbelief. They witness as people roll out of the tenement while being burnt alive. Hassan, once again, sympathises with all ethnicities. He says to Shanta, “Stay here, I’ll see if I can help” (Mehta 1998). As if aware what is happening to him, Dil Navaz says to Shanta:

Shanta *didi* [sister], this is not only about Hindus and Muslim. It's about what's inside us. Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, we are all bastards, all animals. Like the lion in the zoo that Lenny-baby is so scared off. He just lies there, waiting for the cage to open, and when it does, then God help us all. Shanta, marry me. If you are with me, then this animal that's within me will be controlled. (Mehta 1998)

Shanta does not agree to marry Dil Navaz, and it is this precise denial that leads Dil Navaz to commit the most atrocious act towards the woman that he once loved.

Dil Navaz and the beast that resides within him feature early on in the narrative. During the first meeting of the friends in the park, Shanta says, "Do you know, Lenny-baby is afraid of the lion in the zoo?" Sher Singh, who is the zoo-keeper and also has a speech impediment, says, "Don't worry Lenny-baby, I'll hold the chain real t-t-tight. He won't dare h-h-hurt you" (Mehta 1998). Shanta hugs the scared Lenny in an attempt to comfort her. She tells Lenny, "Nobody lets the lion out of the cage. Besides, the cage is so strong even a hundred lions can't break it" (Mehta 1998). Shanta is the reassuring voice who protects Lenny from something she is scared of. The lion, the predatory "king of the jungle", is used as a metaphor within this context. The lion is a beast, which hunts and is capable of devouring humans. The lion appeals to its base instincts for survival and thrives within its natural environment. In a similar manner, Dil Navaz morphs into a beast, taking on the characteristics of the lion. Shanta, an ambassador of goodwill and peace, assures Lenny of safety and protection from the lion. We are therefore assured of this safety as well. Following this scene, an ice-cream on a stick is superimposed onto the screen; ironically, it is Dil Navaz who has bought an ice-cream for Lenny. She is thrilled by this gesture, and hence she refers to him as "Ice-Candy-Man" from this point onwards.

While the friends gather in the park, Dil Navaz pretends to be a Muslim fortune teller. He telephones Allah to request that his Muslim customers will be able to conceive a son. A Sikh man approaches Dil Navaz and tensions flare as a result of ethnic differences surrounding Partition. The following exchange of dialogue takes place:

Sikh: Holy man, telephone Allah and ask him, after the British divide India, what will happen to us?

Dil Navaz: Sorry, the line is cut off now.

Sikh: Why is your Allah's line cut off for Sikhs?

Muslim man: You idiot! This is a private line. If you want to ask questions, telephone your own God. (*The two men begin to fight.*)

Dil Navaz: Wait a minute. I'll just ask Allah. Allah have mercy on us. Allah says when the time for division comes, there is going to be a huge storm and you will fight like animals. (Mehta 1998)

The two men begin fighting as a result of Sikh and Muslim rivalry. Dil Navaz refuses to answer the question that the Sikh man puts forth and he wishes to avoid the subject of Partition and its references. During the dialogue between the men a clear distinction is drawn between Muslim and Sikh faiths and their respective Gods. This lays the foundation for ethnic differences that emerge during Partition. The above remark made by Dil Navaz in the dialogue is prophetic. This is exactly what occurs during the violence of Partition. Dil Navaz's words prove to be true. Ironically enough, Dil Navaz is unwittingly describing the precise characterisation that he will embody as he lets the inner beast out as he fights his friends and fellow citizens. He becomes vicious, ruthless and merciless.

After Dil Navaz's tragic loss, his group of 'friends' assemble and the following interchange takes place:

Shanta: Where is Sher Singh?

Hari: He seems to have disappeared.

Lenny: Who's guarding the lion in the zoo?

Dil Navaz (*says harshly*): Nobody! After the atrocities the Sikhs committed, it's good he's left. Muslim refugees here want revenge.

Hassan: And you, don't you also want revenge?

Dil Navaz: What's it to you? What kind of Muslim are you? If you want to know, I'll tell you. Yes, I've thrown grenades at Hindus and Sikhs who I've known all my life. I want to kill someone for each breast they cut off my sisters! (Mehta 1998)

This conversation accentuates Dil Navaz's full transformation from man to beast. No one is guarding the lion in the zoo, it therefore does as it pleases. So too does Dil Navaz display no restraint. He admits to killing people he once called "friend". It is difficult for Dil Navaz to understand how Hassan can still show compassion towards people who belong to the same religion as those that viciously murdered his sisters. Dil Navaz has been transformed as a direct result of the way that his sisters were murdered, and it is through the events that occurred on the train platform that we are able to understand, though not condone, Dil Navaz's actions.

Earth can be described not only as a national allegory but as an allegory of Partition. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1998, 9) observe, “Allegory has assumed an important function in imperial discourse, in which paintings and statues have often been created as allegories of imperial power.” Mehta, by including various images that connote colonial power within the British Raj and after colonialism, emphasises the continued impact of both colonialism and decolonisation. Various images of colonial power punctuate the narrative. It is significant, then, that at the entrance to the park, resides an enormous statue of Queen Victoria. Her authority and power are visible and they sanction the friends’ meetings. This power is paradoxically responsible for tearing the group of friends apart. The statue of the queen is often superimposed onto the screen and we are also given a close-up view of the *globus cruciger* which stands as a symbol for the influence, might and power of the British Empire within India [see fig. 3.6]. The last scene of the film takes place in an abandoned colonial monument park, where the older version of Lenny reminisces about her past actions [see fig. 3.7].

Earth displays instances of colonial desire which “indicates the extent to which colonialist discourse was pervaded by sexuality” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1998, 40). Colonisation is embedded in the “sexualized discourse of rape, penetration and impregnation” (40). Land is venerated as the Goddess, Mother Earth. It can be seen as caught in a perpetual state of distress, being fought over and upon. It is appropriate then, that the title of the film embodies the very land that is being contested. At the end of the film, Dil Navaz claims Shanta as his war trophy. With the prospect of Independence looming in the near future, the previously colonised male subject gains his masculinity through the departure of the colonists. No longer being held in a position of inferiority under the might of colonialism, the Indian male is able to once again occupy the status of the powerful patriarch. Dil Navaz exerts this might on both Shanta and Lenny.

Rape is used as a tool of war and is implemented by masculine power over the female body. Women, during times of conflict, are victimised due to their ability to reproduce the next generation. Dil Navaz’s sisters have their breasts cut off; this act is directly related to women’s reproductive potential. This show of brutality is connected to ethnic violence. Filling sacks with women’s severed breasts indicates the summation of masculine power over the female body. While “Mother Earth” is being fought upon and fought for, the “mother” is slain and destroyed. “Mother” can thus never be a substitute for “Mother Earth”. Mehta

places both women and children in positions of increasing vulnerability throughout the plot. By making women and children a feature within her plot, Mehta draws attention to the dangers of utilising women as national symbols; invariably, when women suffer, children suffer. On Lenny's birthday, Adi takes her to see refugees from atop a building. Adi refers to these women as "fallen" because they were raped. The courtyard is populated by women and children who live in makeshift tents. Adi sees a boy moving among belongings close to the area that they occupy. Adi calls the boy and asks him, "Was your mommy raped?" The boy says, "When Hindus attacked our village, they killed everyone. I hid under the dead bodies [...] After the Hindus left, I went to look for my mother. She was in a mosque. Her hair tied to a ceiling fan. She was naked" (Mehta 1998). The boy having to resort to hiding under dead bodies serves to reinforce the brutality and violence of this period in history. Lenny offers the boy cake, since it her birthday. The boy says, "Cake? What's that?" (Mehta 1998). This heart-wrenching scene places children as the recipients of the worst kinds of violence. Through the characterisation of the young, nameless boy, Mehta succeeds in drawing attention to the plight of children who are victims in war and violence around the world.

Earth depicts men, women and children as the victims of Partition. Through the characterisation of Dil Navaz, Mehta illustrates that men suffer psychologically as a result of war. Through Hassan, she shows that men physically suffer in zones of conflict. While Shanta prepares to leave Lahore and marry Hassan, Lenny and Hari go out walking and they stumble across a bag at the roadside. The horrifying contents of the bag are the slain Hassan [see fig. 3.8]. Rani Neutill (2010) in an article entitled "Bending Bodies and Desires in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* and Deepa Mehta's *Earth*", discusses an example of violence enacted on the male body. This example centres on the transformation of Hari, the Sethnas' Hindu gardener, to Himmat Ali, a Muslim. This transformation is characterised by a religious and necessary circumcision. Hari's conversion to Himmat Ali occurs within both sexual and social realms. The difficulty for Lenny is evident in the following dialogue:

Lenny: Hari, why did you cut your pigtail?

Hari: Lenny-baby, don't call me Hari. My name is Himmat Ali now.

Lenny: Where is Nanny, Hari? Sorry, I mean Himmat Ali. (Mehta 1998)

Lenny easily gets confused but quickly corrects herself. Through this transformation, Mehta is able to depict the violence that men underwent "during the Partition" (Neutill 2010, 80). Hari makes a rapid transformation from Hindu to Muslim to avoid ethnic attacks by the

Muslim mobs that target non-Muslims. Hari is also the victim of perpetual violence by the angry mob. The enraged mob of men march down the Sethna driveway and demand to see Hari, who stands next to the cook, Iman Din. He defends Hari and the following words are exchanged:

Iman Din: Hari has become a Muslim. Now his name is Himmat Ali...

Protestor: Let's see if you're a proper Muslim. Undo his *salwar* [covering cloth].

Iman Din: Get away! I vouch for him! Why don't you ask the barber? He circumcised him.

Protestor: There is no barber here! (*They pull down his salwar, and the camera angle shows us his bare buttocks.*) Great! The barber did a good job on his penis! (*They all laugh.*) (Mehta 1998)

Neutill (2010, 80) comments on the above scene, "The shot of Himmat Ali's buttocks is one of castration, not fetishism". While the men gaze at Himmat Ali's circumcision which indicates his religious conversion, all we are shown is a shot of his buttocks and we empathise with his humiliation (80). The mob of men embarrass Hari by laughing at his nudity. Neutill comments that within Sidhwa's novel, this particular scene is queered due to the playful relationship that exists between the male servants; however, during the translation to film, this queerness is lost (79). However, some queer undertones lie in any male acting as a voyeur to another naked male.

The protestors taunt Himmat Ali and proceed with their rampage. As if fulfilling our greatest fears, the protestors inquire as to the whereabouts of Shanta, who we know is hiding in Mrs Sethna's bedroom. The cook lies and says that Shanta has left for Lahore. As the men interrogate the household and its servants, Dil Navaz approaches Lenny and he picks her up, looks into her eyes and says, "Don't be scared Lenny-baby. I'm here. I know what will make Lenny-baby smile! Ice-cream. Lenny-baby, tell me where Nanny is. I've come for her. She's here, isn't she? You know I'll do anything for her. Where is she?" (Mehta 1998). By picking Lenny up, Dil Navaz makes eye contact with her, thus allowing him to manipulate her. He also shows affection with this gesture, coercing Lenny into telling him where Shanta is [see fig. 3.9]. Lenny whispers, "She's inside in mummy's bedroom" (Mehta 1998). Dil Navaz puts Lenny down and he mechanically turns around to face the mob. He says, "She's hiding inside" (Mehta 1998). The angry mob of men drag Shanta down the driveway, against her will. Dil Navaz's actions are calculated. He calmly sits on his haunches and smokes a cigarette while the other men do his bidding. Lenny emotionally plummets into despair as Dil

Navaz “drags [Shanta] off in triumph as the film ends” (Uraizee 2010, 12). Lenny, out of despair, screams, “Ice-Candy-Man! Ice-Candy-Man! I lied! She’s not here! She has left! I lied! She’s gone to Amritsar!” (Mehta 1998).

Dil Navaz clearly manipulates Lenny into telling her where Shanta is. Dil Navaz, by telling Lenny that an ice-cream would make her smile, incites us to recall the first time that he bought her an ice-cream. He uses this instance to regain her trust. By returning to an earlier memory, Lenny is tricked into believing that this is the Dil Navaz with whom she is familiar. The ice-cream thus acts as a bargaining chip which results in the uncertain destiny of Shanta who is dragged out of the house by the mob. Dil Navaz takes advantage of the situation of Partition to exact his revenge on Shanta. Partition, then, becomes essential to his plan. Without the political turmoil, Dil Navaz would have to resort to other means, if any, to take his revenge on the helpless Shanta.

The tragedy of the plot as a whole rests within this final scene. Lenny gives up Shanta’s hiding place as she is aware of the fact that Shanta’s chance of happiness with Hassan has been destroyed. The final sentence of the narrative is screamed to Bunty by Shanta, who says, “Madam, tell Hassan!” (Mehta 1998). Only the spectators and Lenny know the fate that Hassan has met with. Shanta’s reaction emphasises the permanent effect and tragedy of Partition and alludes to the fact “that there is no recovery from them” (Herman, 138). The memory of Partition and by extension, Partition itself become inscribed onto the memories of *Earth*’s spectators. This process of inscription is further stressed in the closing still. At the end of the film, against a black backdrop, the following words are inscribed: “Over one million people were killed during India’s division. Seven million Muslims and five million Hindus and Sikhs were uprooted in the largest and most terrible exchange of human population known to history” (Mehta 1998).

The death toll as a result of Partition is staggering. Approximately 10 to 12 million people were attacked and between 200,000 and 360,000 deaths resulted (Uraizee 2010, 21). *Earth* creates a “shared memory” of Partition that stretches across the Indian sub-continent and the Indian diaspora (Herman 2005, 134). Mehta depicts men, women and children as victims of this violence. The ability of the viewer to empathise with the characters in the film “constructs a shared, transnational identity through historical trauma” (134). The legacy of Partition is apparent within the film. As much as *Earth* depicts a historical drama, the drama

of the present is intertwined into the narrative. The film clearly depicts Lenny's battle with polio through her limp and leg-brace. Mehta's use of a child afflicted by polio has implications for the periods both before and after Partition. India and Pakistan existed as one entity prior to 1947 and they were both plagued by similar health epidemics such as polio. As a result of Partition, Pakistan is still engaged in a battle with polio, whereas it has been reported that India has eradicated polio (Unicef). What is benefiting India now is also able to benefit Pakistan; however, hostility still exists between the two countries. Nuclear tensions (Herman 2005, 108) between the two countries have increased and violence is still a real threat, within a global context.

The end of the narrative does not bring closure or relief to the viewer. We are uncertain as to what has happened to Lenny's nanny. In the last scene of the film, the grown up Lenny says, "Fifty years have gone by since I betrayed my *ayah* [nanny]. Some say she married Ice-Candy-Man. Some say they saw her in a brothel in Lahore, others that they saw her in Amritsar" (Mehta 1998). These options exclude the possibility of Shanta's death. Mehta's deliberate act of allowing the film to end with uncertainty emphasises the damaging effects of war and genocide on individuals. Having watched the film the viewer has been bombarded with various forms of violence in varying degrees. As viewers, we are left to wonder which forms of violence have been inflicted on Shanta. Dil Navaz sits at the helm of the cart that carries Shanta away. He resembles the archetypal villain who kidnaps the woman he wants as he knows she will never love him. By ending the film unresolved Mehta also succeeds in leaving infinite possibilities open to Shanta.

Chapter Three

Water, Widows and Wives

In *Water* (2005), Deepa Mehta addresses issues pertaining to Hindu culture and religious literature to reveal the dynamics of power within Hindu society. Much like *Fire* (1996), *Water* also incited antagonistic behaviour from Indian protestors who reacted with violence towards *Water*'s script. At the heart of *Water* lies the figure of the female as daughter, wife, mother and widow. Over the course of this chapter, I will engage in a discussion of various female characters within the narrative. *Water* is fraught with contradictions, and the various double standards that Hindu culture advocates are made evident. During the course of this chapter, I will discuss these double standards and show how Mehta juxtaposes Hindu scriptures that dictate a certain way of life for women, with those that depict Hindu mythology. Mythology opens up spaces for interpretation that are inclusive of the female gender and voice.

Water's narrative revolves around a widowed child, Chuyia. Her arrival at the widow house on the banks of the Ganges River sets in motion a devastating chain of events that will eventually lead to her departure from the widow house. Forsaken by her family as a result of Hindu tradition, Chuyia enters the widow house and befriends Kalyani, a beautiful, young widow who aspires for a better life after meeting Narayan, the educated follower of Gandhi, who falls in love with her. Numerous widows occupy the space of the widow house and all respond in varying degrees to their respective situations. Some accept their fate and some desire a better, more fulfilling life, such as Chuyia, Kalyani and Shakuntala.

The screening of *Water* provoked violence within the Indian sub-continent. Bridget Kulla (2002, 51), in an article entitled "Why Gas 'Water' Evaporated? The Controversy Over Indian Filmmaker Deepa Mehta", questions "[w]hat is so threatening about" Mehta's "films to warrant such violence?" Before filming of *Water* could proceed, the film set was demolished by protestors (52). The first day of filming was met with 2000 protestors who maintained that "the script defamed Hinduism and India" and the set was then torn apart and burned (52). As a result of such violent behaviour, filming was stopped. Mehta was forced to relocate her film set to Sri Lanka (Mukherjee 2008, 43), and use a lake to represent the Ganges River. Mehta and her crew also received death threats (Chaudhuri 2009, 7). As in the case of *Fire*, Mehta has been held accountable, by protestors, of misrepresenting the lives of

Indian women through *Water*'s script, due to the fact that she belongs to the Indian diaspora. Mehta has been accused of "contamination" by external "influences" (8). This hostile behaviour towards *Water*'s script can be attributed to the fact that *Water* was intended for an international audience and not one that existed within the Indian sub-continent (11), as it was available in 57 countries across the world (8). *Water* focuses on bringing the reality of widows living in India into the international domain of debate and discussion. Protestors within India refuse to accept any criticism about Hindu culture, whether it be from within the continent or from the diaspora. The violent protests that occurred in reaction to *Water* are testament to the fact that the Indian sub-continent is closed to the idea of Hinduism as an evolving culture which is inclusive of equal rights for all human beings. The diaspora, with its hybrid qualities, is equipped with the challenge of extending human rights and dignity to all individuals, irrespective of gender. Mehta, through *Water*, gives voice to widows in India. This angered certain religious and political factions within India, as they felt that Mehta's work contradicted "their political agenda of India as an emergent global economic power" (Chaudhuri 2009, 19). Through *Water*, Mehta calls for the change of practices that are thousands of years old. *Water* therefore serves as an apt critique of Hindu culture and its treatment of women.

