

A FEMINIST READING OF BAPSI SIDHWA'S WATER

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Abstract

This research paper throws light on the condition and status of women in society and particularly on the miserable life of the widows. It explores the different aspects of men's authority and women's subjugation. The theory of feminism has been used to conduct this research. This theory seeks to uncover the ideology of patriarchal society in the works of art. The fundamental concept is that the entire cultural spectrum is dominated by a patriarchal value. The woman is made to be subjugated by man. The present paper further explores that the women are assaulted sexually and this assault does not let them suffer only physically rather their lives are shaped by it. Bapsi Sidhwa, the renowned post-colonial feminist author, takes up this very theme in her novel *Water*. She skilfully delineates the plight of women and especially of widows in the Indian society.

Keywords

Patrilineal, polygamy, prostitution, segregation, subordination, marginalization,
post-colonialism, ostracize, hybridity

In this age of globalization, it is usually very difficult to categorize some writers and Bapsi Sidhwa is one of them. She belongs to India, Pakistan and the United States simultaneously. She comes from the Parsi community, an ethnic minority in Pakistan.

Critics regard Sidhwa as a feminist post-colonial Asian writer whose novels particularly

The Crow Eaters (1978), *The Pakistani Bride* (1983), *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988), *An American Brat* (1994) and *Water* (2006) provide a unique perspective on Indian and Pakistani history, politics and culture. Her recurring themes include human relationships and betrayal, immigration, cultural hybridity as well as social and political upheavals. Sidhwa skilfully links gender to community, religion, nationality and class. She has been highly regarded as a feminist author who effectively addresses place and plight of women in Indian and Pakistani society.

Scholars believe that in Ancient India, women used to enjoy equal status with men in all fields of life. Indian woman's position in society, however, deteriorated during the medieval period when Sati, Child marriage and a ban on remarriage became a part of social life in India. The Muslim conquest in Indian subcontinent brought the *purdah* practice in Indian society. Among the Rajputs of Rajasthan, the *Jauhar* was practised. In some parts of India, particularly southern India, Devadasis were sexually exploited. Polygamy was widely practised. There were intimate links between the predicament of widows and a wide range of patriarchal institutions such as patrilineal inheritance.

As a scriptwriter of *Water*, Bapsi Sidhwa exposes the inherent indifference, fatalism and violence latent in Orthodox Hinduism. *Water* is all about Indian widows in the 1930s and how they were made to live in the widow houses. *Water* fearlessly attacks the enslaving hypocrisy of a patriarchal tradition that has developed over thousands of years of socio-economic imperatives and now disguises itself as religion. The novel throws light on the exploitation of widows.

In the novel, Sidhwa focuses on the plight of an eight year old girl Chuyia who has just become widow of a forty- one year old man. She is expected to live in a widows' ashram. The Ashram is not a pretty place. The widows are expected to shave their heads and clothe themselves in plain white sari. They live on just one meal a day. On festival

day, they are given a cup of rice and a fistful of lentils for every eight hour session of singing and dancing in temple. For many widows, this is their only sustenance. On the days when a widow is too sick to perform, she is left to starve.

Such is the treatment given to women in Indian society? The society is based on the superstitious belief of patriarchy, which believes that a woman has no recognized existence outside of marriage. Her role in life is to get married and have sons. Somnath says, “That is why she is created: to have sons ! That is all !.” (8-9). The novel reflects that woman has accepted this domination and she has become prejudiced towards her own sex. Chuyia’s mother saves extra portion of food for her sons. She feels special pride as the mother of sons. She does not lavish that much attention and affection on her daughter that she lavishes on her sons – may be it is because her heart knows that a daughter is only a guest and never belongs to the house into which she is born.

In Indian society, a woman is treated as a commoner like an animal that is why the girl is named Chuyia, a little mouse. The hierarchical tradition of male domination moves from one generation to another. Bhagya, Chuyia’s mother is following the tradition and Chuyia imitates her mother. While playing, she uses the same words and tone of voice which Bhagya uses.

