

Leading author Bapsi Sidhwa defends Deepa Mehta

'They are punishing Deepa for deflating their egos'

19 May 2000

Author Bapsi Sidhwa sent the following letter to the Hindustan Times defending filmmaker Deepa Mehta against the virulent attacks of the Hindu extremist organisations seeking to prevent the production in India of her latest film Water. Bapsi Sidhwa provided a copy of her letter for publication on the World Socialist Web Site.

She is the author of four internationally acclaimed novels: The Crow Eaters (1982), The Bride (1983) Ice-Candy-Man (1991) and An American Brat (1993). Deepa Mehta's film Earth was based on Sidhwa's Ice Candy-Man. Sidhwa's novels have been translated into German, French, Italian and Russian. In addition, stories, reviews and articles have appeared in Europe, Asia, Africa, and New Zealand in the New York Times Book Review, Houston Chronicle, Harper's & Queen, Economic Times, and the London Telegraph.

Of all the charges brought against Deepa Mehta's script of *Water* the charge of plagiarism is perhaps the most unjust. The credit for the most absurd goes to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) for objecting to the script because it is supposed to have included the marriage of a low-caste Dom Raja to a Brahmin widow.

I have read the script; there is no Dom Raja in it. I have also read Sunil Gangopadhyay's book *Those Days*, and the accusation of plagiarism is as fictitious as the Dom Raja.

Gangopadhyay's book, set in the 1850s, deals with the Brahmo Samaj reform movement and its effect on feudalism. It also deals at some length with the 1857 mutiny and the education of women. Of the scores of characters that fill the book's 500-plus pages, there is one widow who commits suicide in the Ganga. The film script has a widow who also commits suicide; but surely Gangopadhyay does not have a patent on

characters who commit suicide in the Ganga. There are only surface similarities between the characters of the film script and *Those Days*.

The differences between a script and a novel are enormous. A script is a working document; because of variables such as locations and the introduction of actors a script is a changeable entity. The only constants are the story and the characters. The plot and the dialogue are subject to continuous change. Further, the final shape of the film depends to a large extent on camera angles, the imagination of the director and, all important, the editing. The director fleshes out the script and moulds it to the cinematic images she has envisioned. I learned this, and much more, during my presence on the sets of *Earth*.

Being so closely associated with Deepa Mehta has brought me to the realisation of her enormous talent. The single-minded focus she brings to the sets defines her professionalism and her commitment to her art. I've seen her girlish and giggly when relaxed and in a state of transport when she writes—but whatever the circumstance, social or professional, I have found her to be always in possession of a rare integrity. Had Deepa wished to make Gangopadhyay's book into a film, there is no doubt in my mind that she would have bought the rights to it. After all, she went to great lengths to acquire the rights to my novel *Ice-Candy-Man* when she wanted to adapt it for the film *Earth*.

Should not those who have so relentlessly attacked Deepa for making a film about Hindu widows be sitting at Gangopadhyay's doorstep protesting his book, if they consider him the source of her inspiration? The most unfortunate part of all this is that it has managed to deflect attention from the real issue, which is the demise of a film before the first shoot has even taken

place.

This is pre-censorship, a role that the cultural police seems to be adept at playing in the present BJP-led government. Minister of Information and Broadcasting Arun Jaitley, who had officially approved the script, has been quoted as saying that he is now likely to withdraw the permission to shoot *Water* because it is a plagiarised work. If this is true, he will be using this charge as a convenience to get rid of the offending 'anti-Hindu' script, giving in to the pressure of the RSS.

Deepa has been left with no alternative but to go to court. I am glad for the sake of freedom of expression in the arts that she has done so—not only to reaffirm her credibility, but also to ensure that the permission the central government has already granted is not so conveniently withdrawn.

And all this cacophony has taken place before the film has even been made. One could easily see the humour in this fiasco, if it were not for the fact that the hand that orchestrated this mess is the hand of fascism. To garner more support from their electorate, these people are using Deepa. One cannot help but wish they would use a fraction of this fervour to eradicate the poverty, disease and ignorance that stalk the country.

Let us keep a clear perspective. Deepa Mehta is only trying to make a film. It is a love story beset by the kind of injustices and misunderstandings that hound the path of true love in the time-honoured tradition of tragic storytelling. Of all her films, *Water* is perhaps the least likely to offend anyone. Why then has she been caught up in this grotesque Kafkaesque landscape?

I wish to make myself clear on another score, as well. I love *Earth*, the film adaptation of my book *Ice-Candy-Man*. Novels are notoriously difficult to adapt to the screen, and this was perhaps the most difficult of my novels to make into a film. The task would have daunted a lesser filmmaker, or one less courageous. Deepa had to jettison many characters and subplots to give shape to her cinematic vision of my book and fit it into a two and a half hour movie. But the film stands firmly on its own, as a work of art, apart from the book. It has its own intrinsic integrity and logic.

I have been misquoted as saying that I was unhappy with the film. This is untrue. Sure, the film ends differently from the book. But the film had to end the way it did: the impact would have been weakened

otherwise. The screen exerts its own dramatic demands. I understood this even while the film was being made, and Deepa did not do anything without consulting me. I appreciate this a lot. As a rule, filmmakers in Hollywood don't care what they do to a book once they've bought it.

There are many books, films and documentaries on the subject of widows in India. They usually depict the Hindu widow as having a marginalised existence that leaves her socially dead. Many of these works end with the suicide of the widow. Although the story of *Water* is set in the 1930s, the miserable condition of widows prevailing then continues to this day. Widows who live in Varanasi in 'boarding houses' still eke out an existence dominated by hunger and exploitation.

Pankaj Butalia has made a brilliant and hard-hitting documentary about the *Widows of Brindavan*. Tagore's *Choker Bali*, also set in Varanasi, is the story of a widow's coming to terms with her sexuality. Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's *Pather Panchali* deals with Apu's mother's life in Varanasi after she becomes a widow. In Indira Goswami's *Adajya*, a young widow falls in love and then commits suicide. Martha Chen's book, *Widows of India*, is considered one of the most authentically researched works on Indian widows. These are among the many books and films Deepa studied before she set about filming *Water*. Then why is only she at the centre of so much controversy? Perhaps a vengeful patriarchy is still punishing her for deflating their egos in her film *Fire*?



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