The narrative plot of the film occurs in colonial India in 1938. Colonialism, while not directly dealt with during the course of the narrative, provides a significant political backdrop through the presence of Gandhi and his philosophy, which becomes significant towards the latter part of the narrative. The characterisation of Rabindra, Narayan's educated friend, serves to highlight the British and colonial influence on the educated gentry in India. Colonialism and British rule in India predominantly functioned through indirect rule, without the colonisers imposing their will and power directly onto the colonised. While many of Gandhi's teachings have been criticised through scholarly debate, one cannot deny that he advocated a significant amount of equality, especially between castes in India and races in South Africa. Responses towards Gandhi's teachings fluctuate across geo-political terrain. Within the context of *Water*, the birth of Gandhian philosophy was considered radical and provided an alternative to British colonialism within India. Madhumati, the villainous widow within *Water*'s narrative, prefers colonial rule over Gandhian philosophy, as colonialism allows her to exercise her power over the other widows within the widow house. Madhumati draws a comparison between Gandhi's liberal ideas and colonial rule. She comments on how "disgusting" Gandhi's concept of a casteless society is. Madhumati says, "Before he [Gandhi]

came, everything ran like an English clock” (Mehta 2005). Colonialism, within *Water*’s narrative, emerges through a historical exploration. In 1772, Lord Hastings “designated Hindu texts as the source of Hindu law governing ‘personal’ matters such as marriage, divorce inheritance, and adoption” and this allowed and authorised “Brahmin pundits to interpret Hindu texts and impose an upper-caste Brahminic code on the lower castes, who were traditionally governed by customary practices” (Virdi 2003, 67-68).

In an article entitled “Snake Charmers and Child Brides: Deepa Mehta’s *Water*, ‘Exotic’ Representation, and the Cross-cultural Spectatorship of South Asian Migrant Cinema”, Shohinin Chaudhuri (2009) analyses whether or not *Water* can be accused of representing an ‘exotic’ image of India. Mehta has been accused of this through her representation of India and its “rural poverty” (9). The image of the *ghat* [stairs leading to a water source] evokes an impression of “timelessness” (13). Hindu culture in itself is ancient and the controversial beginnings of Hinduisms are still being debated. Maxwell, Diesel and Naidoo (1995, 177) note, “Hinduism is one of the oldest religions in the world, having been in existence for at least 4000 years (some would claim even longer).” The image of the *ghats* in India within the film can still be encountered today and will continue to manifest in future. Hinduism adheres to strict regulations, especially in accordance with death. This is evident in the creation and usage of numerous *ghats*, one of which is the Sivananda *Ghat* built along the banks of the Umgeni River, KwaZulu-Natal. The rituals that surround death are so strict that they manifest themselves within my own, first hand, diasporic experience, as well as in my personal familial and generational experiences. “Deepa Mehta’s Film *Water*: The Power of the Dialectical Image” written in 2008, by Tutun Mukherjee, provides a summation and analysis of *Water* through its female characters. According to Mukherjee *Water* interpellates a female audience through the use of a female voice. In commenting about the allegation of timelessness that the film embodies, Mukherjee (41) observes that this allegation is baseless, as the date is provided near the inception of the film.

Water addresses the issue of arranged marriage and child brides more explicitly than *Earth* (1998). Mehta makes use of children in both *Earth* and *Water*. By placing children as the recipients of harmful conduct within society, Mehta enunciates the need for rapid change to take place within Hindu culture and its treatment of women and children. When children, the most vulnerable constituent of society, become victims, society is poised at the precipice of disintegration and ruin. Mehta provides the widows of India with a voice, through *Water*, and

calls for a reanalysis of Hindu society and culture. She goes so far as to provide alternatives to a way of life that imposes on and prescribes to the female.

Water's focus is that of the widow in India. Widows are given three choices, and these are made evident within the film. They can commit *sati*, marry their brother-in-law or lead a life of poverty and suffering (Mehta 2005). A widow is required to give up all worldly pleasures and live a life of social and sexual restriction, confinement and poverty. Religious scriptures such as the Laws of Manu depict the widow as "a canker upon the face of the earth" (Gairola 2002, 311); "she is reduced to a void, a zero" (Mukherjee 2008, 36), a meaningless pile of white cloth. Widows are considered unfortunate, and society views this very misfortune as the reason behind the death of their respective husbands. Within the film as well as in the Indian sub-continent, widows are treated with disdain, despite the fact that Hinduism worships Godhead as both male and female. The Ganges River evokes mythology associated with Mother Ganga. It becomes ironic then, that women suffer on the banks of the very river that is worshipped as a female Goddess who resides at the centre of Hindu life and death. The worship of Mother Ganga stands in sharp contrast to the ways in which the figure of the widow is treated. Through an analysis of Hindu mythology, I will depict the centrality of Mother Ganga to the narrative, making visible the double standards that Hindu culture occupies.

The film's title serves to place the significance of water as an image at the centre of the narrative. Water, within Hinduism, is worshipped for its purity and cleansing potential. Mukherjee (2008, 43) refers to the river within the film as "a regenerative element". Water nurtures life, and it is from water that life first emerged. Water is a ubiquitous presence within the narrative. The film opens with a lake of lotus plants [see fig. 4.1]. The lotus is identifiable by lotus pads; however, we only see buds and not mature flowers. This abundance and fertility of the natural world stands in sharp contrast to the poverty of the widow house. Chuyia and her dying husband traverse the Ganges River in order for the cremation to take place. The widows live in poverty on the banks of the Ganges River, and Kalyani traverses the sacred river as she is forced into the debauched world of prostitution in order to bring an income into the widow house. It is on the banks of the Ganges River that she meets and falls in love with Narayan. Narayan makes a futile attempt to meet Kalyani, and coincidentally, water from Kalyani's washing accidentally lands on Narayan. A strong bond of friendship is formed between Kalyani and Chuyia as a result of a storm when they

play hop-scotch and hand games while it rains, in a jubilant scene [see fig. 4.2]. Kalyani utilises the Ganges River to end her life. Happiness and death occur within the vicinity of the river. This mirrors the manner in which life and death, two opposing forces, exist in unity along the banks of the sacred Ganges River. Burning funeral pyres can be seen in many instances throughout the film. As weddings occur on the *ghat*, simultaneously, funeral pyres burn.

The Ganges River is of central importance to death within Hinduism. After the immolation of the deceased has occurred on the *ghat*, the ashes are then collected and immersed into the river. The union with the elements signifies purity and a return to the natural world. The body is discarded through the means of fire, water and earth, as natural elements¹. The immolation of the body on the banks of the Ganges River and the immersing of the ashes into this sacred river are said to bring about ultimate liberation of the soul so that, eventually, union with Godhead can be achieved. Reincarnation is vital to Hindu culture. The soul is therefore immortal; it is never born and it can never die. Western culture approaches death with trepidation and anxiety. However, Hinduism observes death as a necessary stage in the cycles of birth, death and rebirth. Water is used to traverse the realms between the dead and the living. Water is offered in the memory of one's ancestors, who in turn, bless the family members with prosperity. The intended setting for *Water* was Varanasi. As a result of the violence against the set and the director, the setting had to be relocated. The city of Varanasi as an intended setting is significant. The Ganges River flows through this city and it is known for having innumerable *ghats*. Hindu legend speaks of Varanasi as the birthplace of Goddess Agni, the Goddess of fire. It is befitting then, that both fire and water are central elements within death.

The importance of this river to Hindu life can be witnessed during the festival of Kumba Mela which takes place once every twelve years. January, 2001, saw 25 million devotees attend the Kumba Mela festival on the banks of the Ganges River (Swami 2005). The name Kumba Mela emerges from Hindu mythology. Myth tells of an epic battle that was fought between demigods and demons for the nectar of immortality. The demons stole the nectar from the demigod. Lord Vishnu² took the form of the Goddess Mohini Murti – the

¹ These elements reflect the titles of Deepa Mehta's Elemental Trilogy and are also reverberated in the name of the elemental Goddesses.

² Lord Vishnu is one-third of the Hindu holy trinity, together with Lord Brahma and Lord Shiva.

embodiment of sensual beauty (Swami 2005). The Goddess tricked the demons into giving her the nectar, which resulted in a war. Drops of the nectar of immortality spilled and landed in the Triveni – the convergence site of three rivers, one of which is the Ganges River, worshipped as Mother Ganga. The Kumba Mela festival occurs at this exact location (Swami 2005).

Through the narrative of *Water* we witness the death of Patiraji, a frail but kind widow. Water from the sacred river acts to cleanse the soul before it leaves the body of the dying, according to belief. Ganga water and its importance to the dying are reflected through Patiraji and her need for water from the Ganges River. She knows that she is about to die and wants to be outside instead of within the confines of the rooms that the widows share. Shakuntala sends Chuyia to the river to collect water for the dying Patiraji. Water also has the capacity to remove sickness and can induce well-being once again.

Socio-political forces as a result of colonialism, post-colonialism, globalisation, modernity and capitalism have all failed to disrupt the centrality of death to Indian diasporic culture. Within my own Indian diasporic experience, the body of the deceased is immolated in a furnace. The ashes are then collected by the family and immersed into the sea or a water source³. The Divine Life Society as an organisation in South Africa has been involved in the creation of a *ghat* in Clare Estate, Durban, called the Sivananda *Ghat*, into which ashes of the deceased may be immersed [see fig. 4.3]. Water is brought from the sacred Ganges River in India and added to water fountains within the *ghat*, which connect to rivers or estuaries. It is believed by Hindus that one drop of *Gangagal* (Ganga water) has the capacity to purify a large, contained body of water.

The plot of *Water* unfolds within the vicinity of the Ganges River. This adds a cultural and spiritual dimension to the film. Hindu mythology that is inclusive of the Ganges River serves to place the female Goddess and the female figure at the core of the narrative, which stands in sharp contrast to the ways in which women are treated within the confines of Hindu culture. In the *Vedas*⁴, Lord Vishnu is referred to as a supreme being who comes down to earth in many different vessels (known as avatars) to restore balance to humanity and the universe.

³ The understanding is that all rivers (including the Ganges River) flow into the sea. The ashes, through the means of water, will eventually mingle with the waters of the Ganges River due to the homogenous characteristics of the ocean.

⁴ The sacred texts of Hindu faith.

He is thus worshipped as the sustainer of the universe. Lord Vishnu and his various avatars are evoked within the narrative of *Water* and in the mythology that relates to Mother Ganga. Narayan is an alternate name for Lord Vishnu and it is also the name of our male protagonist who falls in love with Kalyani, within *Water*. Narayan's fate within *Water* functions as a modified allegory to the spiritual entity of Lord Vishnu. Narayan embodies the characteristics of Lord Vishnu. He is kind and benevolent towards both men and women. He is especially sympathetic towards the plight of the widows of India; however, Narayan is unable to save Kalyani from her social and moral ruin and her eventual death. As a result of this he is forced to leave with Gandhi and his followers. Narayan knows that he has the power to change certain customary laws that apply to widows, while utilising the political power of Gandhian principals.

Dasa A.C. Bhaktivaibhava Swami (2005) produced a documentary entitled *Mother Ganga: A Journey Along the Sacred Ganges River*, which traces the 1600 mile course of this river, from its source till it flows into the Bay of Bengal. This insightful film documents the religious and spiritual significance of this river to its people. Mother Ganga is worshipped, on a daily basis, by her devotees as the remover of all sin (Swami 2005) [see fig. 4.4]. Lord Vishnu and his avatars are evoked through Hindu mythology that surrounds the Ganges River. Lord Vishnu is central to the mythology of Mother Ganga. The holy scriptures describe her as follows:

Sri Ganga-Devi has a complexion as white as the champak flower. White garments and jewelled ornaments adorn her body and millions of moons shower their effulgence upon her smiling face. She is ever-youthful, ever-fortunate; beloved of Lord Vishnu, [she] can remove everyone's sins. (Swami 2005) [see fig. 4.5]

Goddess Ganga is referred to as the consort of Lord Vishnu. As the Goddess reincarnates herself into various forms (more so than the Gods) she finds companionship with Lord Brahma, Lord Vishnu or Lord Shiva. Even the origin of Mother Ganga is connected to Lord Vishnu. The ancient Vedic scriptures note an interesting story of good triumphing over evil in the mythological origins of Mother Ganga:

The great journey of Ganga to earth began when the dwarf Brahmin boy named Vamana⁵ [see fig. 4.6] interrupted a sacrifice by King Bali, the ruler of the universe. Bali agreed to give this captivating boy the charity he begged for – only three pieces

⁵ Lord Vishnu's fifth avatar.

of land by measurement of his own small steps. What could the harm be? Suddenly, the Brahmin boy grew to immense proportions. With his first step, he traversed the earth and the lower planets. With his second step he covered the heavens until the toenails of his foot pierced a hole in the covering of the universe. Through that hole rushed the pure water of the causal ocean, thus Ganga was born[.] [Ganga] pierces through the layers of covering; millions of miles of ethereal space, air, fire, water and earth. Ganga emerges in the higher planets of the universe, home of the celestial demigods. Her sacred waters, called the Milky Way [see fig. 4.7], arch across the heavens. Ganga passes [...] the pole star and the constellation of the seven sages [...] [F]rom the divine water of the spiritual realm, Ganga entered the universe and washed the lotus feet of the supreme Lord Vishnu before descending to earth. Thus her inexplicably pure water. (Swami 2005)

It is interesting to note that out of Lord Vishnu's efforts to save the world from the tyrannical King Bali, Goddess Ganga was born. The above extract proposes a reason as to the mystical powers of the Ganges River. Not only is her water pure, but it also came into contact with the feet of the supreme Lord Vishnu. Lord Vishnu resides as the supreme Godhead, and thus the ultimate goal of the soul is union with this Godhead. The film displays the pertinent awe and reverence for Mother Ganga to her people.

Lord Krishna is the eighth avatar of Lord Vishnu, and his presence is also notable within Mehta's *Water*. Vrindhavan, the birth place of Lord Krishna, is just one of the places that the sacred Ganges River passes through. The mythology that is connected to this sacred river evokes the mythology that Mehta employs within *Water*. Four and a half thousand years ago, the grandson of Lord Krishna commissioned the carving of Lord Krishna and his consort, Radha, which were installed in a temple in Vrindhavan (Swami 2005). In Mehta's *Water*, Chuyia arrives at the widow house and we get a glimpse of a statue of Lord Krishna. Kalyani and Narayan's relationship adds yet another mythological dimension to the narrative. Krishna is the eighth avatar of Lord Vishnu and Narayan comes to represent Lord Krishna for Kalyani. Kalyani is an avid worshipper of Lord Krishna. She keeps an iconic statue of Lord Krishna in her living space [see fig. 4.8]. Kalyani asks Chuyia her name and Chuyia asks if Lord Krishna can hear their conversation. Kalyani says that he hears everything; she prays to him and Chuyia asks Kalyani what Lord Krishna said. Kalyani says, "He says you won't be here long" (Mehta 2005). This is a prophetic statement as Chuyia is destined for a better life than that which her culture prescribes for her. Chuyia agrees with what Kalyani says and innocently exclaims, "I told you so!" (Mehta 2005). Chuyia first encounters Narayan when he stops Kaalu, Kalyani's puppy, from running away. Narayan's attire immediately attracts the

attention of the viewer. He wears the traditional Brahmin attire (*dhoti*) and a carries a Western suit jacket. He also carries a suitcase and an umbrella [see fig. 4.9]. Narayan is able to negotiate both the Western and Hindu traditional worlds. After Kalyani meets Narayan for the first time, she asks Gulabi as she escorts her to meet a client: “Gulabi, does Krishna take on human form?” Gulabi responds, “Of course he does!” (Mehta 2005). Kalyani feels an attraction towards Narayan, and she believes that she has met her Krishna – her destined life partner. Narayan writes Kalyani a letter to meet her at the *Shiv* temple on the banks of the Ganges River. As Kalyani leaves to meet Narayan, she prays at a shrine outside the widow house. She approaches Narayan as he plays his flute. This a “reminder of the Krishna-Radha rendezvous” (Mukherjee 2008, 44). The flute is an iconic image of Lord Krishna, who plays his flute for his beloved, Radha. When we first encounter Narayan with his flute, we see his outline as the sun sets. This image evokes the mythological image of Lord Krishna, as they resemble each other in stance and manner [see fig. 4.10]. Narayan tells Kalyani a love story of the separation between two lovers. The story revolves around a message to a raincloud which resembles Lord Vishnu in his guise as Krishna. This mimics the mythology that runs through *Water* and the characterisation of Narayan. Kalyani also prays to Lord Krishna while she is locked in her room by the evil Madhumati, who forbids Kalyani to remarry.

In their first meeting with each other, Narayan and Kalyani discuss changing traditions within Hindu culture. Narayan believes that marriage should occur out of choice and not as a ‘duty’, and he remarks that all the old traditions are dying. Kalyani says, “But what is good should not die out” (Mehta 2005). Despite the fact that it is tradition that is responsible for a life of suffering for Kalyani, she believes that not all traditions are bad and that not all should be done away with. Narayan asks Kalyani who should decide what is good and what should no longer be practised, and Kalyani believes that job should be done by Narayan. Narayan represents a new order and a new way of thinking. Narayan, through his education, is able to negotiate both Hindu culture and Hindu law. He is respectful of his traditions while at the same time he is critical of those that oppress and deny human beings (especially women) basic human rights. Kalyani, after meeting Narayan for the second time, refuses to abide by Madhumati’s instructions when Gulabi takes her to the mansion. Kalyani asks Gulabi to take her back to the widow house as she ascends the staircase, to meet a client. Gulabi forces her up the staircase saying that if she wants to go back she should tell the client. Gulabi knows that once Kalyani is with a client she will have no choice as she will be in his clutches and at his mercy. This exchange highlights not prostitution, but rape.

Narayan takes Kalyani, in a horse-drawn carriage, to the outer edges of the city where the colonial powers reside. Narayan remarks that it is acceptable for Kalyani to look out of the window as widows are not ostracised within colonial society. Kalyani, matching Narayan's intelligence when he quoted the love poem in their first meeting with each other, quotes a verse from the *Bhagavad Gita*. Kalyani says, "Learn to live like a lotus; untouched by the filthy water it grows in" (Mehta 2005). This evokes the first scene within *Water*, of the lotus flowers thriving in the murky waters of a lake. Kalyani believes that human beings can live like the Gods (Krishna) and embody purity, nobility and honour. Despite the fact that Kalyani is utilised for avaricious purposes by Madhumati, she is still able to embody goodness.

