

The Feminine Eye: lecture 5: WATER: 2006: 117m:

May 2: week #5	Women Directors from India: Mira Nair / Deepa Mehta Screening: WATER (Deepa Mehta, 2005)
--------------------------	--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

class business: last class: next week:

1. format
2. BEACHES OF AGNES
3. Fran Claggett

Women Directors from India:

Mira Nair: [Ni-ar = liar]

b. 1957: India:

education: Delhi [Delly] University: India
Harvard: US

began film career as actor:

then: directed docs

1988: debut feature:

SALAAM BOMBAY!

kids living on streets of Bombay:
real homeless kids used

won Camera d'Or: Cannes Film Festival:
Best 1st Feature

clip: SALAAM BOMBAY!: ch 2: 3m

Nair's stories: re marginalized people:

films: focus on class / cultural differences

1991: MISSISSIPPI MASALA:

interracial love story: set in US South:

black man / Indian woman:

Denzel Washington / Sarita Choudhury

2001: MONSOON WEDDING:

India: preparations for arranged marriage:

groom: Indian who's relocated to US: Texas:

comes back to India for wedding

won Golden Lion: Venice FF

2004: VANITY FAIR:

Thackeray novel: early 19th C England:

woman's story: Becky Sharp: Witherspoon

2006: THE NAMESAKE:

story: couple emigrates from India to US

2 kids: born in US:

problems of assimilation:

old culture / new culture

plot: interweaving old & new

Nair: latest film: 2009: AMELIA

story of strong pioneering female pilot: Swank

Deepa Mehta:

b. 1950: Amritsar, India:

father: film distributor: India:

degree in philosophy: U of New Delhi

1973: immigrated to Canada:

embarked on professional career in films:

scriptwriter for kids' movies

Mehta: known for rich, complex explorations:

of cultural taboos & tensions in society of her native India

most of her films: concerned with lives of women:

ways they communicate on deep & intimate level

common theme: unlikely relationship between 2 disparate people:

they end up transcending age / cultural barriers:

become friends: understand each other

another recurring topic:

depiction of older women as vital & active

made some short films / directed TV:

1991: feature film debut: director & producer:

SAM & ME: unlikely friendship between:

Muslim boy & old Jewish man:

families: disapprove of it

1994: CAMILLA: Jessica Tandy: last film:

Bridget Fonda / Hume Cronyn:

road trip: 2 women: Tandy & Fonda:

drive to Toronto for concert:

come to terms with their past & future

Deepa Mehta: continued:

1996: Mehta: embarked on her **elements trilogy**: each film:

“celebrates the lives of women who resist marginalization:
by Indian society”

FIRE: 1st film in her elements trilogy:

deals with politics of sexuality:
due to lesbian content & stance on rights of women:
much controversy re: film in India:
particularly: Hindu fundamentalists:
pressured govt. to ban film
finally re-released uncut in India:
& received international acclaim

FIRE: holds mirror to social change in contemporary India:
centers on relationship between:

2 unhappily married Indian women:
extended family lives together: including:
2 brothers & their wives:

Radha: married to Ashok:
she's childless

Ashok: lives celibate life:
follows religious leader

Sita: married to Jatin:

Jatin: in love with Chinese Indian:
doesn't want to marry him:
he marries Sita to produce son:
spends his time with mistress

2 women left alone / ignored by husbands:

clip: FIRE: ch 3: .5m

first kiss / f/b

1998: EARTH: 2nd film in elements trilogy:

centers on politics of land & nationalism:
turmoil surrounding 1947 partition of India from Pakistan:
told from POV of 8-year-old girl

more problems during filming: from Hindu fundamentalists:
Mehta: “pre-production censorship imposed by thugs”

WATER: 2005:

2005: WATER: final installment in Mehta's elements trilogy:

both: criticism of patriarchy
ode to female resilience

set in 1938: backdrop of film: social fabric of India:

as it's slowly changing
as tradition is being tested

as people feel passionately re:

things being done to them in name of religion

child marriages: prevalent in 1938: when WATER set:

little girls: married off to older men:

when men died: girls become widows

Hinduism: when husband dies:

wife dies, too: figuratively:

woman: must become complete ascetic:

to atone for her sins: which led to death of husband

hair shorn off / only allowed to wear white / no jewelry

WATER: tragedy: 8-year-old girl:

doesn't even remember being married:

becomes widow: taken to ashram / head shaved

set in: ashram: institution for widows:

sent there to spend rest of their lives as ascetics:

sentenced to barbarous living conditions

Mahatma Gandhi: important factor in this:

movement: agitated for India's independence from Britain:

also: focused on social justice:

especially: how it relates to treatment of women

follows 3 women at different stages of internment in ashram:

starts out: Chuyia's POV: 8-year-old widow:

introduces us to ashram / widows

segues into: Kalyani's story:

young widow who finds love

slowly becomes: Shakuntala's story:

middle-aged widow: conflict of faith

WATER: 2005: continued:

WATER: wanted to shoot in India:

4 years earlier: started production:

shut down by Hindu fundamentalists:

felt script too anti-Hindu

sets thrown in river / burned down

Mehta: death threats / burned in effigy

protest: symbol increased conservatism:

in Indian society

more immediately: Mehta & crew:

in mortal danger

as result: production shut down

Mehta: took long time to assimilate what had happened:

made 2 “diversionary” films:

BOLLYWOOD/HOLLYWOOD:

upbeat comedy-musical:

Lisa Ray: in WATER / Rahul Khanna

THE REPUBLIC OF LOVE:

adaptation of novel by Carol Shields

never any doubt Mehta would return to WATER:

but: one stipulation:

“I promised myself that I would not do WATER again:

until I stopped being angry”

4 years later: production WATER resumed:

decided not to shoot in India:

WATER: shot in Sri Lanka:

difficult: re-creating India in Sri Lanka:

Sri Lanka: Buddhist country: not like India:

lots of adjustments to make

ashram & surrounding area: steps, temple, etc.:

set built for film: 1 mile long:

cost: \$60,000: 10 times that in US/Canada

Chuyia: played by Sarala: from Sri Lanka:

speaks no Hindi: language used in WATER:

lines learned phonetically

Sarala & Mehta: no language in common:

they still speak once a week

Sarala: never acted before:

not lot of dialog: uses her body to convey innocence

WATER: 2005: continued:

modern India: colonies like one depicted in WATER:

not nearly as prevalent today:

but they do still exist

widows: continue to be outcasts in Indian society:

difficult time:

problem caused by misinterpretation of religion:

today: 34 million + widows:

living marginal existence

Mehta: WATER: not bleak film:

film with hope, laughter, love:

re: domination & triumph of human spirit:

like water itself: something that flows

something we can't do without

something we can also pollute

film: call to action:

“We are very good, as different nations & different cultures,
to have collective amnesia about our own [problems].

WATER is about 3 women trying to break that cycle &
trying to find dignity, & trying to get rid of the yoke of
oppression, & if it inspires people to do something in their
own culture, that's what's important.”

claims WATER has elicited heartfelt confessions:

from wide cross-section of people:

woman in Vancouver: Jewish:

married outside her culture:

father: in mourning: 7 years

broke all mirrors: covered them in black

tore all his clothes

WATER: reminded her of that

many Catholic people

lots of Americans: worried re:

Christian fundamentalism

1:25 pm: break

1:30pm: screening: WATER

post-screening:

water: rain: washing away / cleansing:

metaphoric cleansing: body & soul

river: washing away / cleansing:

also: polluting: lotus flower

Chuyia: taken to ashram: father helpless thru it all:

Mehta: “that the point!

people are helpless in face of religious convictions”

people feel need to follow blindly

Chuyia: 1st view of widows:

she's terrified:

all look like her: shaved head wearing white

wants to go home:

father: this is your home now

try to imagine: you're 8 years old:

taken from home / exiled from family / nothing familiar

doesn't understand: she's a widow:

but it's what she is

we meet 4 widows thru Chuyia: introduced to them:

Madhumati: widow who runs house:

has become corrupted:

like all institutions: use of religion to hide misdeeds:

almost always: desire for personal benefits a factor:

corruption: almost always happens

Chuyia: wants nothing to do with being a widow:

“I don’t want to be a stupid widow, Fatty”:

ashes: staid:

Chuyia: full of energy:

she affects widows: chaos:

from chaos: she comes into quiet room:

Shakuntala: mysterious widow:

puts turmeric on Chuyia’s head: antiseptic:

Chuyia’s relationship with her builds slowly

Patiraji: old widow: “auntie”:

craves sweets:
played by Dr. Vidula: film debut: never acted before:

doctor of Hindi literature:

didn’t mind: head being shaved

taking out dentures

upset: she had to wear sari without blouse:

height of immodesty in India

Kalyani: Lisa Ray: Canadian: BOLLYWOOD/HOLLYWOOD:

different widow: long hair: innocent / pure:

Kaalu: puppy: must be hidden:

Kalyani & Kaalu: Chuyia’s 2 friends

ostracized by other women:

gives Chuyia Hindu rosary

4 widows film centers on:

“Fatty”:

keeper of ashram
Shakuntala: stoic: faithful one:

her faith: sustains / imprisons her

Kalyani: pure one

Chuyia: voice of innocence

idea of house of widows: ashram: they have nothing:

except Madhumati: keeper of house:
 has bed / parrot: adores parrot
 Mehta: wanted to show cold woman: heartless:
 easy to see why she's like that:
 she's outcast: parrot becomes meaningful
 town behind steps: so close: widows hidden:
 people don't want to acknowledge:
 what misinterpretation of religion has perpetuated
 each ashram for widows: has its own priest:
 Chuyia: "where is house for men widows?"
 widows: only 1 meal / day:
 without oil, onions, tomatoes, salt:
 so they stay pure:
 really: to desexualize them, make them not alive:
 all: distortion of Hinduism:
 to benefit patriarchal society
 no makeup: Kalyani: illiterate: can't read note:
 soot on eyes: before meeting with Narayan:
 begging: 1 of ways they make money:
 Chuyia: uses penny to buy sweet for "auntie"
 \$: also Kalyani: prostitution
 raising lights in baskets: done once a year:
 to ensure husbands' souls have light to go towards:
 day widows fast: can't even drink water
 Festival of Color: celebrating Spring:
 only festival widows can take part in:
 Chuyia: dressed as Krishna: throwing colors

steps: all temple towns in India: steps leading to river:
 place where people pray / morning ablutions / wash clothes
 bathing puppy: he runs away: Chuyia chases him:
 another main char: introduced thru Chuyia's eyes:
 Narayan: John Abraham:
 for role: learned to play flute / Sanskrit
 became big Bollywood star: after WATER
 lawyer / follower of Gandhi

Gandhi: allowed India to throw off yoke of British colonialism:
 Narayan: like Gandhi: wants social change
 Gulabi: Madhumati's pimp / eunuch: also outcast:
 Kalyani: prostitute
 dialog of Madhumati & Gulabi: talk re: Gandhi:
 how we find out re: life outside ashram:
 Gandhi: ruining India with idea of nationalism

Narayan: at friend's father's house: westernized mansion:
 friend: playing Schubert on piano
 where Kalyani is being prostituted: to friend's father
 ironic: downstairs: Narayan: oblivious:
 to her situation / what her life is really like
 Narayan: sees Gulabi: pimp
 this scene: where we learn Narayan is true follower of Gandhi:
 Nationalist: believes it's time for British to relinquish India to Indians:
 imperialism / colonialism should end
 when Narayan tells mother he wants to marry widow:
 "Gandhi has turned you into a lunatic":
 sin: for widow to remarry
 hard to find furnishings to dress mansion:
 piano brought in by mules