A six year old girl (Chuyia gets betrothed at six and widowed at eight) has no idea about marriage. She is executed by all the activities centred on her but some doleful songs make her anxious. Chuyia cries “I don’t want to leave you and Baba... I will have no one to play with.” (17). Some of the women remembering their own weddings say, “She has no idea of the troubles that lie ahead for her” (17).

After marriage, the parents of a bride have no rights over their daughter. By the end of two years, Chuyia has almost no memory of her wedding. Chuyia has just become a widow and as the tradition demands she has to accompany her husband Hiralal’s body

to Varanasi, where he will be cremated by the Holy Ghats and after which she is expected to live in a widows' ashram.

After Hiralal's funeral, her mother-in-law jerks the mangalsutra, violently smashes the bangles with a brick which confirms her widowhood. She shows no concern for the girl as if she is mere an inanimate object. Her mother-in-law believes that Chuyia is responsible for her son's death. The widow is expected to shave her head and give up all material possessions. It is enforced by the belief that if the widow does not shave her head, every drop of water that fell upon the hair pollutes the husband's soul as many times as the number of hair upon her head. When Chuyia's father tells her, "You are a widow now." She asks, "For how long Baba" (32).

As a widow, Chuyia is not allowed to touch non-widows. She has to take care that even her shadow doesn't fall on them because she and her shadow are considered polluted. She is expected to spend most of her time inside the ashram, praying or fasting in atonement for whatever sins caused her husband's deaths. The Hindus believed that widowhood was the direct consequence of a sinful past life. As widows were not allowed to remarry, eight-year-old Chuyia could very well expect to spend her entire life confined to the ashram.

Then the issue is brought to light through the stories of other widows also. The male domination and prevailing superstitions have made woman so hard hearted that she becomes cruel towards her own sex. Madhumati, a fifty year old widow, is the ruler of the dilapidated ashram. She is very cruel towards the widows but shows so much affection and concern for her parrot, Mitthu. It is ironical that even a parrot has better status than a woman.

Madhumati is called as fat cow, beached whale because she has turned a widow, Kalyani, into a prostitute only for ashram's basic needs. When Madhumati comes to

know that Kalyani wants to get married, she says, “Shameless ! You will sink yourself and us ! We must live in purity, to die in purity” (144).

Almost forty years ago Madhumati had faced the same situation. When she became widow, she was raped by two men, was shorn and beaten and taken twenty miles into the wilderness. She was saved by Gulabi. She was brought to the ashram. The elderly widow, who headed the ashram, helped her to abort the foetus resulting from rape, nourished her and at the end of two months she asked an older eunuch to take the girl to the client.

Shakuntala is married to a young widower. Her mother-in-law is hopeful that Shakuntala will be the instrument by which her son would fulfil his debt to his forefathers by producing sons. As the years pass she becomes increasingly hateful towards her barren daughter-in-law. A man is not questioned for his impotence. Shakuntala has just turned thirty and her husband dies. And “Her only useful role, that of wife and producer of sons is gone forever” (149). She is not only viewed as responsible for her husband’s death but also as a threat to her husband’s family. She feels that all eyes are watching and waiting for her to commit some sin that will bring curses on them and consign her husband to hell. That is why she has come to the ashram.

Another poor widow, Bua , comes from a family of landowners who has hounded her out of her house when her husband dies. The brothers of her husband don’t want her to have a share in the inheritance. Bua is informed that her two young sons have immediately been sent to another village and whatever feeling they once had for their mother has dissipated over time. She is not allowed to write to her grandchildren because her sons have found out that she sits on the streets of the holy city with a begging bowl. But the question is, “who have turned her into a beggar, if not them?” (121). Bua becomes widow when she is about thirty five. She has sung her lungs out till

she is seventy, only for a cup of rice and an occasional cowrie flung at her. So this is the male psychology, his domination which is responsible for her plight.