Kalyani associates herself with the lotus flower and thus Goddess Lakshmi, whose abode is the lotus flower [see fig. 4.11]. She is the Goddess of wealth, abundance and prosperity, and the divine consort of Lord Vishnu. Kalyani and Narayan come to embody both Lord Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi, and Krishna and his consort Radha. Kalyani is sympathetic to the needs of the other widows. She is benevolent and compassionate through all her actions, especially when she offers a few cents for the cremation of Patiraji. She was saving this money for her own cremation, but graciously gives it up to Shakuntala for the cremation. Madhumati cruelly remarks at Kalyani's gesture, "What a Goddess!" (Mehta 2005).

Through her multi-layered narrative, Mehta juxtaposes mythological literature with texts that prescribe a certain way of life for a select few, while oppressing the majority. These two sets of Hindu literature diverge from each other in their treatment of women and power dynamics within the male/female relationship. Hindu mythological literature, such as the Vedas, is far more inclusive of all classes and even religions. There is no emphasis placed on caste within the mythologicals. God, even in his human form, is kind and benevolent to those who are ostracised by society. Hindu mythological literature opens up spaces for women to be heard. The relationship between husband and wife is also given prominence within Hindu mythological literature, and women are not subservient to their husbands but are rather equal in all regards. The Goddess takes many forms – mother, daughter, wife and warrior – saviour of all three worlds – *Trailokya*.

Water opens with an extract from the Laws of Manu. By the scope of these three lines it becomes evident that they prescribe a way of living for widows. They are directly responsible for the life that widows are subjected to. The extract reads:

A widow should be long suffering until death, self-restrained and chaste. A virtuous wife who remains chaste when her husband has died goes to heaven. A woman who is unfaithful to her husband is reborn in the womb of a jackal.

Chapter 5 verse 156-161 pg. 115-116. *Dharamshastra* (sacred Hindu texts)

Mehta references the extract that she has chosen to use. This serves to emphasise the reality of the situation that is faced by widows in India. Despite the fact that Mehta's narrative is a fictional one, the suffering of the widows in India is by no means a fictional representation. This extract also forces the viewer, especially the diasporic spectator, to question its relevance with regard to an alternate, modern way of living. By referencing the above extract, Mehta succeeds in giving the film the qualities of a documentary.

The Laws of Manu and related scriptures act to transcend Hindu life and death. These scriptures serve to govern conduct and can thus be placed within the realm of the unreasonable. After death, the soul embarks on a journey, after which reincarnation occurs or the soul reaches ultimate liberation (*moksha*) with the supreme Godhead. Past actions determine the trajectory of the soul. The specificity of the Laws of Manu is unreasonable when it states that the soul of the 'unfaithful' widow will enter into the womb of a jackal. Within Hindu culture, it is believed that priests are able to enter into a trance-like state and tell an individual where their soul resided in their past life/lives. However, they are unable to determine where the soul is destined to reside in the next life. Scriptures like the Laws of Manu act to incite fear into individuals. The text comes across more as a threat, and it is evident that it is not based on fact. Texts such as these function to prescribe a way of living together with complementary punishment. This begs the question: what threat do widows pose to society that they have been shunned by and segregated from the rest of society?

Wendy Doniger (1991), in an article entitled, "Why Should a Priest Tell You Whom to Marry? A Deconstruction of the Laws of Manu", explores to what degree marriage and sexuality are authorised by religious law in India. Through an exploration of the Laws of Manu, Doniger (20) observes how it prescribes a way of life for women and other marginalised individuals (such as lepers), but it does not substantiate reasons for these

practices. In a similar manner, the Laws of Manu confine widows to a poor quality of life without providing reasons. The Laws of Manu display a great deal of misogyny which serves to appoint privileges to men of a higher caste, as in the case of *Water*. The Laws of Manu come under suspicion as they are written by a male who prescribes a way of life for a female (widow) and not a widower. The implementation of these laws within *Water* shows how damaging they can be for both women and female children. Women are forced to live in conditions that barely sustain life. Survival becomes dependent on prostitution, which stands in contrast to widows living a chaste life which the laws deem necessary. Mukherjee (2008, 36) observes, “The fear of female sexuality” and the essential need “to control it” have featured “in all patriarchal societies”, and this need has embodied various forms, in various societies “at different times.”

Hinduism does not view sexual desire as tabooed and heretical. Ancient erotic temple art places sexual desire as a main component in Hindu life. It is classified as important and necessary to human life. However, taking into consideration texts such as the Laws of Manu, this seems to apply only to men and not to women. Doniger (1991, 23) argues that sexual behaviour is central to Hindu life for purposes of lineage and continuity of human life. She deduces that those who control the realm of the sexual control “everything else that stems from it – politics [and] power” (23). It becomes necessary then, that men control women to nurture a patrilineal society. The Laws of Manu were compiled by various authors, but as a body of work, it is attributed to an individual named Manu who could be a mythical figure (19). The Laws of Manu contain “the social obligations and religious duties of various castes and of the individual in different stages of life” (18).

Manu discusses “the proper relations of different groups in society” (Figueira 1999, 8). This is a definition of the caste system and its implementation. The regulations by which society is divided are made evident within Mehta’s narrative. When Kalyani accidentally runs into a woman at the river, she says to Kalyani, “What are you doing? Widows shouldn’t be running around like unmarried girls! You’ve polluted me! I have to bathe again” (Mehta 2005). Under the caste system, widows are characterised and demarcated as inauspicious and as bad omens. If an individual of a higher status (in this case a married woman) or caste touches a widow then the inauspiciousness of the widow is transferred to that individual. This system is based on extreme prejudice and intolerance and on a belief in a specific type of spiritual influence of such women.

Shakuntala is also victim to the viciousness that society displays towards the figure of the widow. While she fetches water from the river, a wedding ceremony is occurring nearby. The priest present says to Shakuntala, “Watch it! Don’t let your shadow touch the bride!” (Mehta 2005). Even the widow’s shadow is considered as polluted and degenerate. This serves to emphasise how deeply ideas of class and caste are entrenched in Hindu culture.

The Laws of Manu thus describe a way of living. Doniger (1991, 19) points out that the Laws of Manu strive to control women who are conceived as the temptresses. The unreasonable nature of such laws becomes the reality of widows in India. Doniger (30) comments, “In the realm of the ideal, the Laws of Manu is the cornerstone of the priestly vision of what human life should be”. The above comment serves to highlight the unrealistic nature of the Laws of Manu. The Laws of Manu assumes that caste is the single most determining factor which dictates how people should be treated.

Dorothy Figueira, writing in 1999, in an article entitled “Aryan Aristocrats and *Übermensch*: Nietzsche’s Reading of the Laws of Manu”, emphasises the relationship between the Laws of Manu and Nietzsche’s philosophy pertaining to ideas of class, caste and the creation of the *Übermensch* – the ultimate goal of mankind. Through Figueira’s analysis, it becomes evident that Nietzsche makes references to The Laws of Manu within his work (5). Nietzsche utilised the caste system in India and the models of medieval Europe and ancient Rome to discuss the organisation of society (10). According to Nietzsche’s philosophy, the creation of strata in society would allow for the *Übermensch* to emerge. Nietzsche explored the master-slave relationship and urged a “distance between classes” (10). In *The Will to Power* (1968), Nietzsche places the *Chandala* (71) as the antithesis to the Brahmin, which was the highest caste within Hinduism and thus “the highest type of man” (139). The Brahmin caste is predominantly made up of priests who are allowed access to education and the Holy Scriptures. The Brahmin embodied supremacy, direction and potency (Figueira 1999, 14), whereas the *Chandala* took the form of the “untouchable”, the one whose shadow should not even fall upon another of a higher caste as that individual could lose their caste. The Brahmin caste is placed at the very top of the strata which gives rise to caste and by implication, class structure. Nietzsche imbued and equated the qualities of the Brahmin with the Aryan race (16). Nietzsche’s philosophy influenced ideas about eugenics. Imbuing one sect of society

with more power than the rest of society can have devastating consequences on different castes and groups of people.

Scriptures act to both liberate and confine. Some of the scriptures that confine their believers act within the sphere of hegemonic patriarchy and often stand in contrast to the Hindu mythological literature. The Laws of Manu circumscribe a way of life for women which leads to their suffering. By placing Hindu mythological literature at the centre of Hindu culture, a way out of rigid confinement is possible. The gap between the treatment of women and men within Hindu culture needs to be addressed. This can only occur through an analysis of Hindu scriptures to reach a neutral territory where males and females can be treated equally. Hindu mythological literature is far more prominent within the diaspora than those scriptures that prescribe a stringent way of life for women. The Indian widow, within my own diasporic experience, is still given significance as mother, and she is a vital part of community and society. She is not ostracised and confined to widow houses, which do not exist within my own diasporic experience. In light of this, the significance of the widow proliferates within the diaspora. She occupies a large degree of power and agency within the diaspora, so much so that widows take the opportunity to marry (not to their brothers-in-law) after the death of their husbands. This is not the case within the film.

Gulabi, the “pimp”, is of the opinion that Gandhi “is going to sink India” as “he says that the Untouchables are children of God” (Mehta 2005). The teachings of Gandhi stand in contrast to the Laws of Manu. While the Laws of Manu prescribe a way of living for women in India, Gandhi’s teachings serve to discard the ideas of caste and class, introducing equality and uniformity within social and sexual structures. Gandhi’s teachings and life have come under scrutiny, and while not all of Gandhi’s philosophy can be viewed as liberal and inclusive of both genders, Gandhi’s way of life, as highlighted by Gulabi, offer an alternate way of living and being, especially for the marginalised. Gulabi says, “What a disaster. If one widow wants to marry, all the widows of India will want to marry. A catastrophe!” (Mehta 2005). Gulabi can see how a catastrophe would occur if all the widows got married, as she would have no clients. Gulabi opposes progress as she depends financially on the prostitution of the widows. Various levels of profit are built into the caste system. Despite the fact that both Madhumati and Kalyani are of the same caste, Madhumati financially benefits from the sex-trade, whereas Kalyani does not.

Through the characterisation of Chuyia, Mehta addresses the issue of child brides and child widows. Child brides are created through the process of marrying off young girls to much older men. Many of these older men have lost their wives. Child brides are often allowed to continue to live with their parents while they and their families are financially supported by their husbands. Mehta's use of a child highlights the injustices that the Laws of Manu prescribe. Where women suffer as a result of gender, the girl child suffers to a greater degree. Chuyia's innocence, naivety and tender age are constantly emphasised throughout the narrative. Worn at the beginning of the film, her tiny anklets around her delicate ankles serve to pronounce her tender age. She eats sugar cane at the back of the cart that pulls her dying husband along the path. She tickles the underside of the dying man's feet and laughs. Chuyia is clearly too young to understand what is occurring. The older woman in the cart reprimands her for behaving in this manner. Chuyia has no conceptualisation of what her culture demands of her. She does not even remember getting married. When her father tells her that she is a widow, she asks for how long (Mehta 2005). Her inability to understand and accept her situation further illustrates her tragedy. The following interchange takes place between Chuyia and her father when he is about to leave her at the widow house:

Chuyia: Let's go home, Father.

Father: This is your home now

Chuyia: Then where is ma? Where is ma? (Mehta 2005)

Chuyia's reasoning revolves around the notion that home is where the mother resides. Through the creation of child widows, the mother-daughter relationship is placed in a position of distress. This is seen in *Fire*, and amplified within the next chapter of this dissertation. Chuyia is adamant that her mother will come to fetch her and take her home. She is under the impression that her current position as a widow is temporary. This serves to further highlight her tragic situation. Chuyia places all her hope on her mother, but ends up creating new mother-daughter bonds within the widow house.

Chuyia pleads with her father not to leave her at the widow house. She is carried away by the widows to her new 'home'. Chuyia is feisty by nature, and more so when she enters the widow house. She rebels against all forms of authority including the large, overbearing Madhumati. Her rebellion brings humour to many of the widows within the house, whose life is etched in misery and anguish. Chuyia creates a spectacle when she bites Madhumati and

runs away. Chuyia breathes new life into the widow house and her arrival sets the stage for change within its socio-economic structure. Chuyia, while not fully aware of what her culture demands of her, is able to reason better than widows who are much older than she is. Chuyia represents a nuanced way of reasoning which can be projected into the future. Upon Chuyia's arrival in the widow house, Madhumati explains to her that the holy Hindu books say that a wife is part of her husband while he is alive, and when he dies, the wife also half dies (Mehta 2005). Madhumati asks Chuyia, "How can a half-dead woman feel pain?" Chuyia replies, "Because she is half alive!" (Mehta 2005). The widows are shocked to hear this reply and Madhumati is infuriated. When Chuyia enters the widow house she is representative of a new way of thinking, despite her tender age. Throughout the narrative of *Water* we are constantly reminded that Chuyia is only a child. When Kalyani tells Chuyia to chant "Jai Shree Krishna" 108 times a day, Chuyia says that she can only count to ten (Mehta 2005). As viewers, our sympathy lies with Chuyia and her circumstances. Chuyia is appalled at the life of a widow. She despises begging outside the temples and she expresses her anger openly. She lets the other widows know that she hates them and the life that she is forced to lead. She takes the little money she has from begging and fulfils the dying wish and only desire of Patiraji. Chuyia, after being treated as a nuisance by the sweet-seller, purchases a *ladoo* (Indian sweet) which acts to liberate Patiraji from a life of suffering as she dies soon after eating it. Chuyia's name translates to "mouse", and this is made evident within the film. Lord Ganesh, the elephant-headed God and the remover of all obstacles, has a mouse as his vehicle, and is no coincidence that Chuyia gives Patiraji a *ladoo*, a favourite of Lord Ganesh's, which he holds in his hand [see fig. 4.12]. Chuyia removes Patiraji's desire for a *ladoo* and she is thus able to die and be released of her suffering induced by a widowed life.

Mehta succeeds in depicting, for the viewer, the reasons behind the miserable lives of women in India. Despite the fact that the Laws of Manu act to enforce hegemonic patriarchy, Indian women are also responsible for operating the machinery of patriarchy. Women play a significant role in allowing themselves to be subjected to a life of misery and deprivation. In a particular scene, Shakuntala and Chuyia attend a sermon with other widows. Chuyia, seated amidst the other widows, asks, "Where is the house for men widows?" (Mehta 2005). The widows are horrified by this remark and they all say in unison, "Good God!" One widow says, "What a horrible thing to say. God protect our men from such fate. May your tongue burn. Pull out her tongue and throw it in the river" (Mehta 2005). True hegemony has the support of its victims. Chuyia is scared by the reaction of the women and she moves closer to

Shakuntala for protection from the women who have condemned her for her question. Chuyia asks a logical question – why are widows subjected to a life of denial and suffering while widowers are not? The priest continues to read his sermon, having witnessed Chuyia's question and the resultant outcry. The priest does not react in a negative manner towards Chuyia. He simply continues to read a sermon both for the women's and his own spiritual benefit. By showing no reaction he encourages the women to do the same. Despite the fact that the majority of the widows collude in their own suffering, we are still called to sympathise with them. At one point in the narrative, Kunti, one of Madhumati's henchman, says, "I don't even remember being seven" (Mehta 2005). When Kunti utters these words we are able to apply Chuyia's tragic situation to the rest of the widows' lives. Narayan's mother, being a married woman, is also responsible for the appalling situation that widows are subjected to. She is horrified to discover that Narayan has chosen to marry a widow. She says, "Gandhi has turned you into a lunatic! Marry a widow? How can you ever think of it? This is a sin!" (Mehta 2005).

Madhumati wields immense power within the widow house because she controls the finances. Madhumati is the only individual that benefits from prostituting Kalyani. In a particular scene, when Madhumati gives Kalyani a new cloth to wear, she says, "You must take care of yourself. You are the jewel of this house. If you are happy, our clients are happy, and when they are happy, I am happy" (Mehta 2005). Kalyani stands up for herself and she says, "This is an ashram *didi* [sister], not a brothel" (Mehta 2005). Kalyani states the obvious but this proclamation is not so obvious to Madhumati. She lives a life of excess while the other widows suffer. Her physical stature is large, which stands in contrast to the other starving widows. Chuyia makes a point to call Madhumati "fatty" on numerous occasions. She is allowed access to rich, luxurious foods, while the other widows starve. Kunti greedily eats food from Madhumati's plate before giving it to her. When Madhumati calls for her food to be served to her, Kunti hastily consumes as much of the food as she can. Madhumati eats rice accompanied with other foods, while the other widows all eat measly helpings of rice. Madhumati, while receiving her food, asks if butter was added to her food. This highlights the opulence that Madhumati is allowed access to. Madhumati, in a particular scene, remarks to Gulabi, "I've been farting nonstop since this morning. I ate too much last night" (Mehta 2005). Gulabi eats a sweet and she offers some to Chuyia, who massages Madhumati's back. Madhumati says, "Are you mad? Giving a widow forbidden food!" (Mehta 2005).

Madhumati relishes consuming forbidden food, but clearly denies the other starving widows (including Chuyia) this privilege.

The other widows do not eat with Kalyani as they believe that she is polluted. The double standard is that Kalyani is the very woman that sustains the widow house, yet they will not eat with her. It is Chuyia who shares her food with Kalyani. When Chuyia first sees Kalyani, she is under the impression that Kalyani is an angel. Kalyani calls Chuyia from her loft-like abode. Chuyia ascends the steps and feels as if she is moving towards a metaphorical heaven, where an angel resides. Kalyani is kind and gentle, and a bond of friendship is quickly established between Chuyia and Kalyani. Kalyani allows Chuyia to play with Kaalu, a puppy that she found and intends to keep. Kalyani tells Chuyia that she cannot take the dog downstairs as dogs are considered to be a bad omen. Widows are not to engage in any activities that result in pleasure, such as keeping a pet; however, Madhumati is allowed to keep her parrot, Mittu, as a pet.