Patiraji: old widow: thinks she's dying:
 not because she ate sweet
 Hindu tradition: to die outside in open:
 spirit / soul: has easier access to god
 outside: she can die in peace:
 also: wants: holy water: good to die with it in your mouth
 Chuyia: goes for water: stops for Narayan to write note:
 water: too late
 Hindus: cremate bodies: no burial:
 widows: no money for wood for "auntie's" cremation:
 all money from Kalyani's prostitution:
 goes for upkeep of ashram
 Kalyani: offers money she saved for her own cremation:
 shows her purity / goodness

Kalyani: only person “Fatty” is nice to:

because she brings in money:

but Kalyani stands up to her:

“This is an ashram, not a brothel”

like lotus flower: surrounded by dirty water: but stays pure:

like Kalyani: survives by not letting pollution around her touch her

faces “Fatty”: has found strength:

“Fatty”: cuts her hair / locks her door:

cutting of hair: defiles Kalyani’s beauty:

also: debases her:

reminiscent of Jews in Nazi concentration camps:

appalling act

widows: all with shorn heads:

visual emblem of their compliance

Chuyia: pays “Fatty” back for cruelty:

kills her beloved pet parrot:

Sarala: Buddhist: worried re: scene:

parrot not really killed

“Fatty”: only time we see her cry: for parrot

Kalyani: thinking beyond limited choices

all widows: moved that Kalyani wants to get married:

Shakuntala: realization: what she’s missed:

goes to priest: is it in scripture widows should be treated so badly?

priest: no: scripture says 3 choices for widows:

live like ascetic

marry late husband’s brother

be cremated with husband

says law recently passed: widows can remarry:

Shakuntala: “Why don’t we know about it?”

priest: we ignore what doesn’t benefit us:

sending widows to ashram:

they don’t get estate: family/brothers get it:

it’s all re: economic system & perpetuating it:

by oppression of women

confronts “Fatty”: takes keys: frees Kalyani:

gives her chance at happiness

Kalyani & Narayan: on water: going to his father's house:

Kalyani: realizes: who his father is: one of her "clients"
that her dream is over

Narayan: confronts father:
"you disgust me"

Kalyani: exiled even from hell: ashram:
can't go back to old life: walks into water

on bank of river: Shakuntala, Narayan, Chuyia:

3 people that loved Kalyani most:

Narayan to Shakuntala: reason widows sent to ashram:
all re: money

Shakuntala: Mehta wanted to show her slowly become more prominent in film:

maternal figure for Chuyia

but no overt affection displayed: shown in eyes

Shakuntala: puts Kalyani's ashes in river:

what happens when conscience conflicts with faith?

what compromises do we make to survive?

what is role of fate in our lives?

how can spirit survive if body is crushed?

Gulabi: replacing Kalyani with Chuyia

finds Chuyia in mansion: Chuyia destroyed:

Shakuntala: devastated:

at river: holds Chuyia / washes her face:

at last: contact between them

Narayan: feels betrayed by father: leaving town:

train station: Gandhi: released from prison by British:

will appear at station

Shakuntala & Chuyia: being pulled toward Gandhi:

Gandhi: galvanized entire nation:

moved people to throw off yoke of colonialism

Shakuntala: hands Chuyia into Narayan's arms:

sacrificing for child she loves:

"give her to Gandhi"

Shakuntala's ultimate sacrifice:

giving up one she loves most

left alone: to go back to her life:

but: she's figure of strength:

she's come to terms with who she is

DP: Giles [Jyles] Nuttgens: all 3 films in trilogy:

WATER: Mehta wanted “ a slight coolness, a greenness”:
 highlights with white
 color: “spectrum of luminous blues & greens”
 camera movement: always motivated by actors:
 not other way around
 lots of care with lighting:
 many night sequences: blacks / shadows

music: songs by A.R. Rahman:

music for LORD OF THE RINGS
 WATER: wrote 4 songs
 score: Mychael Danna

next week:

May 9:
 week #6

Filmmaking as Memoir:

Summarizing the Semester

Current Films by Women

French Filmmaker: Agnes Varda

Screening:

THE BEACHES OF AGNES (Agnes Varda, 2008)