Kalyani's fate is similar to that of Chuyia's. Kalyani's mother dies before she has reached her first birthday. Word of Kalyani's beauty has spread and she is married off to the highest bidder, a man of sixty when she is six. After her husband's death her head is shaved but Madhumati allows her to grow her hair back because she wants to force her into prostitution. She falls in love with Narayan, a young Gandhian idealist who wants to marry her. Everyone in the ashram protests this, especially Madhumati, because Kalyani is the only earning source of the Ashram.

Narayan and Kalyani decide to marry but their dreams are shattered when Kalyani comes to know that he is the son of Seth Dwarka Nath, who is one of her clients. She calmly walks into the river and drowns herself.

Cracking a whip on the male domination, the writer narrates the sorry and pathetic state of women. The widows assemble in a temple and their chorus is full of sad tones. They are socially ostracized, ill treated and considered as bad omen. As a shopkeeper in the market makes a remark, "They shouldn't allow widows to run like this. They bring bad luck to our business" (60).

Even laughing and dancing is a sin for them. They can be abused as a prostitute. Ironically, the people who groan at their sight during the day, sleep with them at night. The novel shows that most of the girls have been married off to a widower and these widowers are always hungry for a gift, legally in the form of a new wife. The novel ends with the escape of Chuyia. But the condition of other widows remains the same.

The novel *Water* focuses partially on the physical agony of females in denial of proper clothing and feeding to them and wholly on the mental agony which they speechlessly suffer in silence. Nobody wants to suffer but woman unwillingly with mute

protest suffers when no other alternative is given to them. How can we expect Chuyia to protest against child marriage at the age of six? It was basically her parents' duty to save her from tentacles of social evils. Here, parents are deliberately sacrificing their daughters for the sake of customs. Ironically, Chuyia's father unflinchingly admits that he has promised Hira Lal's mother for Chuyia's marriage and condemns his wife when she says, "By the time her womanhood blooms, he will be old and spent" (8).

The concept of patriarchy or sexism is a major ideology of feminism. All feminist critics believe that the entire cultural spectrum is dominated by a patriarchal value. Everywhere; in the political, literary and philosophical system, there is the play of patriarchy; the woman is made to be subjugated by man; the female is valued only as the negation of the male. The feminists are of the opinion that in the entire galaxy of literature, it is the male who dominates and whenever the woman appears in any role, she is given a subservient, unimportant, marginal and ordinary role to play and to gratify the lust of man. As Sushila Singh puts it in *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English*, "Human Experience for Centuries has been synonymous with the masculine experience with the result that the collective image of humanity has been one sided and incomplete. Woman has not been defined as a subject in her own right but merely as an entity that concerns man either in his real life or his fantasy life" (Sushila Singh 7).

Right to indulge in and enjoy carnal pleasures is the sole right, religiously preserved for the male. Female is merely subjugated to the blind passions of male. Even as a housewife, her importance stays until and unless she produces sons. She remains safe so long as she keeps on submitting to the wrong or right desires of her husband. But when she becomes widow due to cruelty of the fate, it is accentuated further by accusing her for the death of her husband. She becomes target of social stigma and social segregation respectively for no fault of hers. A hell is hurled on her. She is robbed of her

right to live with dignity not only in society but also with herself—polluting her body with illegitimate lust and consequent abortions. She can be adulteress but not wife or mother.

It can be concluded that the novel *Water* depicts the position of women particularly of the widows in the subcontinent in 1930s. The society is completely a patriarchal society and the men possess all the powers but the women are compelled to live a subordinate life. The parents of the daughters get them married in their early childhood. And while fixing their marriage, they only consider the wealth of their sons-in-law so that most of the girls get the match of aged widowers. Moreover, the men take all the decisions. Somnath fixes the marriage of his daughter Chuyia without even consulting her and her mother. The women are of no use for society except marrying and having children. The widows' life is more pathetic as they are discarded from the society and left at the ashram. They are treated as ill-omened.

Though the conservative social norms and myths against women are being challenged all over the world; yet a change in the attitude of patriarchal society towards women is at a snail's pace. And a society cannot progress so long as its females are under privileged and suffocated.

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