When Chuyia arrives at the widow house, Madhumati asks another widow if she had fed her parrot, Mittu. One of the widows points out that there are no lentils. The poverty that the widow house is steeped in is made evident early on in the film. Madhumati is a very ill-mannered woman. She treats the other widows with disrespect. She often calls various widows a “whore” (Mehta 2005), the irony being that they are meant to live a chaste life. She also shows disrespect to her deceased husband. When Gulabi brings news of Gandhi’s liberal teachings, Madhumati’s only interest lies in knowing if Mohandas is a new client. Madhumati utilises Chuyia as a masseuse, and in one episode she says to Chuyia, “Gently! My skin is like satin. If a mosquito sits on me it creates a crater” (Mehta 2005). This hilarious remark serves to depict how Madhumati views herself. She is a strong woman who wields physical and social power within the widow house. Her physique stands in contrast to who she thinks she is and how she represents herself to avoid criticism. A mosquito is incapable of leaving a crater on any object, let alone Madhumati. Madhumati’s social and physical power within the widow house allows her to commit inhumane deeds while beautifying herself. She takes no accountability for her actions, and the power that she wields allows her to force both Kalyani and Chuyia into prostitution. She refers to the widow house as a “refuge”, but this is not the case for many of the widows, especially Kalyani and Chuyia; however, individuals like Shakuntala are allowed to live a chaste life, untainted by prostitution. Seeking refuge would imply safety and security. The living conditions in the widow house barely support

life. Madhumati has her own room while many of the other widows are forced to sleep next to each other, creating crowded spaces which are unhygienic. The incessant coughing of the widows while they sleep serves to emphasise the unhygienic conditions that the widows are forced to live under. Madhumati's life is controlled by money. While Patiraji is dying, Madhumati takes offence that the other widows stay with the dying widow and Shakuntala holds her hand. Madhumati says, "Aunty is so lucky. Brahmin widows keeping vigil, and that too for free" (Mehta 2005). Her wicked behaviour is reflected through these words as she knows that none of the widows will sit in vigil for her, as she is cruel and greedy. After Patiraji's death, one of the widows enquires about money for the cremation. Madhumati says, "Every penny that we have goes for rent" (Mehta 2005), but we know that she purchases lavish food with the money that she makes from prostituting Kalyani. She demands that Patiraji's belongings be rummaged through in case she was in possession of money. Madhumati, disrespectfully, rummages through Patiraji's menial belongings with her foot [see fig. 4.13]. The other widows greedily grab items that belonged to Patiraji.

Madhumati is furious when she learns from Chuyia that Kalyani is to be married. She protests, "Shameless! You'll sink yourself and us. We'll be cursed. We must live in purity, to die in purity" (Mehta 2005). Madhumati embodies the greatest double standards, as she will not allow Kalyani to enter into a marriage but forces her to have sexual relations with the clients. In an extended class system, a client of high caste can "use" men and women of lower castes to fulfil his needs. Madhumati believes that Kalyani's actions to get married again will result in all the widows being cursed. Her words are ironic as she does not allow Kalyani to live a pure life, and finds nothing impure in forcing Kalyani into prostitution. Madhumati locks Kalyani in her room and believes that she has saved all the other widows from ruin and moral disintegration.

Gulabi is a *hijra*. Like the widows, the *hijras* are shunned and ostracised by Indian society within the Indian sub-continent, but to a lesser extent than widows. The *hijra* sect worships Goddess Bahuchara, whose legends are steeped in stories of gender alterations and transformations. In order to fully embrace Goddess Bahuchara, males undergo a ritual which involves the "total removal of the penis, testes, and scrotum" (Chitnis 2010, 50). The successful transformation begets them a "revered" status in society in which they are valued for their "magical powers of bestowing blessings and curses" (50). Gulabi, having previously been male and then shifting to embrace femininity, traverses both land and water as she is

responsible for ferrying Kalyani across the river into the sordid world of prostitution. Gulabi once moved between sexual spaces and she now moves between social and physical spaces. When we first see Gulabi, she is only a shadow in the alley-way [see fig. 4.14]. Gulabi's name is significant within the narrative. "Gulabi", translated from Hindi to English, refers to a rose. This is a feminine image and serves to highlight the feminine qualities that Gulabi embodies. This name is also used as an affectionate pet name. As Gulabi is an adult, referring to her by a pet name allocates her within a subordinate position in society. This is due to her ambiguous gender and social position within society. Gulabi is a central figure as she is the carrier of news and events from the outside world into the confines of the widow house, and especially to Madhumati. Gulabi involves herself in drama. She tells Kalyani that she plays Krishna's "adoring milkmaid" (Mehta 2005) when the enactment of Krishna's life story takes place.

Shakuntala stands apart from the other widows. She is literate and she does not fear the likes of Madhumati. She comes to represent a mother figure for Chuyia. Chuyia encounters Shakuntala at the widow house when she runs into her room, attempting to escape Madhumati's henchman. Shakuntala grinds turmeric and asks Chuyia to sit down near her. Chuyia does so and Shakuntala applies cool, turmeric paste to her recently shaved head. Chuyia says, "You saved me like the Goddess Durga" (Mehta 2005). Goddess Durga is the prime and ultimate manifestation of the Goddess and mother figure. She is worshipped as the destroyer of demons and as infinite power in the form of *Shakti*. Thomas B. Coburn (1991) is the author of a book entitled *Encountering the Goddess: A Translation of the Devi Mahatmya and a Study of its Interpretation*. This book provides a translation of an ancient Hindu text, the *Durga Saptasati* (the specific greatness of the goddess), discovered fifteen hundred years ago, which venerates the Goddess and tells of her slaying the demon Mahishasura (1991, 1). Turmeric is representative of Goddess Durga and it is offered to the Goddess in instances of worship. Shakuntala saves Chuyia from Madhumati's henchman and she ensures Chuyia's well-being throughout the narrative. Shakuntala removes Chuyia from the crowded sleeping space she is supposed to share with the other sickly widows. Shakuntala has been engaged in many years of service for Sadananda, the kind Brahmin priest. She prepares and cleanses his place of seating on a daily basis. In a particular scene, Sadananda says, "Shakuntala, you've been doing this service for many years. So many years of sacrifice and devotion, do you feel any closer to self-liberation?" (Mehta 2005). Shakuntala does not answer the priest's question immediately. She proceeds to prepare his seating place by placing his bag on the

prepared mat. After some time she says, “If self-liberation means [...] detachment from worldly desires, then no, I am no closer” (Mehta 2005). Sadananda looks upon Shakuntala with pity and says, “Whatever happens, never lose your faith. Never lose your faith!” Shakuntala’s reply to the priest highlights how the way of life that is prescribed to the widow does not work to the widow’s benefit. Shakuntala, despite living a chaste and devout life, is no closer to self-liberation. Despite the fact that widows are meant to detach themselves from worldly desires, this does not stop the widow from requiring and aspiring towards worldly desires. Through the above dialogue, we learn that the reserved and obedient Shakuntala does experience desire. This serves to foreground that she is human, and as humans, we all experience desire in some form. Shakuntala desires a fulfilled life of love and comforts, and so do the other widows. Sadananda urges Shakuntala not to lose faith, possibly in herself, as he does not make reference to faith through a religious lens. Shakuntala harnesses the faith that she has in herself, and this allows her to transcend the boundaries that society has set for her as a widow. She assists Kalyani by reading Narayan’s love letter, and she plays a significant role in liberating Chuyia from the oppressive confines of the widow house. She is aware of the uneven way of life that is available to men and women. Kalyani’s hope for marriage forces Shakuntala to face the question of how long she intends to spend life as a widow. As her consciousness grows, she asks Chuyia, “How do I look?” (Mehta 2005). Chuyia, without any inhibitions, replies, “Old” (Mehta 2008). This honest reply has an emotional effect on Shakuntala which forces her to reanalyse her situation. When Shakuntala is shunned by a priest marrying a couple on the banks of the river, Priest Sadananda witnesses this and says, “Such ignorance. It is this ignorance that is our misfortune” (Mehta 2005). Sadananda is aware of the structures of caste and class and how they contribute to the suffering of those who are allocated to the margins of society (especially widows). It is this very ignorance which has led to the tragic and appalling situation that both Chuyia and Kalyani are placed in. Tradition prescribes a certain way of life for the Hindu widow, but this life diverges from the one that many widows, especially Kalyani, have to endure. She is forced into a life of moral and social corruption.

While doing her daily service for Sadananda, Shakuntala asks, “*Pandiji* [priest], you have studied the Holy Scriptures. Is it written that widows should be treated badly?” (Mehta 2005). The priest educates Shakuntala and tells her that a new law was recently passed which favours the remarriage of widows. Shakuntala is confused by this and asks Sadananda why such pertinent information is kept from widows, the women who have to suffer as a result of

religious law. Sadananda replies, “We ignore the laws that don’t benefit us” (Mehta 2005). The priest is aware of how some laws (such as the Laws of Manu) are used to benefit men of a certain class, while reducing women and children to subservient positions. The priest shares his knowledge with the widows and Shakuntala. Since the priest is educated it is likely that he also belongs to the Brahmin caste. He does not believe that knowledge should only be accessed by men of a certain caste, but rather by those which this knowledge directly affects. He is far more sympathetic towards the plight of the widows than men such as Narayan’s father, Seth Dwarkanath. The priest is educated in religious scriptures and he shows an aversion towards the very ‘practices’ that Hindu culture demands of Chuyia as a child and a widow. It is interesting to note that the male priest is far more sympathetic towards the plight of the widows. The priest shows kindness towards Shakuntala and Chuyia. In one instance, he tells Shakuntala not to scold Chuyia as she is just a child. The priest plays a significant role in the awakening of Shakuntala’s consciousness. Through the priest, Sadananda, Mehta shows that those that are learned in scriptures are not necessarily the men who implement the laws that confine widows. Through the characteristics that the priest embodies, Mehta shows us that men have the capacity to see women as equal human beings and that there is a promise of change. Men living in a patriarchal society do not necessarily have to collude in patriarchal practices. Shakuntala is a progressive widow who offers us a means and way to break the confines of a rigid system that advocates certain negative scriptures that confine the widow to destitution and impoverishment. Shakuntala is representative of the “transgressive and disruptive” woman who defies the boundaries that culture and society have set for her, in contrast to Madhumati who has positioned herself within the existing hegemony to benefit from inequality. Shakuntala, upon learning of better options available to widows, frees Kalyani from her prison, and she is allowed to go to Narayan. Shakuntala gestures Kalyani along with a smile of encouragement. Madhumati vows that she will not let Kalyani enter the widow house again. She meets Narayan at the river and he professes his love for her and asks her to marry him. The next scene that occurs portrays Madhumati in an atypical light. The widow house celebrates *holi*, the festival of colour, and Chuyia is dressed as the child form (*Damodaram*) of Lord Krishna. The widows enjoy the celebration and even Madhumati takes part in the festivities; she smiles and is affectionate towards Chuyia [see fig. 4.15]. While Narayan ferries Kalyani across the river to meet his parents, she finds out that Narayan’s father was one of the clients that she was forced to visit. She demands that the boat be turned around and requests that the confused Narayan should ask his father the reason for this. This

prepares the audience for the death of Kalyani. She is caught in a tragic bind: she cannot return to the widow house nor can she marry Narayan.

Rabindra echoes the name of the famous Bengali poet and playwright, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). Rabindra is educated and he takes pleasure in the ways of the English; “their cricket, their whiskey [...] and the poets they have” (Mehta 2005). He quotes Byron, the romantic poet, as well as Shakespeare. Narayan at one point calls him “a brown Englishman” (Mehta 2005). Rabindra champions the cause of the British in India while Narayan believes that Gandhi will topple the British Empire. Despite the fact that they are both educated members of the gentry, Rabindra and Narayan share different ideas about politics and life in India. Rabindra knows that his father keeps prostitutes, but he does nothing about this. Rabindra says to Narayan, “The gentry here have an unnatural concern for widows” (Mehta 2005). Rabindra is aware of the callousness that is entrenched in this particular system of client and prostitute between widows and the Brahmin class men who are deeply priveaged. Rabindra knows that his father does not even bother with the names of the women he has sexual relations with. Instead they are dehumanised and merely known as “the old one, the fat one, the new one, the young one” (Mehta 2005). Narayan, while at Rabindra’s house, is curious to know who the woman sitting on the balcony is. Rabindra knows who Gulabi is and says to Narayan that she is his “father’s pimp. In English, a procurer” (Mehta 2005). Narayan urges Rabindra to influence his father to join Gandhi and his followers and their way of life – liberating the widows of India. Rabindra laughs at this gesture and they engage in intellectual banter. Rabindra points out that Narayan’s father is nothing like his own father, who engages in sexual relations with prostitutes. Narayan agrees with this and is unaware of how his father’s actions will soon drastically impact on his life. Rabindra makes an interesting remark which reflects the manner in which the Brahmin caste abuses its power. Rabindra says to Narayan, “There’s a famous saying, widows, bulls, slippery steps and holy men. Avoid these and liberation awaits” (Mehta 2005). Rabindra provides a summation of a life where liberation is easy to attain. By implying that widows should be avoided, Rabindra sets up an opposition to men like his own father and Narayan’s father. Even the holy men have corrupt ways and can succeed in corrupting the individual.

Narayan depends on the ‘liberal’ thinking of his father to support his decision in marrying Kalyani, a widow; however, Narayan discovers that that his father is directly responsible for the suffering inflicted upon women, whereas Narayan champions the cause of the widows of

India. Seth Dwarkanath is the antithesis of Sadananda. Our abhorrence lies with men who embody the likes of Narayan's father. The film creates a distinction between men who strive to equal the power imbalances between male and female and those that collude with hegemonic patriarchy to serve their own selfish needs. Seth Dwarkanath embodies the worst kind of barbarism in which he manipulates and exploits scriptures for his own carnal desires. Seth's suggesting that Narayan keep Kalyani as his mistress shows that Seth is willing to share a sexual partner with his son. This revolting and appalling act serves to highlight the extent to which culture is being used as a means to justify horrendous actions. Narayan makes it known to his father that he has lost all respect for him. Seth says, "Narayan, Brahmins can sleep with whomever they want and the women they sleep with are blessed" (Mehta 2005). Hence normal social relations do not apply to them. Seth clearly utilises scriptures for his own needs. He is directly responsible for manipulating scriptures while simultaneously using his caste for his own selfish, devious benefits. Seth uses his caste to serve his own social and sexual needs.

This chapter has argued that mythological Hindu literature stands in contrast to Hindu religious law such as that of the Laws of Manu. While Seth uses his caste to fulfil his debauched fantasies, Narayan evokes the embodiment of purity and sanctity when he cites the words of Lord Ram to his brother, Lakshman. Narayan is also educated in scriptures, but he utilises the knowledge from mythological literature to empower women and show that all human beings are equal. Narayan says to his father, "Do you know that Lord Ram told his brother, never honour those Brahmins who interpret the Holy texts for their own benefit" (Mehta 2005). Seth stubbornly dismisses Narayan's remark in which he refers to the ancient mythological text of the *Ramayana*. The father says, "You are not a hero in an epic play, ready to wage war for love" (Mehta 2005). The father belittles Narayan and proceeds to defend his licentious ways. He dismisses one type of Hindu literature, choosing another kind to follow which he believes justifies his immoral actions. Seth's wickedness and profanity towards mythological literature depict him as a fiend. Narayan is disgusted by his father and he makes this known. He leaves the house, without saying anything to his mother, and she silently bids him farewell. Narayan projects his anger from his father to his mother as well. Narayan's mother is aware that her husband keeps widows and prostitutes, but she does nothing about this, let alone confront her husband about his actions. Despite the fact that the mother is a married woman, she is still subject to subservience, like the widows. She is not acknowledged by her husband as a human being with feelings, desires or individual thoughts.

The mother's happiness stems from her love for Narayan, and even this is taken away by the father. Narayan chooses not to become like his father and assume the position and the 'privileges' that his father has. He leaves his father and mother behind in order to pursue the way of life that Gandhi advocates, thus his personal growth is linked to the changes that the new leader embodies.

Narayan, despite what he has learnt about Kalyani and his evil father, goes back to the widow house in search of Kalyani, only to discover that she has committed suicide by drowning herself in the Ganges River. Shakuntala and Narayan are present at Kalyani's funeral. Narayan is heart-broken. Shakuntala asks Narayan why widows are subjected to a life of suffering. Narayan says, 'One less mouth to feed. Four saris saved. One bed and a corner is saved in the family home. There is no other reason why you are here. Disguised as religion. It's all just about money' (Mehta 2005). Narayan reveals the truth behind the treatment of widows. Financial restraints and poverty leave widows to suffer the consequences. Two marriages would after all require two dowries.

Hindu mythology accentuates the role of women and this should be applied to daily Hindu life. Women, irrespective of age and class/caste, should be treated with respect and human dignity. Caste features prominently within the text through its relationship with Hindu scriptures. The poverty-stricken lives of the widows occurs on the banks of the Ganges River which is a constant presence throughout the film as the central focus of life, faith and social interaction. While the river is worshipped and venerated as female, females suffer untold horrors within the confines of the widow house.

Madhumati, requiring a prostitute after Kalyani's death, sends Chuyia across the river. Gulabi coerces Chuyia by saying that they are going to play and Chuyia goes along with Gulabi. She is forced into the clutches of a sinister shadow that sits upon a bed and smokes [see fig. 4.16]. Shakuntala, horrified by what Madhumati has done, frantically searches for Chuyia and pleads with the boatman to take her across the river. A violated and traumatised Chuyia arrives back on shore with Gulabi, and Shakuntala removes her from the boat and carries her away. Shakuntala follows the crowd of people who have come to see Gandhi at the train station. All the Gandhian followers wear white, initially the colour of the widow. This whiteness, while it represents poverty and suffering for the widows, represents enlightenment, education and prosperity within a Gandhian context. Gandhi gives a sermon about truth, and

the train prepares to leave. Shakuntala pleads with the followers of Gandhi to take Chuyia with them, realising that the life of a widow is a painful sentence. She spots Narayan and he takes Chuyia in his arms. This scene suggest that he will enable her to live a better life than before.

Jamie Scott, discussing *Water*, views the end of the narrative as “an optimistic projection of hope” for India (e-mail, 2014). Chuyia’s destiny is diverted from traditional laws that are allocated to widows. When Narayan takes Chuyia from Shakuntala, on the train platform, Chuyia henceforth resides under the care and way of life prescribed by Gandhi. Chuyia is given freedom and liberties under Narayan’s care, despite the fact that she is a widow. Scott views this as a “rebirth of the Goddess figure in Gandhian terms” (e-mail, 2014). Chuyia is thrust into the arms of agency, liberties and power. The female is given a place of authority and relevance through Chuyia. A Gandhian way of life offers an alternate way of living within the changing social and political atmosphere of the historical setting. Mehta, through *Water*, reveals the complex truth about Hindu literature and its relationship to socio-economic structures within India, which became possible during the historical era of Gandhi’s rise to power.

Shakuntala’s actions result in hope for Chuyia and the widows of India. Her radical actions change the conditions that widows are subjected to. She opens up varying possibilities for Chuyia and for other widows to emulate. The film clearly represents a hopeful future for Chuyia, but it is left open-ended concerning Shakuntala’s future. The open conclusion of the film points to the varying and infinite possibilities that are available to Shakuntala, and by extension the widow figure in India.

The Indian diaspora opens up spaces for the questioning of texts such as the Laws of Manu. Hindu mythology offers an alternate interpretation which is able to give women voice and agency. The violent reaction to the script of *Water* is testament to the fact that the Indian sub-continent is far more resistant to change than the Indian diaspora, especially within a South African context. Maxwell, Diesel and Naidoo (1995, 177) observe that expatriate Hindus in South Africa “follow their ancient traditions”, but they also have applied “certain modifications and adaptations” into their religion as a result of the “influences from their new environments.” *Water* calls for the re-examination of the laws that constitute Hindu culture in a historical plot which caused opposition in the contemporary society.

It is plausible that once, Hindu culture was not governed by authoritarian laws. An investigation and exploration into this way of life would be most compelling and interesting and the Indian diaspora provides the perfect setting for this to occur. *Water*'s intention is to "disturb the mind and shake the complacency of the postmodern world by attending to the traces of the past which continue into the present" (Mukherjee 2008, 46).

Chapter Four

Heaven on Earth, Home and the Heroine

A critical textual analysis of Deepa Mehta's 2008 film, *Heaven on Earth*, raises a discussion which focuses on the Indian diaspora in which Hindu culture, diasporic identity and the locations of home feature prominently. This film is of particular interest to diasporic studies as it depicts the Indian diaspora in Canada and it is created by an individual who is diasporic and interstitial. The film traverses multiple locations as it moves from India to Canada. *Heaven on Earth* successfully disrupts the boundaries between fantasy and reality to create a powerful narrative which gives prominence to Hindu culture within the Indian diaspora.

A significant amount of confusion surrounds the film as a result of Mehta's use of Hindu mythology. This has resulted in a scarcity of scholarly debate and literature on the film. Through this chapter, I will shed light on *Heaven on Earth* which, by means of a powerful female voice, places women at the centre of Indian diasporic culture through Hindu mythology. Mehta's use of Hindu mythology within the film is the most influential of all four films discussed within this dissertation. Hindu culture and mythology open up spaces for both men and women to attain equal power within relationships within the plot.

The film's focus is Chand, a young Indian woman who embarks on a physical and spiritual journey, half-way across the world, for marriage. While a large portion of the film is set in Ontario, the beginning of the film successfully juxtaposes Indian culture with diasporic culture. India is steeped in spirituality and tradition, while Brampton is modern, sophisticated and cosmopolitan. The film begins with a traditional pre-wedding celebration, and we bear witness to a *hijra* dancing at the celebration [see fig. 5.1]. She wears bright pink Indian attire and is the centre of attraction and entertainment. We soon learn that Chand will be married to a man from Canada whose family is known to her uncle. On the morning that Chand is to depart we are shown consecutive scenes of the Indian city and landscapes. A Shiv temple is brought into focus and we see a carving of Lord Shiva, his wife, Parvathi, and their son, Ganesh [see fig. 5.2]. Before Chand's departure, her relationship with her mother is given prominence. Chand's childhood has been steeped in a tradition of storytelling as her mother asks her to recall a story about a cobra and a saint who advises the cobra to hiss instead of bite, as all human life is precious (Mehta 2008). The image of Lord Shiva and the cobra only becomes significant towards the latter part of the narrative.

The recipient family of the imported bride await her arrival at the airport [see fig. 5.3]. Here Chand meets her future husband, Rocky Dillon, his parents, his sister, Aman, her husband, Baldev, and their two children, Kabir and Loveleen. The mother immediately remarks, “Look *what* came for Rocky from India” [own emphasis added] (Mehta 2008). This remark highlights the practice of importing brides and the objectification of women within Hindu culture. Chand is treated like a package and is dehumanised by Rocky’s mother. The practice of importing brides is a tradition that is steeped in Indian diasporic culture. Indian females that constitute the diaspora are considered to be detached from tradition and culture. Since women are the carriers of Hindu culture, the preservation of this culture shifts upon the imported bride. The creation of the Indian diaspora across the globe occurred as a result of the quest for opportunities and a better life. When Chand leaves India, we believe that it is a better option for her future. However, Mehta succeeds in unsettling this belief and places disruption at the centre of the Indian diaspora.

Upon the arrival of Chand in the Dillon household, she is welcomed with rituals. Her dowry, paid by her family to Rocky’s family, is counted by Rocky’s mother, who takes charge of this particular ritual. While these take place, Kabir’s first inclination is to switch the television on. He disregards his traditions and his family. He is disrespectful towards his grandparents when he constantly utters the word “shit” in their presence. Kabir’s arrogance is reflective of a wider loss of culture which slowly becomes evident in the rest of the family members. Kabir is irritated, and his arrogance suggests that the family is engaging in a pretence when they initially show care and compassion towards Chand. Kabir’s characterisation unsettles the viewer and draws our attention to the underlying issues that plague the Dillon family. This is further highlighted by Mehta’s use of uncomfortable images such as the close-up view of the grandfather’s dentures and the use of the snake within the film.

Generational conflict within the diaspora is given significance through the relationship between Kabir and his grandfather, Sadarji. Kabir despises his grandfather, and this disregard is accentuated when Kabir flushes his grandfather’s dentures down the toilet. While the dentures are being flushed down the toilet, Kabir says, “Fucker” (Mehta 2008). Without his dentures, Sadarji is unable to eat any meat, while the family enjoy both his and their own helpings of fried chicken. Kabir taunts his grandfather and constantly asks him if he has found his dentures. Kabir’s anger and dissatisfaction arise from the fact that he has to share his sleeping space with his grandparents, in the lounge. Kabir’s grandparents being the first

generation to relocate to Ontario, Canada, results in Kabir being the third generation to suffer the ills of an overcrowded living space. Kabir is horrified to find out that Rocky's brother, Gurpeet, is being sponsored to Canada, from India. His first reaction is to enquire where he will sleep. He is most upset to discover, from his grandmother, that he will be sharing a sleeping space with his parents and Loveleen.

The family is in dire financial straits due to the large number of individuals that occupy a single household. The Dillon family is a middle-class family, and they all depend on Rocky for financial support. Rocky is pressurised to secure sponsorships to Canada for other family members. In a particular scene he is reduced to tears in his car when the documentation for sponsorships to Canada are declined by the Canadian authorities. Chand asks Rocky for some money to buy a jacket and stamps. He tells her to take Aman's jacket, despite the fact that he takes all of Chand's wages. Rocky becomes irritated and frustrated and he shouts, "What do you all want from me?" (Mehta 2008). Rocky is employed as the driver of a yellow taxi and he frequently works the night-shift. His occupation becomes noteworthy as it reflects and addresses a diasporic identity. Hamid Naficy (2001), in *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, describes "accented cinema" as films that are produced and created by individuals with diasporic identities, including exiled and displaced individuals. Naficy, in discussing various tropes that characterise accented films, observes that "vehicles provide not only empirical links to geographical places and social groupings but also metaphoric reworkings of notions of traveling, homing, and identity" (257). Certain scenes occur while Chand travels in the car with Rocky, and all these scenes act to unsettle the viewer as Rocky is verbally abusive towards Chand. The issues of identity, displacement and travel are also reflected in the characterisation of Chand, as her travelling and displacement feature prominently within the film.

On the night after the wedding, Rocky's mother calls him and then says, "It is nothing" (Mehta 2008). As Rocky leaves the room, she asks him to sit at the foot of her bed. She recalls for him the day he was born, and suggests that if Rocky's brothers were in Canada then they could also share the burden of the household. This insinuation results in Rocky assuring his mother that she is his first priority. After Rocky leaves the room, his father, Sadarji, remarks, "Nobody will steal your son" (Mehta 2008). The mother feels anxious and threatened by her son's wife. This insecurity reaches its climax when the mother knocks on the door of Chand and Rocky's honeymoon suite. She tells Rocky that she had a dream in

which he met with an accident, and pronounces how worried she is about him. Chand suggests that they acquire another room for Rocky's mother. Rocky brutally strikes her face and instructs Chand to take care of his mother. The mother desires to be the only woman in her son's life. While Chand sobs, her mother-in-law coerces her into massaging her legs, which she insists are aching. She says to Chand, "Don't cry, child. This is normal in married life" (Mehta 2008). The mother clearly excuses her son's violent behaviour, after having provoked it through her intrusion into their privacy.

The beatings and battery only increase from this point onwards, and they are incited and instigated by Rocky's mother, who mistreats Chand. As Rocky's financial burden grows, so do his fits of rage increase, which he vents on Chand. Mehta's decision to refer to her male protagonist as Rocky alludes to Sylvester Stallone's performance as Robert Rocky Balboa, which is an iconic performance of hegemonic masculinity in popular culture. The relevance of Rocky's name serves to foreground the levels of violence that are inflicted upon Chand. Rocky kicks, slaps and chokes Chand on numerous occasions. Each time Chand is beaten, her longing to return home is intensified. This longing is reflected through her narration of fantasy stories after each instance in which she is beaten by Rocky. Chand's stories all centre on a mythical cobra that rescues her from danger and reunites her with her mother. The inclusion of the cobra within the narrative evokes the use of magical realism. David Danow engages in a discussion of texts that embody magical realism in his book, *The Spirit of the Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque* (2004). He proposes that the use of magical realism within texts displays something that is "ultimately positive" (9). He notes that magical realism represents a "hopeful vision of life in which what might be termed fantastic is designed to appear plausible and real" (9). Within *Heaven on Earth* (2008) the cobra comes to represent something positive and liberating for Chand. Each mini-narrative that Chand tells evokes the fantastical and magical through its use of golden objects such as a golden tree, a golden skein, a golden thread and a golden kite which will carry Chand back home, to her mother. Chand's fantasy narratives portray the cobra in a positive light and allow her to fulfil her desire to return home. This depiction of the cobra differs from contemporary religious views about the snake that tempted Eve to consume fruit from the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden as told in the biblical book of Genesis. The snake is often viewed as evil, untrustworthy and monstrous. The cobra occupies a liminal space within the context of the film. It is a shape-shifter and moves between human and reptile formations; it is neither human nor animal. Chand is the only character who comes into contact with the cobra. The

presence of the cobra within the film creates a multi-layered narrative, juxtaposing Chand's fantasies with reality. Despite the fact that this creature is considered dangerous and deadly, it becomes besotted with Chand and the fulfilling of her desires. Not only is the cobra significant in relation to Lord Shiva (as will be discussed later on in this chapter), it also appears in *The Mahabharata*, an ancient Hindu epic which tells of a great snake sacrifice stopped by a priest who saves the sacred snakes (Narasimhan 1999, 3-4).

Chand's narratives serve to highlight the intensity of Chand's longing for home and her ability to enter into an alternate realm of fantasy which gives prominence to the mother-daughter relationship. Chand escapes into her storytelling in an effort to be united with her mother. The stylised cinematography that accompanies each segment of Chand's story shifts from colour to a monochrome black-and-white [see fig. 5.4]. This cinematic technique emphasises feelings of nostalgia, homesickness and pensiveness. When Rocky and Chand embark on their honeymoon this is the first instance in which this technique is utilised. The couple visit Niagara Falls and Chand is filled with excitement. She asks Rocky if they can take a photograph and he reluctantly and unenthusiastically says, "Only tourists take photos" (Mehta 2008). Chand is upset as she wants to stay and admire the breath-taking falls, but Rocky hastily rushes off. He is rude, irritable and arrogant, and this upsets Chand. Her dissatisfaction is further emphasised by the use of the monochrome technique showing Chand's face against the backdrop of Niagara Falls. This technique serves to disrupt the viewer through pictorial depiction, drawing our attention to these junctures within the narrative. Various city-scapes are included within these monochrome segments, and we share Chand's aversion for Brampton through Mehta's use of the black-and-white technique, rendering the city hostile, sterile and joyless.

Chand and Rocky, on their return from their honeymoon, stop at a gas station and Chand uses the toilet. While alone in the toilet, she inscribes her name, maiden surname and address, in India, on the bathroom wall, among other identities which have also been inscribed on the wall. This scene places an emphasis on Chand's identity and her place of belonging. She desires to return to India and she does not associate herself as a member of Canadian society or the Dillon family, but rather as a citizen of Punjab, India.

In an analysis of the diasporic subject, the problem of designation arises. Andrew Gurr (1981) in a book entitled *Writers in Exile: The Identity of Home in Modern Literature*, proposes that

a distinction should be made between the subject who is “exiled” and the “expatriate” (cited in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2006, 92). The former implies a voluntary state of movement while the latter indicates an involuntary act. Hindu culture prescribes that Chand enter a state of exile in order to be married in Canada. Hindu culture prescribes that as a women, Chand must leave her home and enter the home of her husband. Chand thus becomes an imported bride who longs for her home in India. This state is highlighted by her desire to return to her mother-land and her mother. Chand constantly asks Rocky if she can call home, and each time the reply is “tomorrow”. This “tomorrow” never materialises for Chand, and the mother-daughter relationship is thus “strained” (Naficy 2001, 127). Chand desires to return home and be reunited with her mother. In a particular scene, after Rocky has had Chand by the neck, she narrates a story about herself embroidering a tapestry. This particular image is a powerful image of domesticity and paradoxically, freedom. In the story, Chand pricks her finger while embroidering the tapestry and her blood becomes part of the tapestry. She will use this intricate piece of work to fly herself imaginatively back home to her mother. Naficy (127) characterises “daughter-texts” under the umbrella term of “accented cinema”. These texts focus on the relationship between a mother and daughter. The voice of the daughter is given prominence within the texts while the mother is “marginalised, even silenced”. Chand’s mother only appears at the beginning of the film. Naficy (229) says that “Every journey entails a return, or the thought of return.”

In a particular scene, in the Dillon kitchen, the mother yells into the ear of Chand, asking her is she is deaf or dumb, as she is dissatisfied with the way that Chand makes *roti* (Indian bread). Chand pushes the mother away and she accidentally (or purposely) falls and summons Rocky to deal with his wife’s ‘disrespect’. The mother, in a child-like manner, complains to her son, “Rocky, she pushed me” (Mehta 2008). Rocky, in an irritated voice, says, “Then take the rolling pin and break her legs” (Mehta 2008). The mother says that Chand is Rocky’s wife and Rocky subsequently throws Chand onto the floor and repeatedly kicks her [see fig. 5.5]. Sadarji intervenes and stops Rocky. Rocky breathes heavily and it becomes evident that he has inflicted a significant amount of injury on Chand. Kabir helps Chand and picks her up from the kitchen floor. He holds her and walks with her to the bedroom. When he gets to the bedroom, he violently pushes her onto the bed. Chand gets no sympathy from the other family members, and it is only Sadarji that shows sympathy and empathy towards her. Chand’s beating is instigated and incited by the mother and it is Sadarji who brings an end to the abuse.

The Canadian diaspora mirrors the South African diaspora with regard to multiple races and ethnicities living together. Where various races co-exist, tension and racism becomes evident. Rocky displays a great deal of racism towards African diasporic individuals without taking into consideration that he is also part of a diaspora. Rocky says to Chand, “Somalians are taking over the country and you let them spray perfume on you” (Mehta 2008). Rocky is angered that Somalians are allowed to enter the country while he struggles to get sponsorships for his family members in India. He is infuriated by this and breaks a glass plate in front of Chand, which he expects her to clean.

Chand works with Aman in a textile factory. Aman’s solution to Rocky’s beatings is that Chand simply take Tylenols. Aman, like her mother, also excuses the behaviour of Rocky. The employees at the factory are of different races. The lunch table, therefore, acts as a microcosm for the diaspora [see fig. 5.6]. At the lunch table, Chand tells Aman and the Jamaican immigrant, Rosa, that she has a certificate and is a graduate. She suggests that she can get a more suitable job. She is ridiculed by Aman who remarks, “Rosa, meet my sister-in-law, Chand. A graduate, she thinks jobs grow on maple trees” (Mehta 2008). Chand is required to work for a wage that is not paid to her but goes to Rocky so that he can support his family and pay for sponsorships to Canada for other family members. Rosa is angered by the abuse that is inflicted upon Chand, and asks her if she got beaten up. Aman quickly interjects and says that Chand walked into a door. Rosa suggests that if Chand requires any help she should call 911. Aman says, “In our community we deal with problems in-house” (Mehta 2008). Aman protects the interest of her family and protects her brother, Rocky, from incurring any legal action because he brutally abuses his wife. On the bus, going back home after work, Aman says to Chand, “Don’t mind Rocky, he’s a nice boy, just has a short fuse” (Mehta 2008). Aman, like her mother, excuses Rocky’s violent behaviour. Rosa, angered by the abuse inflicted upon Chand, drags her to the ladies’ toilet. Rosa tells Chand that she needs to take care of herself. She gestures that Chand should kill Rocky by strangling him with her scarf. Chand is horrified and tries to leave. Rosa confesses that she was joking and she offers Chand a solution to her problem. Rosa, while in Jamaica, was also abused by the man that she loved. She consulted a witch and was given a root that would make her desirable to her lover. This root worked for Rosa and the man married her the very next day; however, he died soon after. Rosa tells Chand that he died from “too much loving” (Mehta 2008). Rosa gives Chand a similar root and instructs her to administer it to Rocky in a drink [see fig. 5.7]. She

guarantees Chand that there will be “instant love” and tells her that Chand can thank her later (Mehta 2008).

Back home, Chand frantically crushes the root in a pestle. While mixing the root with milk, a red chemical reaction takes place. Chand attempts to pour the liquid down the kitchen drain, but it oozes out rapidly from the drain, and Chand is forced to discard the mixture in the backyard. As Chand leaves, a cobra emerges from the ground. Mehta’s use of the cobra in Canada has been criticised as they are not indigenous to this particular place, but as a director she is aware of this. Kabir makes a joke about the cobra and attributes its presence to escaping from the Delhi zoo and boarding the Air India flight (Mehta 2008). By utilising the cobra, Mehta requests that we once again suspend our disbelief and enter the realm of fantasy.

The Jamaican Rosa belongs to the African diaspora, and her presence is of central importance to the narrative. A hybrid dimension is added to the film through its depiction of more than one culture. African traditional medicine and its centrality to culture are made evident within the film. Medicine has ultimately shaped the world we live in through its impact on colonialism by means of the transmission of disease from one zone to another and the availability of medicine within the colonial encounter. Chand is open to the use of a foreign traditional medicine as she is desperate to bring an end to the abuse. Naficy (2001, 222) says that exiles and diasporas are “[p]oised at the intersection and interstice of other cultures, they are subject to historical dynamism and evolution”. Indian and African traditional medicine share similarities with each other. Both the Indian and African cultures make use of traditional healers. The importance of traditional medicine is prevalent even within my own diasporic experience. Within the local weekly newspaper I was able to secure nine advertisements, all of which promise to bring back a lost lover, through the use of traditional medicine from various cultures [see fig. 5.8]. Invariably, “while the diasporic subject travels, so does culture” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2006, 427).

The family are aware of the cobra in the backyard, and Rocky urges the family to keep all the doors and windows tightly shut as he leaves for a night-shift. Rocky saw the cobra in the backyard and tried to kill it with his cricket bat, but only succeeded in wounding the creature. In the following scene we see Chand sleeping with the window open, and the cobra watches her sleep, then makes its way into the room [see fig. 5.9]. Chand wakes from her sleep to find

Rocky at the foot of her bed. He lovingly watches her and asks if she was dreaming. He gives her a hug and Chand discovers a wound on his back. This is the first indication we receive that this is not the real Rocky, as we have witnessed Rocky wounding the snake. Chand wishes to apply balm to the injured Rocky and she asks, “Who hit you?” He smiles and says, “A fool” (Mehta 2008). As the film progresses, we realise that Rocky appears when he should actually be at work.

When Chand looks into the mirror she sees a cobra in place of Rocky. The cobra takes on the human form of Rocky. This Rocky is different from the one that abuses his wife. He is kind, tender, loving and gentle. Chand is under the impression that this is the real Rocky, and she struggles to understand how he can show her affection at one moment and then hit her the next. This version of Rocky inquires about her likes, dislikes, about the games she played as a child, about her mother, and how her brothers teased her and her sister-in-law envied her, and about her favourite colour. The cobra that takes the form of Rocky desires Chand and puts her needs before his own. He is sympathetic towards her and her situation as she is subjected to abuse and mistreatment. He tells Chand how he cannot bear to see her cry. It becomes evident that he possesses a profound love for her.

Naficy (2001, 272) says that “accented films” represent “the constructedness of identity by inscribing characters who are partial, double or split”. The snake that takes Rocky’s physical form can be referred to as his “doppelgänger”. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha discusses identity and identification. He observes, “identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting” (44). Chand desires Rocky’s love and acceptance which will simultaneously secure her position within the family dynamic, giving her a certain degree of power in relation to the mother- and daughter-in-law dynamic. Chand’s desire for acceptance, equality and love within the family drives her to utilise the root, which results in the creation of the snake and its human manifestation.

In their first encounter with each other, Rocky says to Chand, “They say that when a bird looks at a snake, the bird becomes hypnotised. The bird stares and stares but cannot move [...] then the snake approaches the bird and absorbs it within itself” (Mehta 2008). While Rocky tells Chand of the snake hypnotising the bird, they become transfixed by each other’s gaze, as if Rocky is hypnotising Chand, who represents the bird. Rocky moves in a snake-like manner as he removes the space between him and Chand [see fig. 5.10]. Despite the fact that

this analogy is a predatory one, within the confines of their evanescent relationship, this imagery takes on a different form. The absorption that occurs is reflective of a profound love where consummation occurs to achieve a state of completeness and wholeness. To become one with another functions to foreground a fusion and unification of both male and female counterparts through desire and transcendental love.

The mother-in-law wields immense power over those in the household, while the figure of the daughter-in-law is subjugated and treated with disdain. While Chand lived with her parents it is evident that she was loved and she was given an education. Marriage forces Chand into a life that she is unable to endure. She is married to a man that abuses her, she is forced to work without pay and endure endless household chores such as ironing and cooking. Her inability to endure this kind of lifestyle results in her utilising traditional medicine and when this fails, her faith comes to her rescue enabling her to find alternate spaces in her mind.

Rocky's mother's presence within the film is significant compared to his father's presence. The father is repeatedly silenced by the mother and his significance within the narrative is diminished to the point where Kabir can have his way and exert control over his grandfather. The mother is often found telling Sadarji to "keep quiet" or to "stop nagging" when in reality she is the one that nags him and the other family members. The mother is cruel to everyone in the household, including Sadarji. While they spend time in the mall's centre court Sadarji exercises, using the escalator. The mother remarks, "Don't exercise, you're not going to get younger" (Mehta 2008). The mother is very opinionated and she feels that it is her duty to pass a remark on each of the family members. When Kabir and Loveleen get into a squabble the grandmother dismisses it and says, "Fight and die for all I care" (Mehta 2008).

Baldev, like Sadarji, is treated indifferently within the household. While the family eat at the dinner table, the mother serves the family Indian bread. Rocky is given the first preference and then Sadarji is offered a roti. He refuses it and Baldev opts to take it. The mother casts a glance at him, while Sadarji complains about attaining new dentures. The mother says that when Gurpeet is sponsored to Canada then Sadarji will get new dentures. Baldev asserts that he is trying to find a job, and Aman reminds the family that Baldev sponsored her entire family to Canada. Despite this, the mother is still ungrateful and only wishes for the sponsorships of her own sons. The mother says, "In this country, everything is upside down

[...] Back home, after marriage, daughters don't live off their parents" (Mehta 2008). Aman and Baldev sink their heads in shame. Baldev relies on his in-laws and Rocky for food and shelter. He is therefore viewed as useless as he is unable to look after his family, let alone himself. The mother juxtaposes Hindu tradition with those traditions that are prevalent within the Indian diaspora. Daughters are "given away" to their husbands and thus become the husband's responsibility. Women are therefore objectified, which mirrors the mother's earlier reference to Chand as a package that had just arrived from India. It is forbidden for a married woman to visit her parents or her former home. The mother utilises culture and tradition for her own means and desires as she condemns both her daughter and son-in-law. The mother practices what suits her and is thus thrilled when Chand's life is in peril, later on in the film. Baldev is forced to live with his in-laws as he does not have a house and this is the only family that he has in Canada. He says, "A man dependent on his in-laws is worse than a dog" (Mehta 2008).

At the dinner table Sadarji says, "Better to go hungry than to lose faith. Better hell, than a heaven with no dignity" (Mehta 2008). This analogy is a reflection of Sadarji's circumstances, but it is also appropriately applicable to Baldev's circumstances. Sadarji is unable to eat without his dentures and he goes hungry, but he never loses his faith. He is an ardent believer in the Sikh faith despite the fact that he is part of the diaspora. Sadarji is able to negotiate both traditional and modern worlds, whereas the mother is not able to do so. Sadarji listens to religious hymns on the television, and the following interchange takes place between Sadarji and his wife:

Wife: Our Baldev can't even sing. He's so useless.

Sadarji: That's not your concern. You listen to the hymns and take God's name.

Wife: Stop nagging. (Mehta 2008)

Both Baldev and Sadarji feel robbed of their dignity. Heaven, within this particular context, mirrors the title of the film and refers to a lifestyle in Canada, or more widely, within the diaspora. Life in the diaspora is considered to be far better than life within the Indian subcontinent which is steeped in poverty and destitution. Sadarji remarks that it would be better to live in a metaphorical hell (India) than live in heaven (Canada) without dignity. Chand desires to return to her mother-land and the lifestyle that it offers as she is leading an emotionally unsatisfactory life in Canada.

The family rent out the home during the day to tenants, and while the children go to work, Sadarji and his wife spend their time in the mall's centre-court. After a brutal beating, Chand remains at home. She makes a paper boat and while doing so narrates another story which emphasises her longing for home. Chand, while alone at home, spends time with Rocky's double and when the tenants ask Chand, from behind a closed door, if she is well she states that her husband is with her. Chand, confused by the variation in treatment from Rocky, is under the impression that she is going mad. She asks his twin, "Who are you?" and he replies, "Aren't I who you desire?" (Mehta 2008). Chand and Loveleen spend time together as Chand dresses Loveleen up with her clothes and make-up.

The tenants contact the 'real' Rocky to inquire how Chand is feeling and comment that they were happy to know that he was with his sick wife. Rocky is infuriated as he knows he was at work and he beats Chand, in front of Loveleen, demanding to know who she was with. While he beats Chand the phone rings. Chand's mother has called and enquires about her daughter. Loveleen says that Chand "is busy" (Mehta 2008). While Loveleen speaks to Chand's mother we hear glass breaking as Rocky beats Chand, in a typical scene of abuse. Loveleen goes to her grandmother, who upon seeing Loveleen says, "Look at our girl. She looks so pretty. Just like a bride" (Mehta 2008). Loveleen immediately starts to cry and her grandmother pushes her away. Loveleen is upset by witnessing Rocky beat Chand but more so by hearing her grandmother speak of her marriage. Loveleen, like Chand, knows that her destiny is to be married one day. This episode reflects an earlier scene in which Chand, while alone at home, says to herself, "Mourn the fate of daughters, O Lord. Mourn their fate" (Mehta 2008).

After Rocky has beaten Chand and drawn blood, she sobs in the room. Rocky's double appears and wipes the blood from Chand's lip. Chand tells him that she wants to return home. He tells her that she cannot as the family will "sit in judgement" (Mehta 2008). He tells Chand that she must endure the snake ordeal to prove her innocence. She must pull out the cobra from its pit in the backyard and take an oath by it. She will not be bitten so long as she speaks the truth. Chand suggests to the family that she will endure the snake ordeal. The entire family gather in the backyard. Chand's mother-in-law says to Sadarji, "In cases like this, the guilty party must prove their innocence. An old test back home was for them to take an oath while holding a red hot iron rod. But Chand insists on taking the oath by the cobra. So, let her put her hand in the snake pit [...], the snake will bite her and it will all be over" (Mehta 2008). The mother-in-law is the enforcer of an unjust tradition. She presumes that

Chand will be bitten by the snake and this excites the wretched woman. Chand approaches the pit and is terrified, she withdraws her hand in fear and her mother-in-law enquires where she is running off to.

She pleads for help from Rocky but he says, “Only your lover can help you now” (Mehta 2008). Sadarji feels sympathy towards Chand, and Aman suggests that she admit her guilt. Chand is adamant that she has done nothing wrong. Aman’s mother says, “We’ve been very patient with your dramas. You chose the snake ordeal, now get on with it” (Mehta 2008). Chand approaches the pit again, she places her hand into the pit and closes her eyes. Her expression changes to one that is no longer full of fear but rather full of determination and courage. She holds the snake with both her hands and says, “Since coming to Canada, I’ve only touched two males [...] One is my husband [...] and the second is this cobra” (Mehta 2008) [see fig. 5.11]. Rocky is stunned by Chand’s response. As if to lay emphasis upon her innocence and purity, Chand wraps the snake around her neck and thus evokes the iconic image of Lord Shiva and his snake [see fig. 5.12]. This religious image is further pronounced by light that radiates from Chand’s head. This religious image is reflective of the temple motif of Lord Shiva and his family which was shown at the beginning of the film. The family is shocked by the image before their eyes. The only difference that is evident in Mehta’s depiction of Chand is ultimately gender. Chand is female while Lord Shiva is a male deity. Through a deeper investigation of Hindu mythology, we uncover the complexity of Lord Shiva’s iconography.

At the centre of Hindu culture resides the ‘goddess’ as mother, wife and daughter. Sudhir Kakar (1990, 135), in his book entitled *Intimate Relations*, articulates that “hegemonic narratives” within Hindu culture centre on the “great goddess”. The mother-son relationship therefore takes preference over the father-son relationship which manifests itself through the Oedipus complex. The successful resolution of the Oedipus complex and the construction of masculine identity is brought about through the boy’s successful identification with the father. Kakar explores Indian psychoanalysis and hypothesises that the boy desires “to become a man without having to separate and sexually differentiate from the mother”, or female figure (139). The boy wishes “to take on male sexual attributes while not letting go of the feminine ones” (139).

Jyotika Virdi (2003, 90), in her book entitled *The Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Popular Films as Social History*, deploys Kakar's theories to her argument and suggests that "Initially present, the father becomes absent [and] displaced [...] by the son, who ultimately instates himself close to his mother, successfully excluding the father." This relationship dynamic exists between Rocky and his mother, and this bestows the mother with the power to complain to Rocky about his wife. It is also interesting to note that the financial burden of the family is placed squarely on the shoulders of Rocky and not his father. The mother figure is central to the Hindu family dynamic. When Loveleen and Kabir fight, Aman is called to intervene. Baldev, despite sitting next to the two fighting children, does not intervene and he is not expected to do anything. Aman is summoned from the kitchen, by her mother, to discipline her children. As a woman, she wields the power of the discipliner within the Hindu family dynamic, as opposed to the father and his associated machismo, as the enforcer of justice in Western culture.

Like her mother, Aman resides at the centre of her family. She takes charge of her duties and supports her husband and children. It is evident, from the film, that she wields all the power within her marriage. Aman differs from her mother as she is not as cruel and wicked as her mother. She is more accepting of Chand and does not instigate situations that lead to Chand's abuse. Despite the fact that Rocky's mother wields all the power in the household, she abuses her power and uses it to her own advantage. *Heaven on Earth* endows the female with immense power. The film also depicts how excessive power in the hands of the female can also lead to destruction and injustice for other females.

The son desires "to redeem his mother's suffering and to fuse with the maternal figure" (Virdi, 91). However, in the case of *Heaven on Earth*, Rocky's mother creates her own 'suffering' by utilising Chand as the reason for her 'suffering'. Despite the fact that the mother wields all the power, she is not given a name. She is merely referred to as "mother" in the closing credits. This decision, on the part of Mehta, not to give the mother a name stands in contrast to the other characters within the film; even the father is referred to as Sadarji. Mehta's intentions could possibly reflect the fact that the mother's individual personality is insignificant despite her contradictory powerful nature for a large part of the film. After Chand's embodiment of Lord Shiva, we do not see any of the family members, except for Rocky.

If one looks towards Hindu mythology, one becomes aware of Mehta's depiction of gender within the iconography of Lord Shiva. There are various legends that tell of Lord Shiva and his love for the Goddess Parvathi who becomes his wife. This love results in their fusion and thus creates Lord Shiva in an androgynous form [see fig. 5.13]. He embodies both the male and female in equal parts, thus depicting the perfect cosmic balance between male and female. Shiva embodies the necessary conditions for creation through the union with the Goddess. This image advocates equality between the genders. Their co-existence points towards a profound understanding of the implications of the 'other' gender. Rocky's abuse and treatment of his wife reflects his inability to be a good husband and embody the characteristics of Lord Shiva. When Chand meets Rocky's doppelgänger for the first time, he refers to the actual Rocky as a "fool" (Mehta 2008). The cobra as a manifestation of Lord Shiva acts to condemn Rocky for his actions and treatment of Chand while simultaneously placing Chand in a position of righteousness. Chand's image is a powerful reminder to the family of the importance of women to Hindu culture. Within a psychoanalytical context, Virdi (2003, 90) observes, "Indian patients reveal identification with both parents and an amazing degree of cross-sexual identification". This can be attributed to Lord Shiva's depiction within Hindu mythology. If the iconic merging of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvathi represents the ideal unification of parents for a child, then ability to equate the sexes becomes possible.

Chand is the carrier of Hindu culture and myth from the 'mother-land' to the diaspora. Cultural diversity or cultural difference is more evident within the Indian diaspora, with its hybrid qualities. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin observe that cultural diversity and cultural difference can be used "interchangeably" (1998, 60). These terms "refer [...] to a variety of cultures and the need to acknowledge this variety to avoid universal prescriptive cultural definitions" (60). The authors argue that diasporic communities, created as a result of colonialism, "developed their own distinctive cultures which both preserve and often extend and develop their originary cultures" (70). I would argue that is also true of individuals who constitute diasporic communities but have being catapulted into the diaspora as a result of post-colonialism and migration. During the course of this dissertation, it has become evident that the Indian sub-continent and various extremist religious groups dispute Hindu culture as changing and evolving and place it within a stringent and authoritarian domain which serves a select few while resulting in the oppression of women, children and in some instances, men (as depicted by *Earth* (1998)). The family within *Heaven on Earth*

represents cultural difference and diversity as they struggle to maintain their Sikh culture within the diaspora. Chand succeeds in an extraordinary feat – revealing the embodiment and presence of God which manifests itself within the diaspora, represented by Mehta through magical realism.

Chand's embodiment of Lord Shiva succeeds in highlighting the power that women attain within the confines of Hindu culture. Chand embodies a lost religious past for the family who struggle under the weight of diasporic identity. While alone in her room, Chand has a final conversation with Rocky's alter ego. Chand says, "Can our desires be so powerful that they take on human form and walk right into our lives?" Rocky says, "If you want it to be" (Mehta 2008). The final words that are exchanged between them are touching, and Rocky offers to accompany Chand when she leaves. She turns down this offer, no longer depending on a male presence. The 'real' Rocky bangs his fists on the room door. He asks Chand who she was talking to and she says, "Not to you" and walks away (Mehta 2008). The implications of the word "not" exclude and deny Rocky's relevance as Chand's husband. This negative adverb has powerful significance in Chand's and our perception of the events in the film. Within the final scene of the film, Mehta utilises the monochrome technique on the face of Rocky, serving to emphasise his nostalgia and distress, as his wife walks out on him and his family.

Edward Said (2006, 441) comments, "Exile becomes the necessary precondition to a better state." The author use "Moses, Mohammed and Jesus" as examples of exile and its role in shaping fundamental religions and its broader impact on cultures. Chand thus leaves the family and her marriage in the hope of making the journey back home, we assume, as she takes her passport with her. By leaving the family, Chand breaks the cycle of abuse and mistreatment that she endured from various family members. Her power and ability to leave are bestowed upon her through her ordeal and its cultural and religious implications. The snake and its human form play a crucial role in Chand's attainment of agency and power. This manifestation becomes the catalyst for Chand's self-actualisation.

The uncertain ending of the film leaves us with an ambiguous question: where is home located for the diasporic self? The film succeeds in inciting conflicted feelings about home, community and nationality. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1998, 93) point out that the "increasingly large number of diasporic peoples throughout the world further problematizes

the idea of ‘exile’”. Chand travels from India to Canada, and with her attainment of agency, her movement also comes into question. We only assume that she will return to India as she takes her passport with her. Where Chand will go to from here is uncertain. The open nature of the conclusion of the film opens up unlimited possibilities to Chand. Travel highlights “the imaginative construction of other people and places” (96). When Chand first travels to Canada to be married, we, as spectators, enter imaginatively into her character. Our imagination is further exercised through Chand’s religious and spiritual embodiment of the divine presence. Her decision to leave is steeped in the imaginative process as the world becomes accessible to her. Within the mind of the exiled, “home and travel, placement and displacement are always already intertwined” (Naficy 2001, 229).

The film shows how Hindu culture is still evolving, and this is more prevalent within the Indian diaspora. Maxwell, Diesel and Naidoo (1995, 200), note that “Hinduism is a holistic and organic living reality which, to some extent, transcends analysis and dissection.” Hindu mythology displays potential and promise for future analysis through its depiction of the feminine, which can act as a positive domain for women. Mythology offers a transformed way of embracing culture within a diasporic context. The diaspora opens up spaces for possibilities to be realised, as “Diasporic identity demonstrates the extent to which identity itself must be constructed and reconstructed by individuals in their everyday life” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2006, 426).

Conclusion

Hindu identities, both indigenous and diasporic, lie at the heart of this dissertation. Throughout the course of the four previous chapters, I have engaged with diasporic filmmaking to produce a textual analysis of four films directed by Deepa Mehta. Through these four films I have shown how marginalised individuals (women, children, and queer individuals) are able to gain access to power through structures that have previously resulted in oppression and subjugation. These structures include culture, gender, sexuality and the forces of colonialism. Various characters within the four films, despite their initial oppression, are able to gain some agency, voice and cohesion.

The arguments put forth within this dissertation have relied on the theories of post-colonialism, and feminist and diasporic studies. These theories have informed and shaped the manner in which the four films have represented various characters (both male and female). This study has relied heavily on post-colonial theory which has been developed by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. The relationship between colonialism and culture has been explored during the course of this dissertation. Colonialism has had an effect on diasporic Hindu culture and Indian culture as it exists within the Indian sub-continent.

This dissertation has called for the implementation of change in both indigenous, but more specifically, Indian diasporic settings. It has become evident that a rift between an idealised culture and reality exists. I would attribute this disparity to various factors which include pre-colonial Indian history, the caste system in India, colonialism, hegemonic patriarchy, modernity and the rise of capitalism. Patriarchy is a historical term and it continues to impact on Hindu culture in varying degrees. Mehta makes this explicit while also providing ways out of rigid, authoritarian systems. The practice of Hindu culture is thousands of years old, and it has evolved and is still evolving through a multiplicity of factors, especially within the Indian diaspora. The Indian diaspora is more susceptible to change due to varying social, cultural and political influences that are evident within diversified diasporic societies. Various female characters in the four films under inspection deploy Hindu culture and mythology to gain liberation and freedom from patriarchy. They develop their agency within the confines of patriarchy which enables them to transcend a constricting niche.

Mehta's *Fire* (1996) and *Water* (2005) have been at the receiving end of violence and hostility by Hindu extremist groups who uphold a fundamentalist ideal of Hindu culture. Bridget Kulla (2005, 52) comments, "What makes Mehta's films controversial is that they question and expose societal structures and historical events that have been violent and repressive towards women." These issues penetrate and thus affect Hindu and Indian diasporic communities across the globe. They need to be addressed and solutions need to be found. Shohini Chaudhuri (2009, 8) observes that Mehta's work addresses "aspects of Indian reality left out of the domestic popular cinema." Mehta, through her filmography, provides various ways for women to attain a voice and agency through adapting Hindu culture and, specifically, utilising Hindu mythology, as opposed to adhering to oppressive texts such as the Laws of Manu.

The first chapter within this dissertation centred on *Fire* and the figure of the bisexual. Radha and Sita's same-sex relationship was paralleled to the relationship between Radha and Krishna, in Hindu mythology, which exists outside the confines of marriage. This chapter also focused on Mehta's naming of the female protagonists and their connections with Hindu mythology.

Earth (1998), the topic of the second chapter, has shown the damaging effects of war and genocide on both men and women. This chapter gives prominence to the effects that war has on children. The focus of this chapter has been Dil Navaz and his evolving characterisation throughout the film.

A practical way of life collides with religious literature as depicted in Mehta's *Water* (2005). Within my own diasporic Hindu experience I have come across various scriptures and sources which are contradictory in nature, with regard to the place of women within Hindu culture. These contradictions hinder Hindu culture from evolving and moving forward. Perhaps the practice of contradicting values persuades believers from inquiry. My diasporic identity has provided me with a platform to voice these contradictions as negotiating them proves to be difficult. Religious text after religious text begins with the glorification of the Hindu female who lies at the pinnacle of all aspects of Hindu life. "Hindu women are full of strength. They hold in their hands the master-key of the Hindu religion. They are manifestations of Mother Shakti", says Sri Swami Sivananda, in an article entitled "Glory to Womanhood" (Issue 6, 2). These words act to place women at the precise centre of Hindu

religion. They enforce women's importance and relevance, and compare them to the powerful Goddess figure. The article then goes on to contradict itself when it states:

However, the Rishis have said that a real Devi is one who is chaste, who is modest, who serves her family with devotion, who does not mix easily with men, who is simple in dress, who studies the scriptures and prays daily. Sometimes, eating drinking and merry making have replaced this ideal. They have learnt to earn money and live comfortably. Alas this accounts for only eating and sleeping whilst precious time is lost. (*Brahma Vidya* Issue 6, 2)

The above extract prescribes a way of life for women. It places them in a position of subordination and dependency. Basic human needs are viewed as sinful. This stands in sharp contrast to the figure of the Hindu Goddess and the initial words that constitute this article. It also persuades women to read religious scriptures which are contradictory in nature. This will only result in more confusion.

The Laws of Manu and associated literature follow a similar pattern. They all begin with the veneration of the female figure (both Goddess and human) and then go on to dictate how women should be treated and "kept". Even Hindu wedding rituals contradict themselves with regard to their treatment of women. A traditional Hindu wedding commences with an act called *Kanyadan* which is the "giving away" of a virgin daughter, by her father. The daughter is thus objectified and treated like a package or an object. This mirrors Chand's arrival at the Canadian airport in *Heaven on Earth* (2008). Within *Fire*, Sita scrubs the blood stain on the sheets. She refuses to place a significance and price on her virginity and hastily gets rid of the stain. Sita refuses to be labelled as a "virgin" which would imply that she is void of all desire and sexual awareness. Sita is in fact, quite the opposite. The actual "giving away" of the daughter places immense strain on the mother-daughter relationship in our contemporary society, explicitly shown within *Fire*, *Water* and *Heaven on Earth*. It makes sense to assume that the "giving away" of the daughter would have been more plausible when daughters were married to men from different villages, miles away, when transportation was not mechanised.

The Hindu wedding proceeds and the bride and groom are venerated as Lord Vishnu and his consort Parvathi; as equal beings, with equal power and relevance. This stands in contrast to the manner in which the bride was treated shortly beforehand. Rituals such as these can act to secure the importance and relevance of the bride and female figure within the family

dynamic; however, referring to this ritual as *Kanyadan* (giving away of a virgin bride) objectifies women and places a significant emphasis on the controlling of a particular female's sexuality instead of the protection of women in general. Certain Hindu rituals and "laws"⁶ need to be reanalysed to suit contemporary, modern society. This mirrors a particular scene in *Water*, when Kalyani appoints the task of creating a just and equal Hindu law to Narayan, who sees a common humanity before he sees caste and gender as dividing entities.

Mehta belongs to the Canadian diaspora, and diasporic identity is reflected within the final film analysed within this dissertation. *Heaven on Earth* depicts how Hindu mythology is utilised to equate the sexes. Hindu culture venerates Godhead as both male and female. The mistreatment of women therefore underestimates Hindu culture and its origins. *Heaven on Earth* addresses the complicated issue of diaspora. Hamid Naficy (2006, 117) in an article entitled "Situating Accented Cinema", observes, "Diaspora, exile and ethnicity are not steady states; rather, they are fluid processes that under certain circumstances may transform into one another and beyond."

As Mehta has repeatedly shown, Hindu mythology is able to act as a catalyst that opens up spaces for the worship, veneration and protection of the female through her depiction as *Shakti*, the infinite energy, in Hindu mythology. Mehta has shown that women who make their own choices have endless possibilities available to them. They do not go against culture but rather use a different aspect of culture to create new lives for themselves. These women are never depicted as denouncing their culture and religion, but rather utilise Hindu religion and Hindu mythology which can be adapted to their respective situations. Despite their "transgressions", Mehta's female characters still exist and function within the confines of Hindu culture, but a Hindu culture which is less patriarchal and more accepting of equality and individuality. Hindu culture does not oppress women when utilised in a nuanced manner which places an emphasis on mythology rather than indoctrinating literature. Mehta's female characters attain their agency and claim their human dignity and their sexuality as their own. Deepa Mehta, quoted in Manju Jaidka's *A Critical Study of Deepa Mehta's Trilogy: Fire, Earth and Water*, asks, "Do we, as women, have choices? And if we make choices, what is the price we pay for them?" (2011, 34).

⁶ Hindu "laws" are created through a repeated act over an extensive period of time. There is no authoritative voice which states what constitutes Hindu law.

Mehta shows that men and women experience desire in similar ways. Like men, women are complex beings who wish to access the same sexual and sensual experience that men like Seth Dwarkanath feel they are entitled too. Radha and Sita desire sexually fulfilling lives in *Fire*. Ashok projects his needs for a sexually void life onto Radha, while Sita refuses to succumb to being the loyal, devoted wife of an unfaithful husband. Shanta in *Earth* is desired by all her male friends. She makes her choice evident and becomes sexually involved with Hassan, the masseur. In *Water*, Kalyani and Shakuntala desire sexually fulfilling lives, as do many of the other widows in the widow house. Kalyani, unable to live with the shame of having been forced to have a sexual relationship with Narayan's father, drowns herself in the river. Her decision foregrounds her strong character as she claims her life as her own and does as she pleases with it. Chand desires Rocky's acceptance and love; instead, she gets this from the manifestation she creates, in *Heaven on Earth*. In all four films discussed, nothing inherently dreadful occurs to any of the female protagonists, once they have made their respective decision to move beyond the niches they have been allotted. Even as Shanta is being dragged away in *Earth*, we do not witness any atrocious act (such as rape or murder) being committed.

A culture that is as old as Hinduism needs to be reanalysed, especially in its treatment, or lack thereof, towards women, the female child and those who occupy a queer sexual orientation. Through drawing on and utilising Hindu mythology, one can create laws that are equal in their treatment of male and female. The caste system can easily be refuted, as can be illustrated by a story I was told as a child. The original story is lengthy and occurs in the *Ramayana* when Ram embarks on his travels through the forest after being exiled, in search of his wife, Sita, who was kidnapped by Ravana, the evil King of Lanka. The story speaks of a woman named Shabri, who belonged to a low caste. She was unattractive and unruly, as is reflected in her name which echoes the word "shabby". Shabri, having run away from home, encounters an *ashram* (place of worship and sanctimony), where a priest foretells of the future arrival of Ram on his travels through the forest. Shabri stays at the *ashram* indefinitely and spends her days in preparation for Ram's arrival. She keeps the *ashram* immaculate and waits for the arrival of the Lord. As true as the priest's word, Ram does arrive one morning and Shabri welcomes him into the *ashram*. She offers him a plate of berries and Lakshman, Ram's brother, notices that each berry has been bitten. He advises his brother not to partake in contaminated food, but Ram happily eats the berries. Ram, knowing of Shabri's devotion,

tells Lakshman that Shabri had bitten each berry to make sure that she only offered Ram the sweetest ones. Ram was most pleased with her devotion and blessed Shabri. Hindu mythology thus shows that God does not discriminate based on class, caste and gender. Myth repeatedly shows a disparity between the voice of God within myth and the authoritative voice within texts such as the Laws of Manu. Caste, created by man, is still the dominant governing order in India. Hindu mythological scriptures provide the basis for the eradication of caste, which may be a substantial beginning for India to move toward changing attitudes about women, children and queer individuals in society.

Mehta represents queer individuals in all four of the films discussed, thus representing such persons in the realm of considerable debate that each film has elicited. These individuals form part of Indian society, both indigenous and diasporic, and the treatment of such individuals needs to be taken into consideration in light of hate crimes that occur within various societies. Sexuality and queer sexuality are very much a part of Hindu culture. Randy Conner, David Spark and Mariya Sparks (*Queer Myth, Symbol and Spirit* 1997, 18) point out “that a massive campaign was launched in the period spanning the 1920s to the 1940s to erase all positive references to transgenderism and same-sex desire in India, especially Hindu, culture.” The authors reveal the truth behind why queer sexual behaviour is viewed as taboo within Hindu culture. According to the authors:

Gandhi decided to send squads of his devotees to destroy the erotic representations, particularly those depicting homoeroticism and lesbianism, carved into Hindu temples dating from the eleventh century, as part of a program to encourage both Indians and non-Indians to believe that such behaviours were the result of foreign, namely Euro-western, influence. (18)

Mythology thus opens up spaces for the equal treatment of all human beings. The origin of mythological literature is “non-Brahminical” (Dwyer 2006, 16). This places mythological literature outside the confines of the caste system. As previously stated, the Brahmin caste is considered to be the highest caste within the strata of the caste system. Men of Brahmin descent were directly involved in the creation of misogynistic texts which were then passed as Hindu laws. The Laws of Manu objectify women and refer to them as “gifts” (Chapter 3, Verse 27, 80). With regard to Brahmin widows, they are meant to lead a “chaste” life (Chapter 5, Verse 160, 197), and this is not the case for characters such as Kalyani within *Water* (2005).

Mehta makes apt usage of Hindu mythology to show the double standards that Hindu religion occupies. The “last four decades” have shown that, within “Hindi film”, there is a movement towards challenging “Brahminical-Victorian morality” (Virdi 2003, 126). This occurs when “the mythic line is contested, or its boundary stretched even minimally” (126). Mehta does more than just merely stretch this boundary, she crosses this boundary and embraces Hindu mythology for what it really is: an all-inclusive system which does not place an emphasis on dividing structures such as gender, class, caste, race and creed – a system that allows for immense social, sexual and economic freedoms. Culture has repeatedly shown, throughout the course of human history, that it is able to evolve and adapt to suit certain conditions and serve certain purposes. Hindu culture can open up spaces for the representation of women, which also forces society to address the various issues that women face in daily life.

In 2014, at the English Academy of Southern Africa Conference, popular Indian author, Ronnie Govender, in his keynote address, presented a piece of work entitled, “Who am I? The Distortions of History, Religion and Language and their Impact on Human Behaviour”. This paper addressed the use of Hindu mythology and its impact on daily South Africa life. Govender echoed that Hindu religious literature has been utilised to serve the political, economic and social needs of a select few at specific times within the course of human history. Govender, sharing a similar assertion about caste as many authors before him, states that India is “bogged down” by caste and class as it struggles under the “weight of a twisted history” (2014). Despite over 200 years of British rule in India, as well as the system of indentured labour which occurred in the colonies and the racially stratified system of apartheid, Indian culture has still survived throughout the centuries and it still persists to this very day. Dwyer, in a discussion of religion and Indian cinema, highlights that customs and religions are not fixed, they fluctuate across geo-political terrains which Dwyer (2006, 3) refers to as “pan-Indian views and beliefs”, allowing for the capacity to spread to individuals who are non-Indian.

Vijay Mishra (2002, 243), in his book, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*, points out that as we function as spectators, “the cinema gazes back at us”. Mehta’s films entice the viewer to engage with the issues that each film addresses. Mehta’s filmography, as represented within this dissertation, creates an everlasting impact on the viewer. Engaging in a discussion of transnational cinema, Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (2006, 3) observe, “Film is rapidly

displacing literature (in particular the novel) as the textual emblemization of cosmopolitan knowing and identity.”

Culture is a double-edged sword. It empowers some and results in the subservience of others. A nuanced analysis of culture can result in the metamorphosis of consciousness which can suggest and anticipate the equal representation of men and women in contemporary society. This dissertation has engaged with the four selected films produced by a diasporic filmmaker and has also included a film which directly addresses diasporic identity. The varying cultural discourses that they depict criticise certain social and cultural segments, while highlighting positive and progressive dispositions for marginalised individuals which can balance the scales of power. Diasporic identities and marginalised individuals are prominently defined by adaptability. My own personal diasporic identity has been shaped by a Hindu culture that places the Goddess at the very centre of Hindu life, death and rebirth. Colonialism has shaped the post-modern world into what it is today. While the effects of colonialism are often portrayed as negative, I am most grateful for this period in history, as it has bestowed upon me a South African diasporic identity. I possess an identity that is able to embrace many cultures while at the same time allowing me to be critical of the oppressive elements within my own vibrant culture. Homi Bhabha (1994, 172) maintains, “It is from those who have suffered the sentence of history – subjugation, domination, diaspora and displacement – that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking.”

Appendix

Figure 1.1



Devotees in awe as 'image' of goddess caught on camera

SHAN PILLAY
and WITNESS REPORTER

IS the image in a photograph taken at this past weekend's firewalking ceremony in Pietermaritzburg that of the Goddess Draupadi?

A photograph taken at the historic Siva Soobramoniar and Marriamen Temples has gone viral on social networks with devotees who were present declaring it a miracle.

The photograph shows the flames from the fire pit in the temple grounds leaping into the air and above the flames there appears to be the image of the Goddess Draupadi, who is honoured during the firewalking ceremony.

It all started when Dinney Harischandra (32), an armed response security guard, was helping his family man a soft drinks stall just outside the temple gates.

He watched as the pit of hot coals was being prepared for the devotees who were to walk on the fire later that afternoon.

Fifteen tons of wood were piled high on the pit and then lit. Impressed by the height of the flames, Harischandra decided to take a photograph with his BlackBerry cellphone.

Harischandra showed the photo to his sister, who looked closely and pointed out to him that the figure above the flames looked like the Goddess Draupadi.

Word spread around among the thousands of devotees at the temple on Good

Friday and soon the image was being passed from cellphone to cellphone.

Temple chairperson Willie Naidoo said there was a buoyant atmosphere at this year's ceremony and talk all around of the "miracle" that had taken place. He said as a result of this air of confidence more than 1 000 devotees walked across the almost ankle deep fire pit filled with red-hot embers.

He said that even an 11-year-old school pupil had walked through safely.

Naidoo is convinced that they had witnessed a miracle, and so too is temple president Sunny Naidoo, who believes the sighting is a harbinger of good news not just for the local temple, but for the broader community.

Officials had the image enlarged and framed and it now hangs in the historic religious precinct, at the corner of Langalibalele (Longmarket) and William streets, which is over 100 years old.

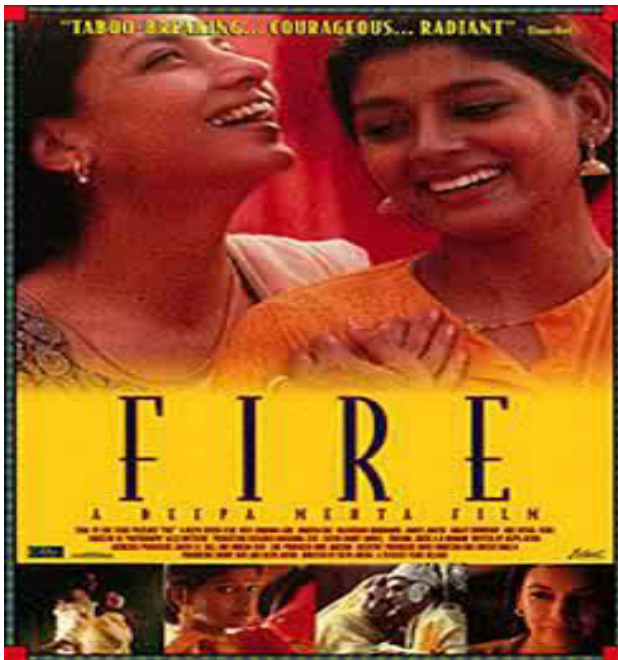
The Harischandra family feel especially blessed and are positive that what happened is going to have more than a healing effect on their family.

Harischandra accidentally fell down more than a month ago and broke his right leg.

He had to have a plate fitted and is currently hobbling around on crutches. The family have always been great devotees of the Goddess Draupadi and Harischandra's younger brother, Vinesh (28) has taken part in the annual firewalking ceremony for the past eight years.

Natal Witness, Wednesday, April 23, 2014, 1.

Figures 1.2

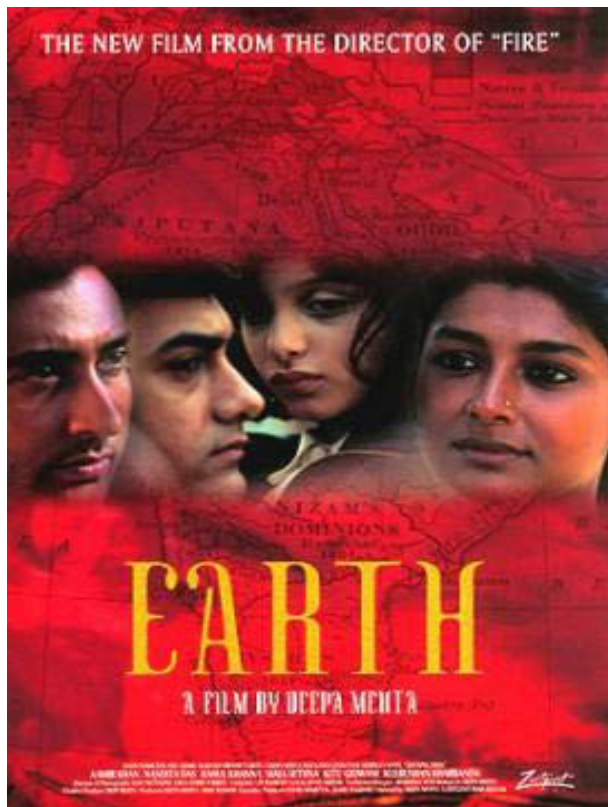


http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/2/2b/Deepa_Mehta



[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/32/Sri_Veeramakalimma_Temple -
_Hindu_goddesses.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/32/Sri_Veeramakalimma_Temple_-_Hindu_goddesses.jpg)

Figures 1.3

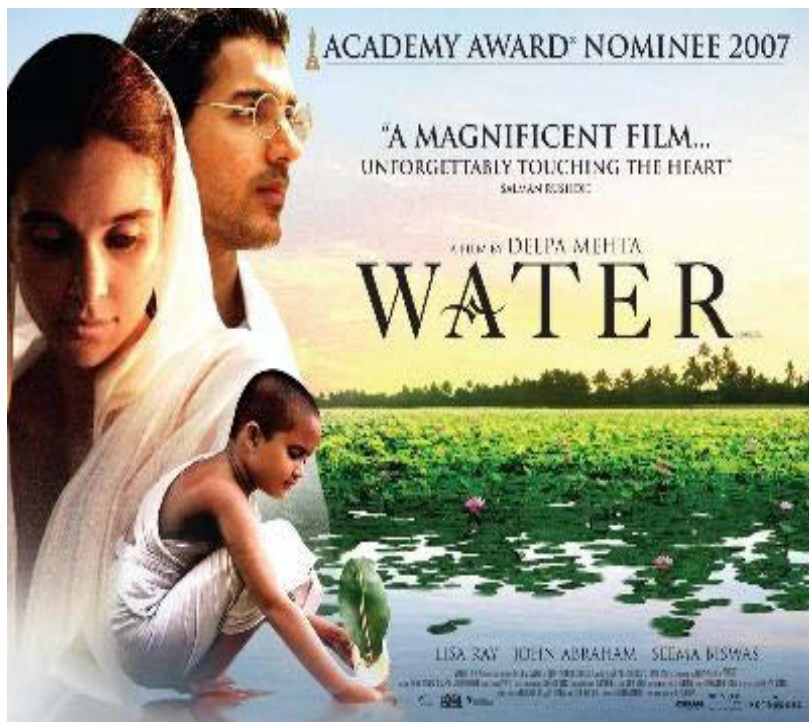


<http://lostmoviesarchive.com/movie/565>



http://www.indianetzone.com/56/goddess_prithvi.htm

Figures 1.4

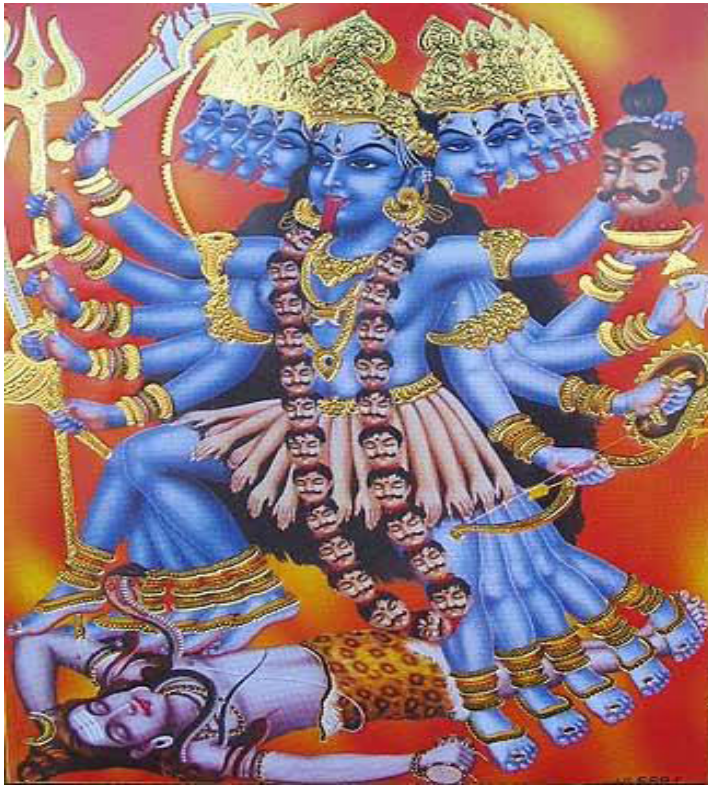


http://www.impawards.com/2006/water_ver4_xlg.html



<http://journeytothegoddess.files.wordpress.com/2012/01/ganga-chalisa1.jpg>

Figure 1.5



[http: /www.lilitu.com.au/graphics/maha_kali.jpg](http://www.lilitu.com.au/graphics/maha_kali.jpg)

Figure 2.1



http://www.sanatansociety.org/indian_epics_and_stories/ramayana_ram.htm#.U9-NtOOSwR0

Figure 2.2



(Mehta *Fire*, 1996).

Figure 2.3



http://www.kidsgen.com/fables_and_fairytales/indian_mythology_stories/the_earth_shelters_sita.htm

Figures 2.4



Back to Godhead, Sep/Oct 2012, 46-47.



<http://www.finewallpaperss.com/radha-krishna-hd-wallpapers-free-download/god-radha-krishna-love-wallpaper/>



[http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-](http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-9TCmOKm4qEc/T0d8J8UUWAI/AAAAAAAAAJU/B0w5nvXdtgc/s640/Radha+Krishna.jp)

[9TCmOKm4qEc/T0d8J8UUWAI/AAAAAAAAAJU/B0w5nvXdtgc/s640/Radha+Krishna.jp](http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-9TCmOKm4qEc/T0d8J8UUWAI/AAAAAAAAAJU/B0w5nvXdtgc/s640/Radha+Krishna.jp)

Figure 2.5



(Mehta *Fire*, 1996)

Figure 2.6



(Mehta *Fire*, 1996)

Figure 3.1



(Mehta *Earth*, 1998)

Figure 3.2



(Mehta *Earth*, 1998)

Figure 3.3



(Mehta *Earth*, 1998)

Figure 3.4



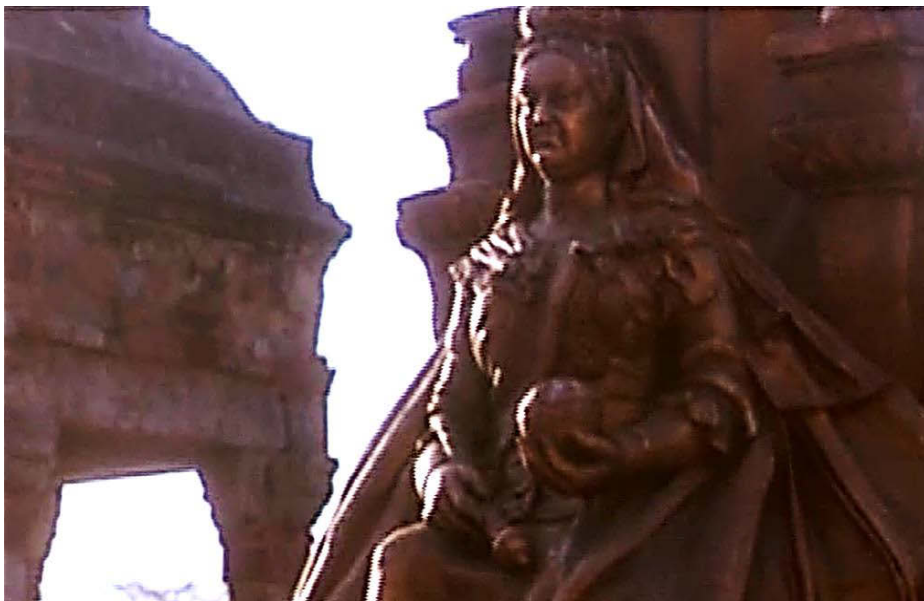
(Mehta *Earth*, 1998)

Figure 3.5



(Mehta *Earth*, 1998)

Figure 3.6



(Mehta *Earth*, 1998)

Figure 3.7



(Mehta *Earth*, 1998)

Figure 3.8



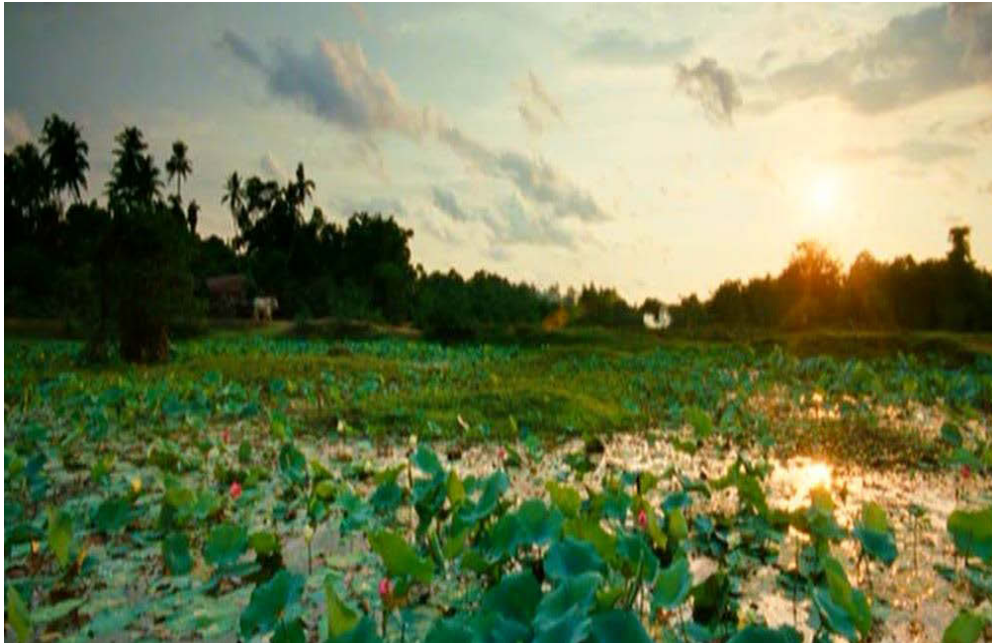
(Mehta *Earth*, 1998)

Figure 3.9



(Mehta *Earth*, 1998)

Figure 4.1



(Mehta *Water*, 2005)

Figure 4.2



(Mehta *Water*, 2005)

Figure 4.3



<http://sivananda.dls.org.za/Sivananda%20Ghat%20.htm>

Figure 4.4



(Swami Mother Ganga: A Journey Along the Sacred Ganges River, 2005)

Figure 4.5



<http://lilipilyspirit.deviantart.com/art/Indian-Goddess-Ganga-statue-301393336>

Figure 4.6



<http://www.iskcondesiretree.net/profiles/blogs/vamana-stotram>

Figure 4.7



(*Swami Mother Ganga: A Journey Along the Sacred Ganges River*, 2005)

Figure 4.8



(*Mehta Water*, 2005)

Figure 4.9



(Mehta *Water*, 2005)

Figure 4.10



(Mehta *Water*, 2005)



<http://www.bhakti-yoga-meditation.com/devotional-songs-bhakti-kirtan-murali.html>

Figure 4.11



<http://sathyasaibaba.files.wordpress.com/2008/07/lakshmi-devi.jpg>

Figure 4.12



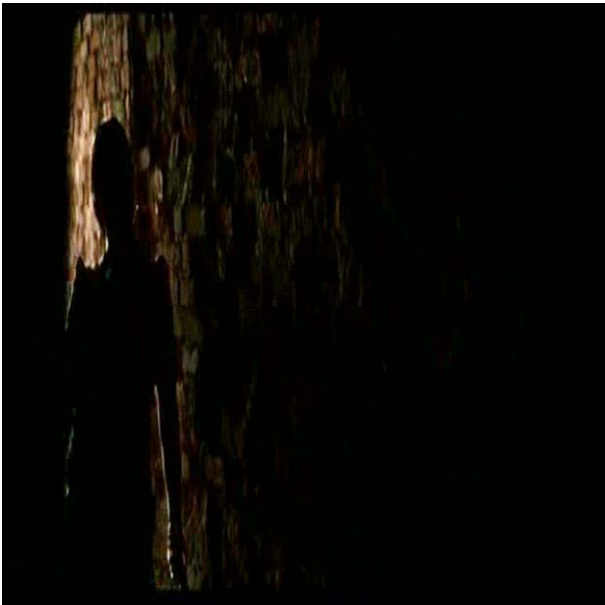
<http://ganeshawallpaper.blogspot.com/2012/06/ganesha-and-mouse.html>

Figure 4.13



(Mehta *Water*, 2005)

Figure 4.14



(Mehta *Water*, 2005)



(Mehta *Water*, 2005)

Figure 4.15



(Mehta *Water*, 2005)

Figure 4.16



(Mehta *Water*, 2005)

Figure 5.1



(Mehta *Heaven on Earth*, 2008)

Figure 5.2



(Mehta *Heaven on Earth*, 2008)

Figure 5.3



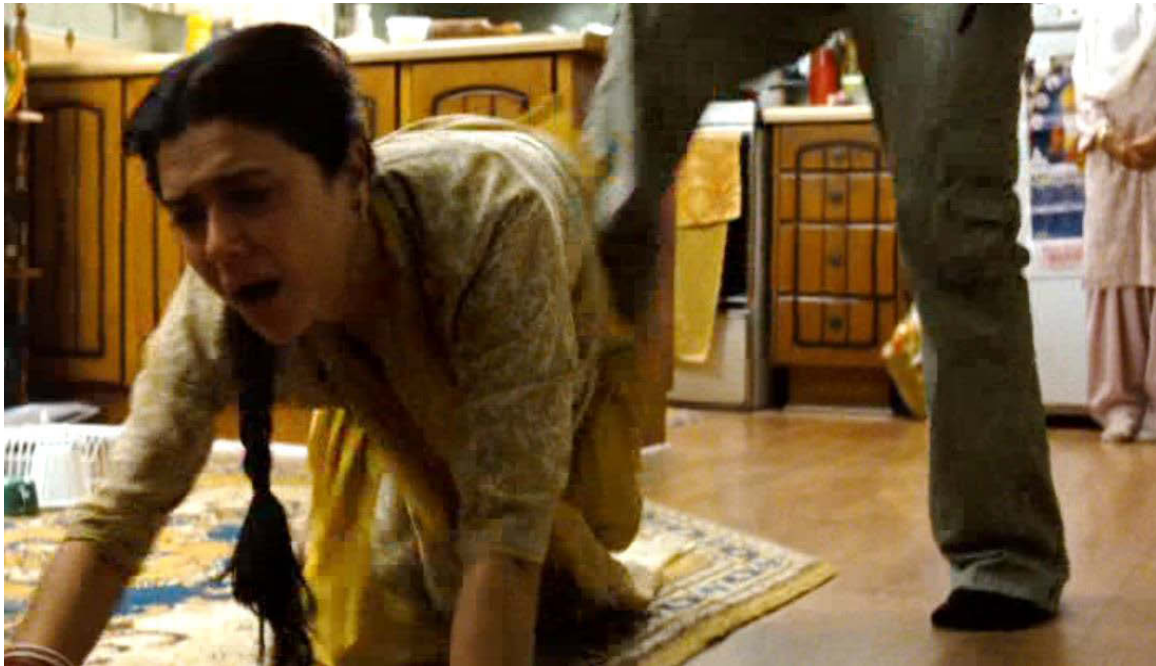
(Mehta *Heaven on Earth*, 2008)

Figure 5.4



(Mehta *Heaven on Earth*, 2008)

Figure 5.5



(Mehta *Heaven on Earth*, 2008)

Figure 5.6



(Mehta *Heaven on Earth*, 2008)

Figure 5.7



(Mehta Heaven on Earth, 2008)

Figure 5.8

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Rand

I will never forget the HAPPINESS I had after WINNING that must May God Bless MAMA HINDU. I Had Suffered for so long without a smile on my face like my husband was turning against me as the BUSSINESS he open was going DOWN and all my customers had run away with all my money I Decided to go and look for help from MAMA HINDU. she gave me MUSIRU POWDER AND SAID that I must pour around my shop doors way and also rub around my body. after just 3 days all my customers who had run away came back and paid me and later apologized and as I am talking now my business is booming and my husband is in my hands once again. Live Long MAMA HINDU she does the FOLLOWING Bringing back lost lover FAMILY PROBLEMS court cases promotion at work make men's penis BIG and strong IN ALL sizes

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Figure 5.9



(Mehta *Heaven on Earth*, 2008)

Figure 5.10



(Mehta *Heaven on Earth*, 2008)

Figure 5.11



(Mehta *Heaven on Earth*, 2008)

Figure 5.12



(Mehta *Heaven on Earth*, 2008)



<http://love-eye-floaters.blogspot.com/2012/08/lord-shiva-with-snake-curled-around-his.html>

Figure 5.13



[https://vibhormahajan.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/
androgyny-ardhanarisvara.jpg](https://vibhormahajan.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/androgyny-ardhanarisvara.jpg)

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